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Introduction to the English 100 Program

You may already appreciate the central role writing plays in your everyday life and academic career, as well as in other contexts. If you’re already a strong writer, you might wonder why you are required to take a class like English 100. As this course will emphasize, writing is a socially situated practice that takes into account purpose, context, audience, and other factors that may inform why you write, what you write, and how you write. To put it more simply, new writing situations require new writing strategies.

Certainly, we all appreciate some general qualities of “good” writing—such as clarity of thought and language—but there are many more qualities of effective writing that connect to specific situations. So while the types of writing that you’ve done during high school or for other occasions have developed and focused your writing for that context and those experiences, you’ll find that the writing you do at the university and beyond requires a variety of new and/or different strategies and practices. You will need to resituate both yourself and your writing.

As an introduction to college composition, English 100 prepares you to identify your purposes for writing and to make informed decisions about the choices you face when you write. What are the kinds of questions you need to ask in order to approach and execute your writing effectively? Even in the defined context of the university, purposes and decisions vary widely. Some writing strategies can be applied across courses, regardless of discipline, or within cocurricular and extracurricular activities, or even as you begin to create materials for your career beyond the university. But you also need to recognize when to use other strategies that may require specialized knowledge about how information is communicated or how arguments are made in specific disciplines.

An Introduction to Concepts, Conversations, Critique

This course reader—Concepts, Conversations, Critique—has two primary purposes: (1) to provide readings that help you consider issues and practices related to writing in college and beyond, and (2) to serve as a handbook for English 100.
First, the readings offer opportunities for you to engage with a variety of ideas, especially about writing. At the same time, they illustrate the kinds of intellectual work expected of you in this course. Some of the essays published here were written recently by English 100 students. Each student essay includes commentaries by the author and the student’s instructor. These materials provide a context to help you understand the writing assignment and the writing and revision process.

Second, some materials in this text serve as a type of handbook for the course, providing you with information about foundational practices, program policies, student support services, and other resources you may find useful as you join the UW-Madison community. At the back of the book, you will find information about the writing awards sponsored by the English 100 Program.

The essays in Concepts, Conversations, Critique range widely and include pieces that offer advice on drafting and editing, narratives about writing as both personal and social experiences, and explorations about the building of knowledge through writing, among other topics. Your experience with this reader is meant to be active. We want you to read with a critical eye, to question the ideas presented here, and to take these ideas and transform them into practices that will shape your writing. With this in mind, the first thing you might notice is that the essays are arranged alphabetically by author rather than, for instance, by theme or type. This organization encourages instructors to customize the choice of readings for your section of English 100 in ways that best meet the needs of your class. Some of the readings are interchangeable and overlapping in purpose to enable you to experience writing and reading as interrelated activities.

Writing as a Process

English 100 is designed to emphasize writing as a process, and several of the essays here are meant to illustrate “writing practices.” They provide ideas for approaching any writing project, but especially writing in this course. Invention, drafting, revision, and editing, can be considered stages of the writing process, and you will move through this recursive process several times during the semester as you explore and develop ideas; sharpen and clarify descriptions, narratives, and arguments; and, finally, present your work in clear, organized, and effective ways.
Writing to Build Rhetorical Awareness

English 100 also emphasizes the development of rhetorical awareness, in other words, the understanding of how writing and language can be engaging and persuasive in particular situations. An important element of rhetorical awareness is understanding audience. In your classroom, you’ll find opportunities to engage with a variety of audiences, from members of the peer review group who will respond to your drafts, to your instructor who will work closely with you on revisions, to your entire class and possibly others with whom you might share your research presentations.

Although each section of English 100 has a distinctive personality, all sections are organized around three sequences, with each building on the rhetorical work of the one(s) before it.

Sequence 1. Concepts: Invention and Inquiry

In Sequence 1, you will use narrative strategies to explore concepts, ideas, and experiences. Narrative encourages you to draw evidence from a wide variety of phenomena in the world and also in your life. Assignments in Sequence 1 allow you to trace how an inkling of an idea that arises from curiosity or the material world can move to a fully realized line of inquiry. Effective communication with those around us depends upon the ability to take our own experiences and connect them to that of others in meaningful ways. One way to do this is by using specific and perhaps unique experiences as evidence for more general or common qualities or conditions. This is a process of abstraction that can begin the process of building knowledge.

Sequence 2. Conversations: Writing to Inform

Much of the writing you will do in college is connected to texts produced by people who have ideas about the same topic on which you’re working. Academic writing is often thought of as part of a conversation, because of the way writers and researchers build on, disagree with, and respond to one another’s work. As understood in Sequence 2, writing that informs offers one way of organizing and making sense of a variety of information and thoughtful points of view that a writer gathers about an event, topic, or issue. An important first step in this intellectual process is doing research to locate relevant material related to your
interest. For instance, if you are interested in freedom of speech, you will need to learn where to look for sources that will help you understand the issues and arguments related to freedom of speech. Then you will need to choose sources that provide a range of perspectives you can investigate or study. The writing you will do in Sequence 2 will build this kind of information literacy and guide you through a process of learning to locate and use texts and/or other sources, as you identify and enter into written conversations that provide context for your own ideas and writing. Sequence 2 writing assignments will engage you in the process of summarizing, analyzing, and gradually synthesizing information so that others understand the knowledge you are discovering. This kind of writing – or this kind of purpose for writing – is valuable in many contexts within the university and workplace. It can also provide a foundation for further investigation and for developing your own contribution to an academic or other public conversation.

Sequence 3. Critique: Developing a Critical Approach through Research and Argumentation

The final sequence of assignments asks you to engage in research in order to develop a critical approach to a topic or issue, that is, to develop a way to investigate and analyze it. Part of your job will include designing and executing a research plan to guide your investigation. The writing you produce should make some form of an argument about your researched topic, supporting your views with specific reasons and evidence. It’s important to note that making an argument does not assume you have reached a definitive answer. Arguments are also not only “pro and con.” Arguments can be made as a way of exploring an issue and raising intelligent questions.

Sequence 3 builds on your earlier practice in using texts, considering audience and purpose, and incorporating others’ ideas into your own writing. Rather than asking you to produce a report or “research paper,” as you might have done in high school, it provides an opportunity for you to develop a critical perspective on a body of knowledge or craft a set of questions around a well-researched issue. For example, one approach to the sequence might have you looking at ideas that you first formulated at the start of the semester about a topic, let’s say freedom of speech, placing your ideas within scholarly conversations on the history of censorship and then perhaps critically testing your conclusions by interviewing a high school English teacher and a librarian for their views on banned books.
Writing at Wisconsin

Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison happens in all kinds of locations and through a wide variety of practices, from sitting on the Terrace with your laptop, to using a pen and notebook in a lab, to being surrounded by papers and books in your dorm room or the library. As you begin your career at Wisconsin, you will see that writing is everywhere. Your experience writing in English 100 is an invitation to participate in the university community, contribute to scholarly conversations, and become an engaged learner. Welcome!
Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Students

E. SHELLEY REID

1. A THOUSAND RULES AND THREE PRINCIPLES

Writing is hard.

I’m a writer and a writing professor, the daughter and granddaughter of writers and writing professors, and I still sit down at my keyboard every week and think, writing is hard.

I also think, though, that writing is made harder than it has to be when we try to follow too many rules for writing. Which rules have you heard? Here are some I was taught:

Always have a thesis. I before E except after C. No one-sentence paragraphs. Use concrete nouns. A semi-colon joins two complete sentences. A conclusion restates the thesis and the topic sentences. Don’t use “I,” check your spelling, make three main points, and don’t repeat yourself. Don’t use contractions. Cite at least three sources, capitalize proper nouns, and don’t use “you.” Don’t start a sentence with “And” or “But,” don’t end a sentence with a preposition, give two examples in every paragraph, and use transition words. Don’t use transition words too much.

When we write to the rules, writing seems more like a chore than a living process that connects people and moves the world forward. I find it particularly hard to cope with all those “Don’ts.” It’s no wonder we get writer’s block, hands poised above the keyboard, worried about all the ways we could go wrong, suddenly wondering if we have new messages or whether there’s another soda in the fridge.

We can start to unblock the live, negotiated process of writing for real people by cutting the thousand rules down to three broader principles:

1. Write about what you know about, are curious about, are passionate about (or what you can find a way to be curious about or interested in).
2. Show, don’t just tell.
3. Adapt to the audience and purpose you’re writing for.

When we write this way, we write rhetorically: that is, we pay attention to the needs of the author and the needs of the reader rather than the needs of the teacher—or the rules in the textbook.

Everything that matters from the preceding list of rules can be connected to one of those three rhetorical principles, and the principles address lots of aspects of writing that aren’t on the list but that are central to why humans struggle to express themselves through written language. Write about what you know about so that you can show not just tell in order to adapt to your audience’s needs and accomplish your goals. (Unless you do a good job showing what you mean, your audience will not understand your message. You will not meet their expectations or accomplish your goals.) Make clear points early so that your audience can spot your expertise or passion right from the start. Write multi-sentence paragraphs in which you show key ideas in enough detail that your audience doesn’t have to guess what you mean. Use a semi-colon correctly in order to show how your carefully thought out ideas relate to one another—and to win your reader’s confidence.

Writing will still be hard because these are some of the hardest principles in college; they may be some of the hardest principles in the galaxy. But if you write from those three principles, and use some of the strategies listed below, your writing will finally have a fighting chance of being real, not just rules. And that’s when writing gets interesting and rewarding enough that we do it even though it’s hard.

2. SHOW & TELEPATHS

What does that “show, don’t just tell” idea really mean? Let’s try some time travel to get a better idea. Can you remember being in kindergarten on show-and-tell day? Imagine that a student gets up in front of you and your fellow five-year-olds, empty-handed, and says, “I have a baseball signed by Hank Aaron that’s in perfect condition, but I can’t bring it to school.” You’re only five years old, but you know that she’s got two problems, right? Not only can you not see the ball to know exactly what “perfect condition” looks like, to eyeball the signature and smell the leather and count the stitches, but you have no reason to believe this kid even if she describes it perfectly. If you tell without showing, your reader might not only be confused but might entirely disbelieve you. So you’re two strikes down.

Another way to explain show vs. tell is with a story. There is a very, very short sci-
ence fiction story in a collection of very short science fiction stories entitled "Science Fiction for Telepaths."

This is the entire story, just six words: “Aw, you know what I mean” (Blake 235).

“Wah-ha-ha!” go the telepaths, “what a great story! I really liked the part about the Martian with three heads trying to use the gamma blaster to get the char-

treuse kitchen sink to fly out the window and land on the six-armed Venusian

thief! Good one!” Since the telepaths can read the storyteller’s mind, they don’t

need any other written details: they know the whole story instantly.

This story is a little like when you say to your best friend from just about forever, you know what I mean, and sometimes she even does, because she can almost

read your mind. Sometimes, though, even your best buddy from way back gives

you that look. You know that look: the one that says he thinks you’ve finally

cracked. He can’t read your mind, and you’ve lost him.

If you can confuse your best friend in the whole world, even when he’s standing

right there in front of you, think how easy it could be to confuse some stranger

who’s reading your writing days or months or years from now. If we could read

each other’s minds, writing wouldn’t be hard at all, because we would always

know what everyone meant, and we’d never doubt each other. If you figure out

how to read minds this semester, I hope you’ll tell us how it works! In the mean-
time, though, you have to show what you mean.

3. THE LITTLE GREEN BALL AND SOME PEOPLE: DOING DETAILS RIGHT

Now we know: I can read my own mind, and you can read your own mind, and

this self-mind-reading is even easier to do than breathing in and out on a lovely

April morning. When I write something like “I have a little green ball” on the

whiteboard, I read my mind as I read the board, so I understand it—and I’m

positive, therefore, that you understand it. Meanwhile, you read my sentence

and your own mind together and the meaning is so perfectly clear to you that

it’s nearly impossible to imagine that you’re not understanding exactly what I

intended.

I have a little green ball. Even a five-year-old could read this sentence and know

what I mean, right?

Try something. Bring both hands up in front of your face, and use each one to

show one possible size of this “little” ball. (You can try this with friends: have

everyone close their eyes and show the size of a “little” ball with their hands,
then open their eyes, and look around.) Hmm. Already there's some possible disagreement, even though it seemed so clear what “little” meant.

Maybe “green” is easier: you know what “green” is, right? Of course. But now, can you think of two different versions of “green”? three versions? five? In the twenty-five minds in a classroom, say, we might have at least twenty kinds of little, and maybe a hundred kinds of green, and we haven’t even discussed what kind of “ball” we might be talking about. Those of you who are math whizzes can see the permutations that come from all those variables. If I sent you to Mega Toyland with the basic instructions, “Buy me a little green ball,” the chances are slim that you would come home with the ball I had in mind.

If I don’t care about the exact ball—I just need something ball-like and not too huge and somewhat greenish—then it doesn’t matter. I can leave it up to you to decide. (Occasionally, it's effective to avoid details: if I were writing a pop song about my broken heart, I'd be deliberately vague so that you'd think the song was about your heart, and then you'd decide to download or even buy my song.) But the more I care that you know exactly what I'm thinking, the more the details matter to me, then the more information I need to give you.

What information would you need to write down so that someone would buy the exact little green ball that you're thinking of while he or she is shopping at Mega Toyland?

If you’re going to show me, or each other, what you’re thinking, using only language, it will take several sentences, perhaps a whole paragraph—filled with facts and statistics, comparisons, sensory description, expert testimony, examples, personal experiences—to be sure that what’s in your mind is what's in my mind. After my students and I finish examining my ball and choosing rich language to show it, the whiteboard often reads something like this: “I have a little green ball about an inch in diameter, small enough to hide in your hand. It's light neon green like highlighter ink and made of smooth shiny rubber with a slightly rough line running around its equator as if two halves were joined together. When I drop it on the tile floor, it bounces back nearly as high as my hand; when I throw it down the hallway, it careens unpredictably off the walls and floor.” Now the ball in your mind matches the ball in my hand much more closely.

Showing is harder than just telling, and takes longer, and is dependent on your remembering that nobody reads your mind like you do. Can you think of other “little green ball” words or phrases that you might need to show more clearly? How do you describe a good movie or a bad meal? How would you describe your mother, your hometown, your car? Try it on a blank page or in an open document: write one “you know what I mean” sentence, then write every detail and example you can think of to make sure that a reader does know what you mean.
Then you can choose the most vivid three or four, the ones that best show your readers what you want them to understand.

There’s another kind of description that requires mind reading. If I write on the board that “some people need to learn to mind their own business sometimes,” would you agree with me? (By now, you should be gaining some skepticism about being able to read my mind.) In my head, I’m filling in “some people” and “their business” and “sometimes” with very specific, one-time-only examples. It’s like I have a YouTube clip playing in my head, or a whole season’s worth of a reality TV show, and you don’t have access to it yet. (I might as well be saying “I have cookies!” but not offering to share any of them with you.)

If I give you a snapshot from that film, if I use language to provide a one-time-only example, I show you: “My ninety-year-old grandmother needs to stop calling up my younger cousin Celia like she did last night and telling her to persuade me to move back home to Laramie so my mom won’t get lonely and take up extreme snowboarding just to go meet some nice people.” Does that help you see how the onetime-only example you were thinking of, when you read my boring sentence along with your own mind, is different from what I wanted you to think? As writers, we need to watch out for the some-people example and the plural example: “Sometimes things bother me” or “Frederick Douglass had lots of tricks for learning things he needed to know.” If an idea is important, give an exact one-time snapshot with as much detail as possible.

In a writing class, you also have to learn to be greedy as a reader, to ask for the good stuff from someone else’s head if they don’t give it to you, to demand that they share their cookies: you have to be brave and say, “I can’t see what you mean.” This is one of the roles teachers take up as we read your writing. (One time during my first year teaching, one of my students snorted in exasperation upon receiving his essay back from me. “So, like, what do you do,” he asked, “just go through the essay and write ‘Why? How so? Why? How so? Why? How so?’ randomly all over the margins and then slap that ‘B–’ on there?” I grinned and said, “Yep, that’s about it.”)

It’s also your job as a peer reader to read skeptically and let your fellow writer know when he or she is assuming the presence of a mind reader—because none of us knows for sure if we’re doing that when we write, not until we encounter a reader’s “Hunh?” or “Wha-a-a-?” You can learn a lot about writing from books and essays like this one, but in order to learn how not to depend on reading your own mind, you need feedback from a real, live reader to help you gauge how your audience will respond.

4. LOST MONEY AND THANK-YOU NOTES: WHAT’S IN AN
AUDIENCE?

Writing teachers are always going on and on about *audience*, as if you didn't already know all about this concept. You can do a simple thought-experiment to prove to them, and to yourself, that you already fully understand that when the audience changes, your message has to change, sometimes drastically.

Imagine that you’ve done something embarrassingly stupid or impulsive that means you no longer have any money to spend this semester. (I won’t ask you what it is, or which credit card or 888 phone number or website it involves, or who was egging you on.) You really need the money, but you can’t get it back now. If I just said, “Write a message to try to get some money from someone,” you might struggle a bit, and then come up with some vague points about your situation.

But if I say, “Ask your best friend for the money,” you should suddenly have a very clear idea of what you can say. Take a minute and consider: what do you tell this friend? Some of my students have suggested, “Remember how you owe me from that time I helped you last February?” or “I’ll pay you back, with interest” or “I’ll do your laundry for a month.” Most of my students say they’ll tell their friends the truth about what happened: would you? What else might you say to your own friend, particularly if he were giving you that skeptical look?

Suppose then that your friend is nearly as broke as you are, and you have to ask one of your parents or another family adult. Now what do you say to help loosen the parental purse strings? Do you tell the truth about what happens? (Does it matter which parent it is?) Do you say, “Hey, you owe me”? Some of my students have suggested choosing messages that foreground their impending starvation, their intense drive for a quality education, or their ability to learn a good lesson. Would your parent want you to offer to pay back the money? What else might you say?

Notice how easy it is for you to switch gears: nothing has changed but the audience, and yet you’ve quickly created a whole new message, changing both the content and the language you were using.

One more try: when your parent says there’s just no extra cash to give you, you may end up at the local bank trying to take out a loan. What will you tell the bank? Should the loan officer hear how you lost your money, or how you promise you’ll be more responsible in the future? Should you try looking hungry and wan? Probably not: by discussing collateral (your five-year-old Toyota) and repayment terms (supported by your fry-jockey job at McSkippy’s), you’re adjusting your message once again.
Sometimes writing teachers talk about a “primary” and “secondary” audience, as if that were really a complicated topic, but you know all about this idea, too. Take just a minute and think about writing a thank-you note. If it’s a thank-you note to your grandmother, then your primary audience is your grandmother, so you write to her. But if your grandmother is like mine, she may show your note to someone else, and all those people become secondary audiences. Who might see, or hear about, your note to your grandmother? Neighbors, other relatives, her yoga group or church friends? If you know your note will be stuck up on the fridge, then you can’t use it as a place to add snarky remarks about your younger brother: you write for a primary audience, but you also need to think for a minute to be sure your message is adjusted for the needs of your secondary audiences. (If you haven’t written a thank-you note recently, try to remember the last time someone forwarded your email or text message to someone else, without asking you first.)

In a writing classroom, everyone knows that, in reality, your primary audience is the teacher—just as during rehearsal or team practice the primary audience is the director or coach who decides whether you’ll be first clarinet or take your place in the starting line-up. Your classmates (or teammates) may be part of a secondary audience who also need considering. It can be tempting to take the middle-of-the-road route and forget about any other audiences. But in all these cases, you won’t be practicing forever. It helps to imagine another primary audience—sometimes called a “target audience”—outside the classroom, in order to gain experience tailoring your performance to a “real” audience. It also helps to imagine a very specific primary audience (a person or small group or publication), so that instead of staring at the screen thinking vague “some people” thoughts, you can quickly come up with just the right words and information to match that audience’s needs, and it helps to consider some exact secondary audiences so that you can include ideas that will appeal to those readers as well. (Who do you suppose are the specific primary and secondary audiences for this essay? How does the writing adapt to those audiences?)

5. PINK HOUSES & CHORUSES: KEEPING YOUR READER WITH YOU

Once you’ve identified a target audience, and put down all the detail you can think of to help show your ideas to those readers, you need to focus on not losing them somewhere along the way. Earlier in your writing career as you worked on writing cohesive essays, you may have watched writing teachers go totally ballistic over thesis statements and topic sentences—even though some teachers insisted that they weren’t requiring any kind of set formula. How can this be? What’s up with all this up-front information?
The concept is actually pretty simple, if we step out of the writing arena for a minute. Say you’re driving down the interstate at sixty-five miles an hour with three friends from out of town, and you suddenly say to them, “Hey, there’s that amazing Pink House!” What happens? Probably there’s a lot of whiplash-inducing head swiveling, and someone’s elbow ends up in someone else’s ribs, and maybe one of your friends gets a glimpse, but probably nobody really gets a chance to see it (and somebody might not believe you if she didn’t see it for herself!). What if you had said instead, “Hey, coming up on the right here in about two miles, there’s an amazing huge neon Pink House: watch for it”? They’d be ready, they’d know where to look and what to look for, and they’d see what you wanted them to see.

Writers need to advise their readers in a similar way. That advice doesn’t always need to be in a thesis statement or a topic sentence, but it does need to happen regularly so that readers don’t miss something crucial.

“But,” you say, “I’m not supposed to repeat things in my essay; it gets boring!” That’s true, up to a point, but there are exceptions. Have you ever noticed how the very same company will run the exact same advertisement for light beer five or six times during one football game? It’s not as if the message they are trying to get across is that complex: Drink this beer and you will be noticed by this beautiful woman, or get to own this awesome sports car, or meet these wonderful friends who will never ever let you down. The ad costs the company hundreds of thousands of dollars each time, but there it is again. Beer: sports car. Beer: sports car. Contemporary Americans have a very high tolerance for repeated messages; we even come to depend on them, like football fans relishing the instant replay. Beer: sports car.

If you’d rather think like an artist than an advertising executive, consider popular music. Pick a pop song, any song—“Jingle Bells,” for instance, or whatever song everybody’s listening to this month—and the next time you listen, count the number of times the chorus, or even the title phrase, comes up. Do we get bored by the repetition? Not usually. In fact, the chorus is crucial for audience awareness because it’s often the first (or even the only) part of the song the listener learns and can sing along with. Repeating the chorus helps bring the audience along with you from verse to verse: the audience thinks, “Aha, I know this!”

Now, what you’re trying to say in your essay is much more complex than beer: sports car or I will always love you. If you only say it once or twice—there, in the last paragraph, where you finally figured out the most important point, or maybe once at the start and once at the end—we might miss it, or only get a piece of it. Here you’ve spent hundreds of minutes working on this idea, and we zoom past it at sixty-five m.p.h. and miss it entirely! You have to bring it back to our attention throughout the essay. Of course, you don’t want to repeat just
anything. You certainly don’t want to repeat the same examples or vague “some people” theories, stuffing baloney into the middle of the paper to fill it out. But the core idea—beer: sports car—needs to appear early and often, using the same key words, even, as an anchor for all the complex ideas and examples you’re connecting to it, as a place for the audience to recognize the main idea and find a way to “sing along.”

So as you’re revising, add your chorus back into some key middle parts of your essay—the beginnings and endings of paragraphs, like commercial breaks, can be places that readers expect repetition—until you start to really feel uncomfortable about your repetition . . . and then add it one more time, and it might be enough, but it shouldn’t be too much. (Since you read the essay dozens of times and you read your own mind, you’ll get antsy about repetition long before your readers will in their one trip through your essay.) If you get a good balance, your reader—the same person who keeps laughing at the beer ad or mumbling the chorus to the pop song without knowing the rest of the lyrics—won’t even notice that you’re repeating. When I work with my students, I say: “I promise to tell you—no harm, no penalty—if you’re ever too clear about your main point.” I find that very few people make it that far, but they like having the encouragement to try. You and your peer readers can make the same agreement.

6. FRUIT JELL-O: BALANCING ARGUMENTS & EXAMPLES

“Great,” you say, “so I’m supposed to have all these examples and to have all these Pink House reminders, but it’s hard to keep it all straight.” That’s a very smart observation—because one of the main challenges writers face, when we can’t read someone’s mind or get them to read ours, is learning how to balance the writing that states our theories and arguments with the writing that provides our evidence and examples. It turns out that it’s easier to do just one of these things at a time when writing, but having theories and arguments without evidence and examples is a recipe for confusion and misunderstanding.

I find that it helps sometimes to think about fruit Jell-O™, the kind my mom used to take to family get-togethers: lime Jell-O with mandarin orange slices in it, or berry Jell-O with cherries in it. Fruit Jell-O is a pretty good balance of foods to take to an informal family gathering: it meets the needs of the audience.

You wouldn’t want to take plain gelatin to show off to your family, after all. Think of the last time you ate plain old Jell-O, with no additional food (or beverage) added to it. Weren’t you in a hospital, or a school cafeteria, or some other unhappy place? Hospitals serve plain gelatin because it looks and behaves like food, but it has so few ingredients that it won’t irritate your mouth or upset your
digestion. That same blandness means that not a lot of family members will choose it over the tortilla chips or the macaroons.

Writing just your opinions, theories, and arguments is a lot like serving plain Jell-O: it seems like you’re doing something productive, but there’s not much substance to it. Politicians often write plain Jell-O speeches with no details or examples, because that kind of talk motivates people but won’t irritate voters with tiny details about time or money. Talent-show contestants sometimes choose to sing plain Jell-O songs for the same reason.

On the other hand, if you took a bowl of cherries with you, your family might perk up a bit, but cherries are kind of hard to serve. They roll out of the bowl and off of those flimsy paper plates and end up sliding into the cheese dip or being squished into the new carpet by your two-year-old cousin. People finger all the cherries but take just a few (using tongs on cherries just seems too formal!), and it’s hard to know how to handle the pits, or to eat gooey already-pitted cherries with your hands.

Writing just your examples, reasons, and details is a lot like bringing cherries to the party: it’s interesting and lively, but readers don’t know what to make of it all. Some of your reasons or stories will roll out of readers’ heads if they aren’t firmly attached to an argument; some readers will meander through all your details and just randomly remember one or two of them rather than building a whole picture.

Good writers blend argument and evidence as they write, so that readers get both elements together all the way through. Good revisers go back and adjust the recipe, seeking a workable combination. Sometimes as you’re revising it can feel odd to be just adding cherries: it can seem like you’re packing in too many extra details when there’s already a perfectly good piece of fruit there. Other times it seems weird to be just adding Jell-O, because all those “chorus” sentences sound the same and have the same flavor, and you don’t want to repeat yourself unnecessarily. It’s hard to get the balance right, and you’ll want to have your readers help you see where to adjust the ingredients. But if you remember that the fruit/evidence is the tastiest part (so you want the most vibrant examples), and the point of Jell-O/argumentation is to provide consistency to hold everything together (you want statements that sound alike), you may start to gain additional confidence in balancing your writing.

7. WASH-AND-WEAR PARAGRAPHS

If you’re going to have Jell-O and cherries, a chorus and one-time-only examples, in every paragraph, that’s going to take some managing— and you’ll want to
manage *rhetorically* rather than going by some rules you once heard about exactly how long a paragraph should be. What paragraph-length rules have you been taught? Should a paragraph be five to eight sentences? always more than two sentences? never longer than a page? Some of my students have learned rules that specify that all paragraphs have twelve sentences and each sentence has a specific job. That sounds complicated—and you know that a rule like that can’t be universally true. What if you’re writing for a newspaper? for a psychology journal? for a website? Paragraph length doesn’t follow clear rules, but once again depends upon a rhetorical negotiation between the writer’s needs and the reader’s needs.

Switch gears for a minute and try out another metaphor: what do you know about how big a load of laundry should be? Right: it depends. What’s wrong with a very small or a very large load? Paragraphs face the same kinds of boundaries: too small, and they can waste a reader’s energy, always starting and stopping; too large, and they overload a reader and nothing gets clean. But there are no definite rules in laundry or in paragraphs. Is there ever reason to do one tiny laundry load, even if it might waste money or energy? Sure: maybe you’ve got an important event to attend Friday night and you just need to wash your best black shirt quickly, or maybe you have a small washing machine. Is there ever reason to do one slightly oversized load? Absolutely: perhaps you’re low on quarters or there’s only one machine open in the dormitory laundry room, and you need to get all those t-shirts clean. The same is true for paragraphs: sometimes, you have just one important thing to say, or your readers have a short attention span, so you want a short paragraph—even a one-sentence paragraph. On the other hand, sometimes you have a complex explanation that you want your reader to work through all at once, so you stretch your paragraph a little longer than usual, and hope your reader stays with you.

You want to write paragraphs that your target audience can handle without straining their brains or leaving suds all over the floor. I bet you’re pretty good at sorting laundry into the basic loads: darks, colors, whites, like the three body paragraphs of a five-paragraph essay. But what if you’re writing an eight-page paper using three basic points? What if you have an enormous pile of whites?

You sometimes have to split up even the loads that look alike. Would you split an all-whites pile into all the long-drying socks vs. all the quick-drying shirts? the dirty stuff vs. the really gross, stinky stuff? the underwear you need tomorrow vs. the towels you could wash later? You can find lots of ways to split a too-long paragraph based on how you want your reader to think about the issue: pros and cons, first steps and next steps, familiar information and more surprising information.

Writers need to remember that paragraphs help readers focus and manage
their analytical energies. It's good to have some variance in size and shape but not to overtax your readers with too much variation; it's useful to write each paragraph with a clear beginning and ending to direct readers' attention; and it's helpful if paragraphs come with a blend of information and analysis to help readers "see what you mean" about your subpoints and see how they relate to the overall point of your essay. It's not true that paragraphs are "one size fits all," and it's not true that "anything goes": you need to adjust your paragraphs to connect your ideas to your readers' brains.

8. HEY HEY HEY AND THE TEXTBOOK CONSPIRACY: ANNOTATING YOUR READING

I know, you thought this was an essay about writing. But part of being a writer, and being a helpful companion to other writers, is being a careful reader, a reader who writes.

Besides, I want to be sure you get what you pay for: that kind of critical thinking helps all of us be better writers. Did you know that you pay for most textbooks in two ways, and most students never do the simplest thing to recoup their investment?

How do you pay? First, except for texts like the one you're reading right now, you've paid some exorbitant price for your books, even if you bought them used. Why would you do that, instead of checking them out of the library or sneaking a look from a friend? Right: you can read them whenever and wherever you get around to it. (No, I don't want to know where you read your class book!) But you may be overlooking one more benefit, which I'll get to in a minute.

Second, you pay for the book—even a free one like this one—with your time. You pore over page after page, the minutes ticking by, instead of building houses for orphans in Botswana or coming up with a cure for insomnia or even giving that double-crossing elf what he deserves in World of Warcraft. Did you ever finish all that poring (with a “p,” not a “b,” really) and realize you had tuned out and didn’t remember a thing? Now you've paid dearly, and you may have to pay yet another time when you re-read it.

The simplest thing you can do to get your money's worth and your time's worth from your books and other reading material is this: you can write on them.

Whatever you pay for the book (minus whatever you might sell it back for), the only two benefits you get are convenient reading access, and the chance to write in the book. If you don’t write in your book, or type notes into the document, you're being cheated, as if you'd paid for a Combo Meal but ate only the
fries. (Do you think maybe you won’t be able to re-sell your book if you write in it? Check with your friends: I bet someone’s bought a used book that’s been scribbled all over. So clearly someone will buy your book back even if you write in it. Don’t let the textbook industry scare you out of getting what you pay for.)

Some of you may think you are writing on your text, but I wonder if that’s true. Smearing it with hot pink highlighter pen doesn’t count as writing. Why not? That takes another story and another metaphor. There’s a classic Far Side cartoon from back in the twentieth century that reveals what dogs are really saying when they bark all day long. According to cartoonist Gary Larson, when we finally translate their secret language, we find that they say, “Hey! Hey! Hey!” (144). You can just see a dog thinking that way, everything new and surprising, but not much complexity of analysis. Hey!

When you read something and gloss it with your highlighter pen, that’s what you’re saying: Hey! Hey! Hey! You can come back six weeks later to write an essay or study for an exam, and you have an entire book filled with Hey! It’s a good start, but as a smart writing student, you’re ready to go further to get your money’s worth.

Without having to expend much more energy, you can begin to add a wholly intelligent commentary, putting your own advanced brain down on the page, using an actual writing utensil such as a pen or pencil (or a comment function for an electronic document). For starters, let’s just vary Hey:

Ha.  
Heh.  
Hee.  
Hooboy!  
Hmm.  
Hmph.  
Huh?  
Whoa!

Each of those responses records some higher-brain judgment: if you go back later, you’ll know whether you were saying “Hey, this is cool!” or “Hey, this is fishy.” You can also use other abbreviations you know: LOL, OMG, WTH(eck), or :). You can underline short phrases with a solid or a squiggly underline, depending on your reaction. And of course, you can always go back to “Why? How so? Show me!” If you get really bold, you can ask questions (“will this take too much time?”), write quick summaries (“annotate so there’s no hey”) or note connections (“sounds like the mind-reading thing”). It doesn’t take very long, and it keeps your brain involved as you read. What other short annotations could you write or type on this page right now?
Every time you write on the page and talk back to the text, you get your money's worth, because you make the text truly your own, and you get your time's worth, because you're staying awake and you're more likely to remember and learn what you read. If you don't remember, you still have an intelligent record of what you should've remembered, not just a pile of Hey! Bonus: being a writer when you're a reader helps you become a better reader and a better writer.

9. SHORT-TIME WRITING: USE YOUR HIGHER BRAIN

So far, we've been thinking about writing when you have plenty of time to consider your audience, play with your paragraphs, and recalibrate your Jell-O/cherry balance. But you won't always have that much time: sometimes you'll get a late start or have an early deadline. In college, you might encounter essay questions on an exam. Learning how to be a good timed-exam writer can help you in lots of short-time writing situations.

What's hard about writing an essay exam? The stress, the pressure, the clock ticking, the things you don't know. It's like trying to think with a jet airplane taking off overhead, or a pride of hungry lions racing your way. But wait: the coolest thing about the essay exam is that, in contrast to a multiple choice exam that shows what you don't know, the essay exam allows you to focus on what you do know. The problem is that only your higher brain can show off that knowledge, and for most people in a stressful situation like an essay exam, the higher brain starts to lose out to the lower brain, the fight-or-flight brain, the brain that sees breathing in and breathing out as one of its most complicated tasks, and so the writing goes awry.

Essay exams—or those last-minute, started-at-1:22-a.m. essays that you may be tempted or forced to write this semester (but not for your writing teacher, of course!)—generally go wrong by failing to meet one of the three principles described at the beginning of this essay. Sometimes students fail to study well so that they can write from knowledge. (Unfortunately, I don't know if I can help you with your midnight cram sessions.) More often, though, some very smart, well-prepared students fail to adapt to their audience's needs, or fail to provide specific support. All that late-night study-session agony goes for nothing if your lower brain takes over while you're writing. Your lower brain can barely remember “I before E,” and it knows nothing about complicated rhetorical strategies like ours: you have to make sure your higher brain sets the pace and marks the trail.

So the teacher hands out the questions, and the first thing you do is . . . panic? No. Start writing? Heavens, no. Never start an essay exam—or a truly last-minute
essay—by starting to write the essay, even if (like me) you generally prefer to “just start writing” rather than doing a lot of restrictive planning. Freewriting is an excellent writing exercise, but only when you know you have plenty of time to revise. Instead, ignore all those keyboards clacking, all those pens scribbling: they are the signs of lower brains at work, racing off screeching wildly about lions without remembering the way writing happens. You’re smarter than that. You’re going to use your higher brain right at the start, before it gets distracted. Speed, right now, is your enemy, a trick of the lower brain.

The first thing you want to do is . . . read the gosh darn question. Really, really read it. Annotate the assignment sheet or exam prompt, or write the key question out on a separate piece of paper, so you know you’re actually reading it, and not just pretending to. (If you’re in a workplace setting, write down a list of the top things you know your audience—or your boss—wants to see.) In every essay exam I’ve ever given, somebody has not answered the question. When I say this in a class, everyone frowns or laughs at me just the way you are now, thinking, “What kind of idiot wouldn’t read the question? Certainly not me!” But someone always thinks she’s read the whole question, and understood it, when she hasn’t. Don’t be that writer. Circle the verbs: analyze, argue, describe, contrast. Underline the key terms: two causes, most important theme, main steps, post–Civil War. Read it again, and read it a third time: this is your only official clue about what your audience—the teacher—wants. On a piece of scratch paper, write out an answer to the question, in so many words: if it asks, “What are two competing explanations for language acquisition?” write down, “Two competing explanations for language acquisition are ___ and ___.” In an examination setting, this may even become your opening line, since readers of essay exams rarely reward frilly introductions or cute metaphors.

But don’t start to write the whole answer yet, even though your lower brain is begging you, even though the sweat is breaking out on your brow and your muscles are tensing up with adrenaline because you know the lions and probably some rampaging T-Rexes are just around the corner. In real time, it has only taken you two minutes to read and annotate the question. Some students are still pulling out their pens, while across campus at least one student is just waking up in a panic because his alarm didn’t go off. Meanwhile, far from being hopelessly behind, you’re ahead of everyone who’s writing already, because you’re still working with your higher brain.

You have one more task, though. You know that showing takes longer, and is more complicated, than telling. Given the choice, your lower brain will tell, tell, and tell again, blathering on about Jell-O generalities that don’t let readers see all the best thinking going on in your mind. Before your higher brain starts to abandon you, make it give you the cherries: write yourself a list of very specific examples that you can use in this essay, as many as you can think of. Do not
just “think them over.” That's a lower brain shortcut, a flight move, and it's a trick, because your lower brain will forget them as soon as the lions get a bit closer. Write them down. If you don't know all the possible transmission vectors for tuberculosis that were discussed, write down excellent examples of the ones you do know. If you can, number them in an order that makes sense, so that you leave a good breadcrumb trail for your lower brain to follow. Don't call it an “outline” if you don't want to; that can feel intimidating. Just call it a “trail guide.”

Now you can start writing: take a deep, calming breath and begin with your in so many words sentence, then follow the trail your higher brain has planned. About every two or three sentences, you should start out with “For example, . . .” or “Another example of this is . . .,” to be sure that you’re not forgetting your higher brain’s advice or sliding into a vague “some people” sentence. About every three or four sentences, you should start out with “Therefore, . . .” or “In other words, . . .” and come back to a version of that very first, question-answering sentence you wrote on your paper. Bring the chorus back in; stay in tune and on the trail. Don’t try for too much variation or beauty. Knowing that your higher brain has already solved the problem, all you have to do is set it down on paper, to show what you know. Writing is hard, especially under time pressure, but when you use higher brain strategies and don’t get trapped in the rules or caught up in random flight, when you take control and anticipate your reader’s needs, you can make writing work for you in very powerful ways even without a lot of time.

10. RULES VS. RHETORIC, OR, THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY VS. “TRY SOMETHING!”

We started out by thinking of all the rules—all those “Don’ts”—that writers can face. Each of the metaphors here replaces a rule with an idea that helps you consider how real people communicate with each other through writing, and how writers make judgments and choices in order to have the most powerful effect on their readers. That is, we've been thinking rhetorically, about the audience and purpose and context of a writing situation.

Interestingly, many of those rules are just short-cut versions of really good rhetorical principles. If you were a middle-school teacher faced with a room full of thirty squirrelly teenagers who all wanted to know What’s Due On Friday? and who didn’t have patience for one more part of their chaotic lives to be in the “it just depends” category, you might be tempted to make some rules, too. You might even come up with The Five Paragraph Essay.

That is, instead of saying, “Most readers in the U.S. prefer to know exactly what they’re getting before they invest too much time,” which is a thoughtful rhetori-
cal analysis that can help writers make good choices, you might say, "Your thesis must come in the first paragraph." Instead of saying, "In Western cultures, many readers are comfortable with threes: three bears, three strikes, three wishes, even the Christian Trinity," you might make a rule and say, "You must write an essay with a beginning, an end, and three middle paragraphs." Instead of saying, "Your readers need to know how your examples connect to one another, and how each set of examples is related to your overall point," you might say, "Every paragraph needs to start with a transition and a topic sentence and finish with a concluding sentence." And instead of saying, "Writers in the U.S. face one of the most heterogeneous groups of readers in the world, so we need to be as careful as possible to make our meaning clear rather than assuming that all readers know what we're talking about," you might just say, "Each paragraph needs to include two concrete-detail sentences and two commentary sentences."

You would intend to be helping your students by saying these things, and for many young writers, having clear rules is more useful than being told, "It depends." But eventually the rules start to be more limiting than helpful, like a great pair of shoes that are now a size too small. Good writers need some space to grow.

As a writer in college now, and as a writer in the larger world full of real readers—whether they’re reading your Facebook page, your letter to the editor, or your business plan—you need to free yourself from the rules and learn to make rhetorical decisions. From now on, when you hear someone tell you a rule for writing, try to figure out the rhetorical challenge that lies behind it, and consider the balancing acts you may need to undertake. What do you want to say, and what will help the readers in your primary audience "see what you mean" and follow your main points?

There aren’t any easy answers: writing is still hard. But the good news is that you can use a few helpful “rules” as starting points when they seem appropriate, and set aside the rest. You can draw on some key principles or metaphors to help you imagine the needs of your readers, and when you come to an open space where there doesn't seem to be a perfect rule or strategy to use, you can try something. In the end, that's what writers are always doing as we write: trying this, trying that, trying something else, hoping that we'll make a breakthrough so that our readers will say "Aha, I see what you mean!"—and they really, truly will see it. You know James Bond 007 would try something; Jane Eyre would try something; those Olympic medalists and rock stars and pioneering cardiac surgeons and Silicon Valley whiz kids are always trying something. In the same way, being a good writer is always more about trying something than about following the rules, about adapting to a new situation rather than replicating last year’s essay. So take a deep breath, push all those nay-saying rule-makers into the far corners of your brain, focus on your current audience and purpose, and write!
Discussion

1. Which section of this essay do you remember most clearly? Write down what you remember about it, and explain how you might use an idea in that section to help with a writing task that you’re doing this week. Why do you think this section stuck with you?

2. Without looking back at the essay, what would you say is the chorus of the essay, the “beer: sports car” message that keeps getting restated? Write it down: it may be a sentence, a phrase, and/or a few key words. Now go back to a section of the essay and underline or highlight sentences or phrases where Reid repeats this chorus or key words. Does she repeat them as much as you thought she did?

3. What other rules for writing have you been told to follow, either at school or outside of school in your workplace, community group, or online setting? List a couple of rules that weren’t described in this essay, and note down whether you think they’re most connected to the principle of writing from knowledge, showing enough detail, or adapting to readers’ needs. Also, if there’s another principle for writing that helps you a lot, something you always try to do, add a note about it so you can share it with your classroom peers.

4. Where in this essay does Reid practice what she preaches? Go back through the essay and label a few places where she seems to be doing what she says writers should do (“here she gives a Pink House heads-up sentence at the start of a section”), and note a few places where she doesn’t. Even though Reid admits that writing is hard and depends on a specific context, her essay may make some of the strategies sound easier or more universal than they are. Which one of her suggestions seems like it would be the hardest for you to do, or seems like it would be the least effective in the kind of writing you do most often? Explain why this suggestion is trickier than it looks, and how you might cope with that challenge as a writer.

Works Cited


Narrative Writing

JENN KEPKA

Human beings tell stories every day. We understand most of nature through stories. Though facts can be memorized, stories — the details, the description, the experience — make us believe.

Therefore, as we begin to study writing, we need to begin with the properties of story. How do good storytellers make us believe? How can good writing draw a reader into a story? How can we harness the power of the story to make a point, even in a dry, academic context?

This lesson will reflect on those questions as well as offering concrete advice and practice outlines of typical narrative writing.

Sherlock Holmes, a creation of the writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, has become one of the most famous detectives of all time — though he never lived. Have you heard of him? Why do you think this story perseveres? How can stories permeate our culture so thoroughly?

WHERE DO WE FIND NARRATIVE?

We talk about narrative writing in many ways. Books will introduce it as Narra-
tion, Narrative, and Story-telling. Narrative creeps into most of the other kinds of writing we learn about, too. Persuasive essays use short stories — often called anecdotes — to engage a reader’s attention and sympathy. Consider the difference between these two openings to the same essay:

Statistics show that consistent seatbelt wearing is vital if passengers are to survive a moving vehicle accident. Though laws have been in place since the 1970s in most states mandating this behavior, some drivers and passengers resist because belts cause some discomfort. However, everyone should wear a seatbelt because they’ve been proven to save lives.

Timmy’s mother was in a hurry as they left the mall. He’d climbed into the backseat of their minivan and immediately started playing with his tablet, and his mother was in too much of a rush to fight him over putting on his seatbelt. They had to make it to his sister’s concert on time. The van rushed into traffic, and Timmy’s mother tried to beat a yellow light to make a left turn at the intersection — but someone else, coming from the other direction, had tried to do the same thing, and the car barreled into their van, connecting with the door beside Timmy with a sickening bang and crunch.

Which opening makes you want to read more? The second one engages its readers with a story — and we’re hard-wired, as humans, to want to hear the end of a story.

Television plays on this characteristic all the time. Think of your favorite show and the maddening, brief preview that starts before the credits roll. It’s always a quick snippet that makes you stay tuned because the writers and producers know their audience will sit through several minutes of mindless commercials just to find out how the story will continue.
In our own writing, we can use story in just the same way. We can draw our readers into our own experiences, even if they’ve never been through anything even similar to what we have, by telling our own stories.

**HOW DO WE WRITE NARRATIVE?**

A narrative essay is a piece that tells one consistent, cohesive story. In academic writing, a narrative essay will also always convey a lesson, a moral, or a point that the writer wishes the reader to take.

When we say “moral,” some people think of after school specials and having “good behavior” tips crammed down their throat. However, the most powerful lessons conveyed through writing are often done with great subtlety. True, the punishing pace of writing expected in a college course may not leave enough time to develop a nuanced story — no one is going to churn out *War and Peace* or even *The Hobbit* in ten weeks — but not every story has to have the moral stated clearly, in bold font, at the very beginning.

Think about it this way: When you were a kid, if your grandmother had sat you down and said, “Listen. We’re now going to have a thirty-minute conversation about how it’s really bad if you start smoking,” would you have listened? Probably not. If, however, your grandmother took you to visit your uncle Larry, who had terminal lung cancer, and then casually mentioned as you left that Larry had been smoking since he was your age — would you get the lesson? Would you remember it? Do you remember better the 200 lectures you had as a teenager about not being a bully, or do you remember the one time that you witnessed its effects firsthand?

In a narrative, we want to pull that same kind of trick on our readers: get our point across, but do it in a way that engages the imagination and attention. Use the power of the story.

Narrative relies on the same components that all good writing does: it needs detail, clear organization, and a central purpose (AKA our friends Development, Organization, and Unity).

**NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT: BRING THE DETAILS**

Consider this passage from the very first Sherlock Holmes mystery, “A Study in Scarlet,” which describes a major character:
His face was lean and haggard, and the brown parchment-like skin was drawn tightly over the projecting bones; his long, brown hair and beard were all flecked and dashed with white; his eyes were sunken in his head, and burned with an unnatural lustre; while the hand which grasped his rifle was hardly more fleshy than that of a skeleton. As he stood, he leaned upon his weapon for support, and yet his tall figure and the massive framework of his bones suggested a wiry and vigorous constitution. His gaunt face, however, and his clothes, which hung so baggily over his shrivelled limbs, proclaimed what it was that gave him that senile and decrepit appearance. The man was dying—dying from hunger and from thirst.

The author includes detail upon detail to describe this gentleman. He could have simply said, “He was dying from hunger and from thirst,” which would tell us everything we need to know. Instead, he describes how these feelings have had an effect upon the man — he is gaunt, he’s starting to look like a skeleton, and he can barely stand without the support of his rifle.

Think of the best book you’ve ever read (or the best television show you’ve ever watched, or the movie you love), and you may be able to relate to this. Good description is the difference between hearing a game on the radio and watching it live in the stadium (or on a ginormous 3-D television). The very breath of life in a narrative will always be your ability to describe a scene.

This relies on the use of specific language. As you read through the revision section, you were encouraged to avoid phrases that your audience might find misleading. Consider this as you write a story. With every sentence, ask, “What does my audience know? What do they think?” If you say a car is “beautiful,” will your audience think of a 2018 Hybrid Honda Accord or of a 1966 Chevelle (pictured at right)? If there’s some doubt, change your words to reflect your meaning.
You may have heard the advice that asks you to “show, not tell” in writing. This is what we mean: be so descriptive in telling a story that the reader feels s/he is there beside you, seeing the swimming pool or the school’s front doors or the new car or the new child with his/her own eyes.

**NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION**

Narrative traditionally follows time order, or chronological order, throughout. This seems obvious when you think about it — we tell stories in time order, starting (usually) at the beginning and working through to the end.

In an essay, pieces of the story can be organized into timespans by paragraph. For instance, if I’m describing a particularly harrowing day at work, I might have a paragraph just for the morning, and then a paragraph about my terrible lunch break, and then a paragraph about my afternoon.

Narrative essays usually can’t cover more ground than a day or two. Instead of writing about your entire vacation experience, study abroad month, two years of work at the plant, or 18 years living at home, focus on one particular experience that took place over a day or two. That’s enough for a reader to digest in a few pages, and it will also give you a chance to really lay in details without feeling rushed.

Sometimes, we start stories out of order. Many popular movies and television shows do this regularly by showing a clip of something that happens later before starting the whole show. If you’ve ever seen an episode of NCIS, you’ll be familiar with this technique: they start each section of the show with a photo of the ending scene, then start an hour or two before that scene in the live action. Shows often jump to “One Week Earlier” between commercial breaks.

Think of the emotional impact that has upon you as a viewer. Again, it’s a trick the writers pull with their story to drive you through the boring/silly pointless/insulting commercials so that you’ll stay with them. We want to know how the characters get to that end.

You can manipulate your audience in this way, too, but be careful; giving away too much of the ending may sometimes make a reader simply put down what they’re reading. It’s safer (though not always better) to just start at the beginning and write things down as they happened. Particularly in a first draft, sticking to the natural story order will be a good way to make sure nothing gets missed.
NARRATIVE UNITY

The final consideration in putting together a narrative essay should be unifying it around a single theme or lesson. As you draft, you may already have this lesson in mind: everyone should wear a seatbelt. However, remember that your reader needs to make up her own mind. Don’t insult a reader by beating them up with your lesson, and don’t leave them guessing about the meaning of your piece by leaving it out completely.

Many writers include a paragraph of reflection after telling a personal story in an essay that lets a reader know, directly, the significance that the story has on the writer’s life. This can be a good way to get a lesson across. Showing what you’ve learned or found important in an event will provide the reader with a clue about the overall meaning of the story.

You should use “I” in a personal, narrative essay. There are types of academic writing where “I” is inappropriate, but this is not one of those times. In fact, the best narratives will often be the most personal, the stories that avoid hiding behind “you” or “they” and instead boldly tell the writer’s own story.

NARRATIVE OUTLINES

The typical narrative essay follows an outline that should seem like common sense:

1. Paragraph 1: Introduction
2. Paragraph 2: Event #1
3. Paragraph 3: Event #2
4. Paragraph 4: Event #3
5. Paragraph 5: Conclusion

This outline is flexible. Perhaps the first event in your story will take significant space to describe; it may need 2 paragraphs of its own. Maybe there are smaller events that happen within the larger events. Maybe for your piece it makes sense to jump right into the story instead of spending an introduction paragraph to give some setup. What matters most is that a reader can easily follow the piece from beginning to end and that she will leave with a good understanding of what you wanted the reader to learn.
This guide originally appeared in Jenn Kepka's *Narrative Writing* text, an open resource licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

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The college where I first started teaching writing called its freshman composition course “Logic and Rhetoric” after two of the three arts of discourse in the classical tradition (the third being grammar).* While the students could easily explain what logic is, they struggled with the definition of rhetoric; most of their responses were more or less a politer version of this succinct definition offered by one brave student: “bullshit.” While I was surprised that he dared say such a word in class, and I am equally surprised that our publishers have so kindly agreed to print it, this offensive word so directly and memorably brings us to the crux of the matter: that choosing how to express your meaning is every bit as important as the message itself, which is really what rhetoric is. Every time you go to write anything (and every time you open your mouth), whether actively conscious of the purpose or not, you are making decisions about which words to use and what tone to establish as you order your thoughts based upon what is appropriate for your intended audience in that context.

Determined as I was to enlighten the class about the more positive and powerful aspects of rhetoric, we used no textbook in the program that could edify us. This turned out to be a good thing, for, out of necessity, I invented a simple, little exercise¹ for them that you will participate in here, now, and dazzle yourself with the rhetorical skills you already possess, skills that are crucial for your development as an academic writer. For purposes of comparison, I have also included responses from other student writers for you to consider—all of whom surprised themselves with their own rhetorical range and ability. First, I will give you five simple facts, nothing but the facts, as I did my students:

Who: Mark Smith  
What: Murdered  
Where: Parking garage  
When: June 6, 2010; 10:37 p.m.  
How: Multiple stab wounds

¹Odds are, I was inspired by Anna Quindlen’s book Murder to Adore, which is full of rhetorical surprises. Thanks, Anna!
You might read such straightforward facts in a short newspaper article or hear them in a brief news report on the radio; if the person was not famous, the narrative might sound like this: Mark Smith was found stabbed to death at 10:37 p.m. on June 6th, in the local parking garage. Next, imagine that you are the detective called out to investigate the crime scene, which will, of course, demand that you also write and file a report of your findings. (In fact, many people who go into law enforcement are shocked to discover how much writing such a job regularly entails.) Take a moment to visualize the five facts, and then pick up a pen or turn to your keyboard and write for five or so minutes as if you were that detective. In writing up the case (whoops, I have given you a clue), you may add or invent as many details as you see fit, but you may not alter the given facts. Go ahead. Get started on writing your report of the murder scene. Then come back and read the next section.

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR INNER DETECTIVE

Welcome back. While it is usually the detective who asks all the questions, we will proceed first with me grilling you not about the murder but about your report:

• How does it begin? Where does it end?
• What types of details did you find yourself adding? Why? What details did you omit? Why?
• What kind of words did you choose?
• What tone did you take? (I will admit, tone can be a tricky thing to describe; it is best done by searching for a specific adjective that describes a feeling or an attitude such as "pretentious," "somber," "buoyant," "melancholic," "didactic," "humorous," etc.).
• How did you order your information?
• And, since I am working under the assumption that no undergraduates have yet had careers in law enforcement, how did you know how to write like a detective would in the first place?

The answer I get to my last question invariably is “from television, of course,” nowadays particularly from shows such as the fictitious CSI: Crime Scene Investigation and reality-based The First 48. From such shows, and from detective movies or fiction, we get a glimpse not only into the work detectives are likely to do but also the language they choose. Gradually, and ever so subtly, we internalize this detective-speak, which is more than just the jargon they use. Jargon is the terminology used by those in a particular profession or group to facilitate clear and precise communication, but this rhetorical tool is not limited just to the professional world. For example, anyone who participates in a sport uses the
lingo specific to that sport, which is learned by doing. Doctors use medical jargon and lawyers use legal jargon, and they go to school specifically to learn the terms and abbreviations of their professions; so do detectives. If you use any kind of slang words, you, too, use jargon, but if you studied these words in a book, they are probably not very hip or at least not very au courant. For slang is different in that it maintains a currency in a dual sense: it strives to be current, and it circulates among a select network of users. Jargon does not fall victim to fashion so easily as slang does, but it does have a similar effect in that they both exclude those outside of the community who do not understand the meanings of the words. And so purposefully in the case of slang and not necessarily purposefully in the case of jargon, the initiated constitute an “insiders club” for whom they themselves are their intended and best audience. When you write an academic paper, you are practicing how to use the jargon you have internalized through studying that discipline as you write for professors and students within that field.

Getting back to the detective writing . . . although you probably didn’t think much about whom your audience would be, who would read such a report, when you got started you probably had no problem deciding how to begin your narrative: Am I right that it starts with you arriving at the crime scene, and that you wrote in first person? Every piece of writing needs a starting point and a perspective, it is true, and the demands of the genre—in this instance the reports of detectives—shaped the very first words of your response. This is why I say with confidence that you worked your magic with more than just detective jargon. As much as I am aware of my audience here—so much so that I am trying to engage in dialog with you through my casual tone, my informal language, and my addressing you directly by asking you questions and anticipating your responses—ultimately the format dictates that our “conversation” remain one-sided.

As much as I wish I could chat with you about the report you wrote, I cannot. Instead, I offer you here the “detective reports” of students much like you, students taking freshman composition classes who were given just the five facts about the murder, to present some rhetoric in action. “I arrived at the crime scene at roughly 22:45 (10:45) p.m.,” writes Jeannette Olsavsky; “headquarters had received a phone call at 10:37 p.m. about a dead body lying stabbed in the parking garage on Franklin Ave.” Ilya Imyanitov starts his report with: “My partner and I received a phone call at 11:02 p.m. from dispatch that a body was found in the parking garage on 34th and 5th. We were the first to arrive on the scene.” Here’s one more example: “On Saturday, June 6th, at 10:37 p.m., the Montclair Police Department received an anonymous call regarding a body found in the Hawk Parking Garage. Detectives Dan Barry, Randy Johnson, and
I, Tamara Morales, were called to the scene. Upon arrival, we noted the cadaver was facing down and had multiple stab wounds.

Did you notice all of the things that these reports do similarly? Mere coincidence? I think not. They obey the conventions of the genre (which is a word we will gradually define). All of these opening sentences note some kind of phone call that gets them to the scene of the crime, all of them establish more specifically the location, all of them note precise times (which could be of significance), all of them are in first person, and two of our detectives work with partners. While the similarities continue to multiply as the three reports unfold, we can discern from these few sentences alone that writers attend to how they order their information and that writers can aspire towards objectivity even when writing in the first person.

Since detectives are trained observers who search for clues to aid in the investigation of a crime, they provide written, first-hand accounts of the tangible evidence they find. They also speculate as to what might have motivated the criminal to perpetrate the crime. In short, detectives have an agenda: in their reports, our three student-detectives try to identify the victim, establish injuries and cause of death, and look for signs of foul play. They also hope to interview witnesses to corroborate their findings, and one lucky detective does. Detective Imyanitov “took down a statement from the [garage] attendant, Michael Portnick.” Portnick “states that he was making his rounds as usual,” and “he remembers checking his phone” when “he discovered a body that appeared to be stabbed to death.” Why such hesitation, Detective Imyanitov? You can tell from the verbs he uses (such as Portnick “states” and “remembers,” and the body “appeared”) that he is recording a version of the events he has not yet verified, and so he infuses his narrative with words that establish room for doubt. Through his diction, or choice of words, Imyanitov establishes a tone for his report that is formal, objective, inquisitive, and tentative all at the same time. Not surprisingly, Olsavsky’s and Morales’s reports adopt much the same tone, and all three also end the same way: with the call for a “full investigation” to ensue based on the preliminary findings.

These three detective reports, in fact all the detective reports I’ve ever collected from students, discuss to some degree the nature of the fatal wounds Mark Smith received. Now shift gears slightly to imagine that you are the coroner who is on duty in the city morgue when Mark’s body arrives. The coroner must do a full examination of the corpse and, what else, write up a report (trust me, there are few jobs out there that do not require writing). Visualize yourself in your new occupation, recall the “five facts,” and then take five minutes to write up your findings as a coroner might (remember, you may add or invent as many details as you like, but you may not alter the given facts). Really—go, write, and come back.
CULTIVATING YOUR INNER CORONER

Your first thoughts probably weren't so much about audience this time, either; you were probably thinking hard about jargon, though. You know (from CSI or elsewhere) that coroners use very specific terminology that allows for precise and concise description, so to write a plausible report you had to muster up as many factual and pseudo-medical words as possible. In other words, your freedom to select words—to choose your diction—was limited greatly by the jargon of this profession, which means that the tone was also mostly dictated. Because a detective and a coroner have similar agendas in that they report causes, effects, and facts, and because they often present to similar audiences, their reports often assume a similar tone that is informative, authoritative, and forensic. But the tone of the coroner's report is ultimately much more technical and is prescribed by the medical community. Every discipline has its own range of acceptable jargon, diction, and tone to be learned and applied.

So how does your report read? If it is like that of my students, you began it much like you did your detective report with the five, simple facts relating to the crime. After that, however, it diverges. It becomes focused on the body alone and for good reason—that's all you've got to look at! Here I'd like to answer some relevant questions I asked but never addressed with regard to your detective report: what details did you include or omit and why? Of course the coroner cannot and does not include details about the parking garage, but what would stop him/her from recording whether Mark Smith was handsome or not, or whether the tattoo on Smith's calf was cool or comical, or whether he reminded the coroner of his/her brother-in-law? You think this a dumb question, I know, because such subjectivity and personal observations do not belong in an official, objective report. Perhaps the question is dumb, but thinking about why it is dumb is not: even though you are not a real coroner (you just play one here) you have an awareness not only of what the genre demands but also what it rejects. You have a sense of what is appropriate in this context, and in many, many other rhetorical contexts, including when you assume the role of a student writing an essay (we are getting closer to a definition of genre).

What surprises me most about all the times I've asked students to write like coroners do is not that they can, even though this is the most difficult exercise in the group, but that they do not include the simplest information—a basic, physical description of Mark Smith. They tend to jump right into gory descrip-

2. While coroners are forensic scientists, the terms are not exactly synonymous, for forensic actually means “legal,” and a forensic scientist can be anyone in the discipline who gathers evidence of interest in legal matters.
tions of what got him to the morgue but not anything like “The subject is a Cau-
casian male, is in his early thirties, about five feet, ten inches tall and 175 pounds; he has brown eyes and shoulder-length, dark brown hair. He has a birthmark on his left forearm and a two-inch scar in the vicinity of where his appendix would be.” Maybe students are just too eager to cover the “five facts” I have presented them; or maybe it is that they are not so eager to ponder Mark Smith as a real but dead person with personal features; or both.

After reporting the five facts in the first sentence of his coroner’s report, and adding that Mark Smith was found by an off-duty police officer, Brett Magura writes:

After post-mortem evaluation, it can be seen that only one of the six stab wounds was fatal. This stab came from behind, through the back and in between the ribs, puncturing the heart and causing internal bleeding. The fatal blow appeared to follow an effort to run away after the first five wounds occurred to the hands and arms. The wounds on the hands and arms are determined to be defensive wounds.

Magura concludes his report with the contents of Smith’s stomach and a blood-alcohol level assessment. Like many students, Magura identifies the locations of the wounds and the exact cause of death, and like many students he admirably gropes for the words that coroners use. Instead of “back” or “behind,” he might have substituted “posterior” and thrown in some words like “anterior” or “lateral” or “laceration,” I would venture, but his report is on target even if his and my jargon would benefit from some medical schooling.

Lecille Desampardo is the only student I’ve known to give the report a case number, “Murder Case #123,” which immediately suggests that her report is official and conforms to standards we would also find in Cases 1 through 122. Even better, one could easily keep track of and even reference such a report, which would be important if it should be needed as forensic evidence. Desampardo finds “remnants of some kind of black grease” in the stab wounds, and upon the miracles of further lab testing links it to the “Nissan Pathfinder owned by the victim.” Coupled with the “irregular shape” of the stab wounds, the murder weapon was a “monkey wrench” she concludes. What kind of weapon did you deduce killed Mark Smith? Was it a hunting knife or a butcher’s knife or scissors or something else? Does your report work to support that assumption? Chances are you found yourself knowing exactly what content to include but were frustrated at not having the exact words you desired at your disposal. In this rhetorical instance, you even know what it is you don’t know (which, unfortunately, can also be the case when you are first learning academic writing).

On the other hand, perhaps these words came easy for Kristin Flynn who writes,
Mark Smith was an amazing father, husband and good friend. His unfortunate murder and untimely demise come as a shock to all who knew him. Mark and I go way back [. . .]. His memory will be forever treasured, and it is truly a shame to have to say goodbye to him today.

Wait a minute? What happened to the knife, the parking garage, and the stab wounds? One would hope that such graphic details wouldn’t make their way into a eulogy.

Yes, the next exercise I want you to write is a short eulogy for Mark Smith, which is a speech of remembrance delivered at a funeral. This exercise is perhaps one of the easier ones to write, but that is only if you liked Mark Smith and can write in honesty; imagine how difficult it would be if you didn’t like him? So return now to the “five facts,” invent the details that you need, and work for five minutes or so to fulfill the rhetorical demands of the genre of the eulogy (which I hope you’ll never get much practice in).

LEARNING HOW TO SAY GOODBYE

Many students get flustered with this exercise because they feel compelled to include all “five facts” while they intuitively know that an actual eulogy would not; the instructions I give require no such thing. I write “intuitively” here because, again, I cannot imagine that many of you are trained to write eulogies, and so you proceeded based on the knowledge you have internalized from your religion or culture. The example of the eulogy highlights very well the decisions all writers must make about what to include and what to omit based upon the expectations of the audience for whom they write (including an academic audience). You were probably rather surprised to read just on the heels of the coroners’ reports an excerpt of the eulogy Flynn penned because you were expecting more blood and guts. It is a good time to admit that I did this on purpose, and that in my classes I aim for this element of surprise as well; my students don’t know that they have been assigned different writing tasks relating to the facts of Mark Smith’s murder, and when they read them aloud without identifying the piece the contrasts stand sharp. After only a few sentences, though, the students recognize what genre it is they hear because of the various rhetorical cues they so quickly discern.

So what did you include in your eulogy? Of the five facts, you probably mentioned Mark Smith by his whole name at first, and thereafter by his first name to foster a sense of familiarity, and then did your best to avoid the other four facts entirely, facts the detectives must write about so extensively. Flynn mentions the “unfortunate murder” in her eulogy, which could be considered daring,
but she does so to commiserate with others in their sense of “shock.” Notice, though, that she doesn’t say that Mark Smith “died” or “croaked” or was “offed”; okay, clearly “croaked” and “offed” are too indelicate, but why not “died,” which seems innocuous enough? She writes of Mark’s “untimely demise,” which is a euphemism. When people replace a word that can be considered offensive, discomforting, or controversial with another term to make it seem less so, they have chosen a euphemism. Death provides an excellent example of something that makes us uncomfortable, and so we have many euphemistic synonyms for dying such as “to pass on,” “to leave this world,” “to be with God,” “to breathe one’s last,” and “to go to a better place.” Interestingly enough, we have many irreverent synonyms for dying in addition to “croak,” such as “to kick the bucket,” “to bite the big one,” “to push up the daisies,” or “to buy the farm,” which are colloquial and try to bring humor to this bothersome subject. Colloquial refers to language that is informal and usually spoken but not written (such as “ain’t” and “gonna”). These particular death colloquialisms can also be considered dysphemisms in that they exaggerate rather than soften what could be offensive. While colloquialisms and dysphemisms usually do not belong in academic writing, euphemism can serve its purpose depending on your tone.

But enough talk about talk. Let’s get back to the writing. Adi Baruch wrote her eulogy in the form of letter (also known as an epistle) to Mark Smith, which is a bit of a departure from the genre in its strictest sense, but she nevertheless avoids mentioning anything about the murder while still conveying that he has, well, left us: “Whoever knew quite how cruel life could be? Surely, neither you nor I. We’ve known each other for the past ten years, always growing closer. Unfortunately enough, for me and many others, your life has come to an end. We can no longer continue to make great memories together. . . . Your memory will live on with every life you’ve ever touched.” Does your eulogy sound like this? Is it written in first-person, is it evasive of specifics but generally positive, is the diction a bit stilted and the tone sentimental, wistful, and poignant? Does yours, like hers, eventually end with saying good-bye to the deceased (aka the dead person)?

Or does your eulogy sound more like this one from Micheal Lynch:

> For those of you who knew Mark Smith as I did, I am sure you are not the least bit surprised to hear that he was murdered and quite violently with multiple stab wounds. Mark was our friend and our benefactor, but of course we all know he was a low-life criminal. With the number of enemies Mark made, I’m sure that the only surprise is that it took them until

3. And I would add, unfortunately for Mark, too!

40 | Murder! (Rhetorically Speaking)
When we read this one aloud in class, much laughter broke out. Why is it funny? Because it runs contrary to our established expectations, and incongruity is often a source of humor. The students recognized that while Lynch conforms to the rhetorical conventions of eulogy—he writes in first-person, remembers the deceased fondly, and says goodbye—he also works against the conventions of the genre in terms of content, diction, and tone. In short, this incongruity makes the piece ironic, which Lynch might be trying to flag when he points to the situational irony of the location of the murder.

I imagine that Lynch, like many students, assumed he had to work in all “five-facts” and saw his way to a very creative solution; knowing that such facts don’t belong in a eulogy and wanting to respond to the assignment as he interpreted it, Lynch turned the genre on its head. He showed savvy in writing it and his classmates in laughing at it, for they all recognized how much one can push or play with a given genre and still maintain its identifiable qualities. The content is graphic, the diction is crass, and the tone is irreverent. Nonetheless, it remains a eulogy, one that would likely get recited among friends (but not family) with shots of whiskey in hand. Herein we might find our definition of genre, which by necessity remains perpetually loose: when the traits or attributes considered normal to or typical of a particular kind of creative piece, such as in literature, film, or music, make it that kind and not another. For example, we know horror films when we see them and we recognize classical music when we hear it because we can classify these things according to the conventions of their genres. And we can identify the genre of the piece I am writing for you as an expository essay with its thesis, its body paragraphs of support and detail, and, as you will see, its conclusion, even if my tone is playful.

Whether or not Mark Smith was a low-life, petty thief as Lynch makes him out to be, the person who murdered him is most definitely a criminal, which brings us to our last rhetorical scenario. Your final task is to write a closing argument as if you were the prosecutor addressing the jury who will find the accused murderer guilty or not. Go ahead. Put on a suit and become a lawyer (in this profession, if you are not off researching you are usually writing), and then come back to see how your closing argument compares with the others.
LEARNING TO LOVE YOUR INNER LAWYER

Notice how I kindly provided a big clue to get you started, since you’ve had so much to think about already. When you wrote the eulogy I did not call attention to the fact that your audience was friends and family, for whom you wrote nonetheless, but here I do remind you that you were to address the jury. This is your signal not to soften the blow of the loss of Mark Smith for your audience, as you did in the eulogy, but to write it big, to write it bold . . . perhaps to the point where you could be accused of exaggeration (in writing aka hyperbole). You must play upon your audience’s heartstrings here, too, of course, but you must balance it with cold, hard, irrefutable facts as per the genre’s demands. How did you begin?

Despite my clue, only some of your peers start their closing arguments as Christopher Traina and Ricardo Ataide did with the requisite and respectful “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (Traina did admit that both of his parents are attorneys, but it is unlikely he attends any of the closing arguments they might make!). What effect does this address have? It alerts the members of the jury that what follows is directed specifically to them, reminds them of their important role, and helps to establish a rapport between them and the attorney. The closing argument is a good example of how the different rhetorical tools available carry different weight given the rhetorical situation. Although awareness of audience is always hugely important when one goes to write anything, a direct address is not, which we see with the lack thereof in the detective's and coroner’s reports. They write for an implied audience (as you do in your academic writing), which is more often than not comprised of attorneys and, funnily enough, eventually of judges and juries (which is why their work is ultimately forensic). Furthermore, when it comes time to communicate to the jury how Mark Smith was murdered, the attorney would do best to translate the medical jargon of the coroner’s report into layperson’s terms, or language for people who are not experts; plain, simple diction would prevail over sophisticated jargon in this context. And while the detective's and the coroner's reports should be devoid of emotion, just as the eulogy should be saturated with it, the attorney aims to persuade the jury with both objective facts, what Aristotle calls logos, and simmering emotion, what he calls pathos; and lastly, depending on the lawyer, the jury will also likely be persuaded by his/her ethos, or credible character.

Appealing to his jury in first person, Traina states for “what reasons” the “accused” committed the “heinous murder . . . you and I will never know. But I do ask you to do what is right. That is when you go to deliberate, you remember the grieving family. Remember the horrendous photos. Remember the lack of emotion on the accused’s face. You must remember all of these facts, find the
defendant guilty, and put him in jail where he will not be a danger to society. I thank you for your time and hope for your diligence in [reaching] your verdict." Traina charges the jury with the moral duty to do what is right based on the evidence provided while he also beseeches them—in short sentences of parallel form that one can imagine him articulating very slowly and deliberately—to dwell not only on the family’s agony but on the defendant’s lack of remorse. This appeal to emotion (aka pathos) doesn’t alter the facts per se, but it provides a less than neutral lens, a bias, through which the attorney hopes the jury will view them (although in academic writing one is often encouraged to avoid such bias). The tone Traina establishes is one full of urgency and gravity for the case and also of reverence for the jury, whom he thanks at the end and so maintains the rapport he initially established.

You might find that your closing argument reads so much like Traina’s that they can be considered “generic” closing arguments. Or maybe you went the route that Ataide did, which is to highlight the significant points of the investigation as you constructed a summary—a conclusion. Ataide looked a bit at the criminal mind of the defendant who “harbored feelings of despair and hatred for quite some time” before murdering his former professor, all of which are documented “in his emails and Twitter updates.” Ataide concludes his argument by directly reminding the jury that while the professor “will never again teach a class, you have the opportunity to teach the accused, Lucas Brown, a lesson here today. A conviction should be your only choice.” This clever twist on teaching a lesson provides eloquent closure to his argument.

Or perhaps you, like Chelsea Vick, felt mounting drama to be the most persuasive approach. She tells the jury that “the defendant has not only physically stabbed my client Mark Smith; he has stabbed the judicial system. Every entrance wound on my victim’s body is another blow to the system our government runs on.” She, like Traina, conjures up fear with the prospect of returning such a person to the streets, and she, too, “leaves you [the jury] to deliberate whether to send a murderer to jail or to another parking garage.” By making reference to the “system our government runs on,” Vick plays with the sometimes subtle line between the connotation and denotation of words. What a word denotes is its literal definition or what you would find should you look it up in the dictionary, but words have connotations, too, which are the emotional associations, positive or negative, we bring to them. While an apple pie denotes a dessert made of sliced apples and sugar baked in a single or double flour crust, in the United States it can also conjure up positive emotions about home and/or patriotism about country. We imagine apple pies to be lovingly-baked by apron-clad moms who raise citizens who are, well, as the saying goes, “as American as apple pie.” Vick’s comment that the defendant has metaphorically “stabbed the judicial system” in addition to Mark Smith is meant to produce negative conno-
tations beyond the actual murder; she conjures up the looming threat that our entire way of life would be at stake should the jury do anything other than convict the defendant.

If we envision in our minds the passionate delivery of these closing arguments, we might imagine that we have finally come close to the first definition of “rhetoric” that the American Heritage Dictionary online offers us, which is “the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively,” rather than that one-word definition my brave student once proffered. Yes, our attorneys all did perform admirably in their endeavors to persuade the jury with their words, but we find examples of effective rhetoric in all of the writing scenarios we have considered.

Here I offer my definition: rhetoric is what allows you to write (and speak) appropriately for a given situation, one that is determined by the expectations of your audience, implied or acknowledged, whether you are texting, writing a love letter, or bleeding a term paper. When you go to write, you might not always be actively aware of your audience as an audience. You may not even consciously realize that you are enacting certain rhetorical strategies while rejecting others. But each time you write you will find yourself in a rhetorical situation, in other words within a context or genre, that nudges you to choose the right diction or even jargon and to strike the right tone. In this essay, I put you in three rhetorical situations for which you have no formal training—writing hypothetically as if you were a detective, a coroner, and a lawyer—and you knew what to do, as you did with the eulogy. This shows the extent to which we absorb and internalize our rhetorical tools by watching media, reading books, and participating in our culture. More importantly, you can now see that when I told you at the beginning that you are already in possession of the rhetorical skills necessary for mastering the genre of academic writing and that you need only apply them, I wasn’t just feeding you a bunch of bull.

Discussion

1. Which of the exercises did you find easiest to write? Why?
2. Which of the exercises did you find hardest to write? Why?
3. What does the rhetorical situation of academic writing demand? Who is the audience? What tone is appropriate? What jargon might be needed? What information might be included and/or rejected in an academic paper?
Movie clips are one of my favorite teaching techniques. For example, to emphasize the importance of audience in an argument, I love to show the rainy scene from Focus Features’ *Pride and Prejudice* in which rich Mr. Darcy makes the **claim** that poor Lizzy should marry him. His **reason** is that he loves her "most ardently" and the **evidence** is his agony.

But Lizzy says whoop-dee-doo.

Despite the complications of British accents, archaic phrasing, and speedy dialogue, we get the idea: claim, reasons, and evidence aren’t enough if we haven’t considered the audience’s **values**. Lizzy isn’t the type to swoon at money or any old declaration of love. In contrast, when Darcy comes back with a humbler-voiced letter addressing her **objections**, it’s much more effective at persuading her to trust him.

By seeing it and hearing it as a movie clip, we remember the concept better. Who’s going to forget that intense of a proposal gone wrong? And hopefully the next time we sit down to write, we’ll think more about our audience’s beliefs, opinions, objections, etc.

My goal with this article is along those lines: to use movie clips and the movie-making process (which I would argue mirrors any type of composition process) to present writing concepts in memorable ways. We know focused reading can expand our repertoire of writing moves; now let’s see how analyzing the rhetorical strategies of cinema can improve our understanding of **ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency**, and **conventions**—and translate into better writing from top to bottom.
IDEAS

How often have you been enticed by the premise (the idea) of a movie, only to have it fail to meet your expectations? Isn’t it wild that an idea can have so much potential and then totally flop if that potential isn’t developed?

Pixar is a movie producer that really sets the standard here, refining their ideas until they hit peak potential. For example, the premise for *Ratatouille*—a rat who wants to be a gourmet chef—was first pitched in 2000. By the fall of 2004, the script still wasn’t palatable enough. As one entertainment news hound put it,

While individual elements of the film . . . were admittedly charming and quite entertaining, its narrative as a whole fell flat. You never really got caught up in Remy’s quest to become one of the greatest chefs in France. . . . [The director and his] story team were then sent back to their drawing boards with some very specific orders: Make the story stronger and make us really care about the characters’ struggles. (Hill para. 11–12)

The team had to completely revamp until they had a story and characters—fiction’s biggest idea ingredients—that would deliver. Pixar even brought a second director on board to come up with a new vision. The effort paid off: *Ratatouille* went on to win the 2008 Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film.
Pixar believes that story is king, so they don’t settle for mediocre. Even with amazing computer-animated visual effects, movies need solid ideas first.

What makes ideas solid? Think about how well your favorite movies do the following:

- excite/entice you
- provide something/someone to care about
- delve deep into the premise
- deliver on expectations
- resonate with you

These five criteria apply to all genres of writing. Consider the *Pride and Prejudice* clip above with its failed proposal: the idea of marrying Darcy did not entice Lizzy, did not offer her a fiancé she would care about, did not delve into the deeper issues she needed addressed, and did not meet her expectations for a good match—even though at the end we can see some emotional resonance. One out of five wasn’t enough for Lizzy.

But like *Ratatouille* did, Darcy is able to overcome his flaws—and so can we. Step by step he corrects each problem: addressing the issues thoroughly, making himself more likeable, exceeding her expectations, and becoming absolutely enticing to her. As we do the same, with our particular audience in mind, our writing can likewise win over our readers.

**ORGANIZATION**

Once we’ve got winning ideas, the next arena is organization. Great building blocks (fully developed ideas) won’t do as much good if they aren’t arranged well. Ideal arrangements match natural human expectations, and these expectations, believe it or not, are based on our brain’s programmed preference toward storytelling.

First, consider the basic six-step outline of storytelling: intro, conflict, complications, epiphany, climax, and resolution. Then look at how familiar movie genres use these steps:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sci-Fi/Fantasy</th>
<th>Horror</th>
<th>Super Hero</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRO</strong></td>
<td>Audience Hooked</td>
<td>Naïve characters, foreshadowing</td>
<td>How they got their powers, who they are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONFLICT</strong></td>
<td>Issues Shown</td>
<td>False jumpscare, small scary moments</td>
<td>Villain introduced, hero struggling to find own identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPLICATIONS</strong></td>
<td>Evidence Introduced</td>
<td>Things Get Worse</td>
<td>Hero disliked, moral dilemmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EPHANANY</strong></td>
<td>Evidence Revealed</td>
<td>Find out what's causing scary stuff</td>
<td>People realize super hero is GOOD!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLIMAX</strong></td>
<td>Evidence Confirmed</td>
<td>Fighting for lives against the horror</td>
<td>Face-off between hero and villain, total destruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESOLUTION</strong></td>
<td>Point Stressed</td>
<td>One survivor lives scarred but wiser</td>
<td>Good guy wins! ...this time (sequels?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the chart above shows, each step has a purpose that applies to more than just storytelling:

1. **Intro**—hook your audience (with exciting ideas)
2. **Conflict**—show what the big issues are
3. **Complications**—introduce the type of evidence/solution needed
4. **Epiphany**—reveal the evidence/solution
5. **Climax**—explain/apply the evidence/solution
6. **Resolution**—stress the point (moral of the story)

From hook to resolution, the organization builds the tension as it proceeds, keeping the audience in suspense for the final reveal. It’s why our ears perk up when someone starts a story. We want to know what happens. And that hardwiring is why story-based organization is most effective—even beyond story genres.

For example, a recipe might **hook** us with the name and a great photo and a description of its yumminess. The main **conflict/hurdle** will be gathering the ingredients, so those are usually listed next. The **complications** are yield and time involved, often spelled out before we get to the steps that reveal why the dish takes so long to prepare. The **epiphany** is the steps themselves (“Oh! That’s how you make it!”). The **climax** is often the final step of baking/simmering/etc (when we’ll wait to see if the recipe worked). Finally, the **resolution** could be tips on how to serve the finished dish.

Good organization moves the ideas forward by creating momentum that carries us to the resolution. Nifty, huh?
The popular indie flick *Juno*, which won an Oscar for Diablo Cody’s brilliant screenwriting, might be a perfect way to begin understanding voice. Just check out the trailer:

Voice is pretty much viewpoint, personality, and tone squashed together. It’s what gives a piece of writing its overall feel. A good voice should be four things:

- strong
- appealing
- appropriate
- consistent

I’ve heard dissenters claim that Juno’s voice is too unrealistic and too exaggerated, but even an over-the-top voice can be awesome, so long as it meets the four criteria above.

Satire is one example of exaggerated voice. Writers attempting it must consider their situation and whether or not satire is a strong way to make their point, whether or not it’s appropriate for their topic, whether or not they can make it appealing, and whether or not they can maintain a consistent voice throughout the piece.

The last trait, consistency, doesn’t mean you can’t pull off a range of emotion, from funny to tragic. *Juno* manages to. I cry every time I watch it, and I laugh at the great lines, and I get angry at a certain character who will not be named (since it’d be a spoiler). Those disparate emotions all fit in the movie because they’re brought together by the same quirky, complex point of view: Juno’s.

To understand how that translates into writing, take a look at the examples below showing how various nonfiction genres also adopt a particular voice.

From Sharon Begley’s report, “Why Your Brain Never Really Rests”:

> Oops. Neuroscience is having its dark-energy moment, feeling as cha-
grined as astronomers who belatedly realized that the cosmos is awash in more invisible matter and mysterious (“dark”) energy than make up the atoms in all the stars, planets, nebulae, and galaxies. For it turns out that when someone is just lying still and the mind is blank, neurons are chattering away like Twitter addicts. (para. 2)

From Jason Gay’s set of New Year’s resolution tips, “27 Rules of Conquering the Gym”:

This is the time of year when even people who hate the gym think about going to the gym. Many of us are still digesting whole floors of gingerbread houses, and jeans that fit comfortably in October are now a denim humiliation. (para. 1)

From Chris Jones’s ESPN profile of Zac Sunderland:

The crossing was the last great hurdle in his quest to be the youngest person to sail solo around the world. It was a desolate, often windless stretch—4,278 nautical miles that, on a good day, he covered at just six nautical miles an hour. The math could make seasoned sailors talk to themselves, let alone a 17-year-old California kid who’d just realized he’d lost his radar. (para. 1)

In the first article, the voice is a snarky but enthralling; in the second, it’s self-deprecating and funny; and in the third, it’s sympathetic and tense. All three are strong voices, appropriate for the topic, appealing to their audience, and consistent throughout.

WORD CHOICE

While voice is the overarching feel, word choice is the specific, detailed texture. The big considerations of voice have to come first, and then you can sprinkle in the details.

It’s similar to how you choose actors for a movie based on the feel you want, and then you reinforce that feel with their costumes. The actors (and their skills) are the voice; the costumes (and the sets) are like word choice.
Again, both need to be appropriate for the piece. We don't want gladiators wearing frilly dresses covered in bows (unless we're creating a parody). We have to find the words that fit the texture we're going for.

In the following excerpts from young-adult novels, notice how the individual words dress each unique character and setting like wardrobe and sets.

From James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*:

He heard noises above—voices—and fear squeezed his chest.

“Look at that shank.”

“How old is he?”

“Looks like a klunk in a T-shirt.”

“You’re the klunk, shuck-face.”

“Dude, it smells like feet down there!”

“Hope you enjoyed the one-way trip, Greenie.”

“Ain’t no ticket back, bro.” (3)
From M. T. Anderson’s *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation: The Pox Party*:

I was raised in a gaunt house with a garden; my earliest recollections are of floating lights in the apple-trees.

I recall, in the orchard behind the house, orbs of flames rising through the black boughs and branches; they climbed, spiritous, and flickered out; my mother squeezed my hand with delight. We stood near the door to the ice-chamber.

By the well, servants lit bubbles of gas on fire, clad in frockcoats of asbestos.

Around the orchard and gardens stood a wall of some height, designed to repel the glance of idle curiosity and to keep us all from slipping away and running for freedom; though that, of course, I did not yet understand.

How doth all that seeks to rise burn itself to nothing. (3)

From Laini Taylor's *Faeries of Dreamdark: Blackbringer*:

“How you holding up, my feather?” she asked the crow she rode upon, stroking his sleek head with both hands.

“Like a leaf on a breeze,” he answered in his singsong voice. “A champagne bubble. A hovering hawk. A cloud! Nothing to it!”

“So you say. But I’m no tiny sprout anymore, Calypso, and sure you can’t carry me forever.”

“Piff! Ye weigh no more than a dust mouse, so hush yer spathering. ’Twill be a sore day for me when I can’t carry my ’Pie.” (4–5)

Each excerpt makes me want to keep going. Voice and word choice together bring writing to life as surely as actors, wardrobe, and sets in a movie.

While the above examples are from fictional works, that transformative effect can happen in any genre. Whether in fiction or nonfiction, you can potentially pen words that will outlast you, like this famous editorial from 1897, responding to eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon’s letter to *The New York Sun*, “Is There a Santa Claus?”:

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the
world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished. (para. 2)

Beautiful, right?

But of course, well-chosen words alone do not make good writing. It’s like Will Ferrell’s character in Bewitched blaming the wardrobe department for the failure of his latest movie. Yeah, maybe the Sherpa hats were ridiculous-looking, but even great costumes wouldn’t have made up for his terrible acting (the character’s, not Will Ferrell’s). The newspaper snippet above shows how a writer has to do everything we’ve discussed so far:

- Introduce a powerful idea—comparing Santa Claus to joy
- Shape the organization—
  - Intro: “yes, Virginia”
  - Conflict: existence of Santa Claus
  - Complications: his connection to love, generosity, beauty etc
  - Epiphany: without him the world is dreary
  - Climax: facing how much goodness we would lose
  - Resolution: childhood faith lights the world
- Find a perfect voice—tone of wonder and sincerity appropriate for responding to a serious child’s question
- Choose the best words—exist, abound, alas, childlike, enjoyment, eternal, light

Revising on only one level, such as only worrying about the words, wouldn’t be enough.

**SENTENCE FLUENCY**

Next, let’s try a little experiment of observation. As you watch this clip below from the movie Stranger Than Fiction, I want you to notice the cuts. Usually, we don’t—unless the film editors have done a poor job. Usually, the cuts are so natural that we easily shift from one angle to the next. But if you force yourself to notice, you can observe a lot about how they make it smooth.
For one thing, did you notice how Harold (Will Ferrell) walking around the store creates a sense of flow? If each shot had cut straight to him already in front of each guitar, it would be more jarring. Instead, they cut one angle as he starts to move away from a guitar and then pick up the next angle as he's walking toward a new one. It creates flow between the shots, and the cuts become nearly invisible, leaving us to focus on the meaning of how the scene impacts the story.

Sentences have to be the same way. They have to flow so smoothly that we hardly notice them—unless to occasionally notice a sentence as breathtaking as a beautiful shot in a movie. Other than that, the sentences should simply be working together to feed us a story, piece by piece.

Look at how that happens in the following excerpt from Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*:

> There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife. The knife had a handle of polished black bone, and a blade finer and sharper than any razor. If it sliced you, you might not even know you had been cut, not immediately.

> The knife had done almost everything it was brought to that house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet.

> The street door was still open, just a little, where the knife and the man who held it had slipped in, and wisps of nighttime mist slithered and twined into the house through the open door. (2–5)

This passage is a great example of what is called the **known–new contract**, in which each sentence builds on the one before. Neil Gaiman begins with “there was” and then adds something new: “a hand in the darkness.” Then he refers to the hand as “it”—something now known—and adds the next new piece: a knife. The knife again (now known) leads us to its handle and blade (new). Notice how subtle changes reinforce this: when it’s new, it’s a knife, but once it’s known, it becomes the knife. The sentences are one long chain of known–new–known–new, flowing as smoothly as movie shots.

Creating that chain sounds tedious at first, but astute writers naturally point
back to what’s known so that the sentence fluency is smooth. When they encounter an out-of-place sentence, they look for breaks in the known–new chain and add the necessary pieces to fix it.

Below is a nonfiction example from a sports article about baseball pitcher Daniel Norris. As you read it, pay attention to how the author takes you from one sentence to the next.

The future of the Toronto Blue Jays wakes up in a 1978 Volkswagen camper behind the dumpsters at a Wal-Mart and wonders if he has anything to eat. He rummages through a half-empty cooler until he finds a dozen eggs. “I’m not sure about these,” he says, removing three from the carton, studying them, smelling them and finally deciding it’s safe to eat them. While the eggs cook on a portable stove, he begins the morning ritual of cleaning his van, pulling the contents of his life into the parking lot. Out comes a surfboard. Out comes a subzero sleeping bag. Out comes his only pair of jeans and his handwritten journals. A curious shopper stops to watch. “Hiya,” Daniel Norris says, waving as the customer walks away into the store. Norris turns back to his eggs. “I’ve gotten used to people staring,” he says. (Saslow para. 1)

Did you catch the chain? You might sum it up like this:

He wakes up in a van . . . wonders what’s to eat . . . rummages for food . . . finds eggs . . . cleans while they cook . . . curious shopper stares while he cleans . . . comments on it as he returns to the eggs.

The end of one sentence, like “wonders if he has anything to eat,” connects us straight to the beginning of the next sentence: “He rummages through a half-empty cooler.” That way readers never feel lost—and probably don’t even notice the “cuts.” Like an editor splicing the shots, the author creates congruence from each sentence to the next so that they flow.

CONVENTIONS

Finally, we get to the arena of visual effects—the stuff that makes movies look
so cool. As a simple example, let’s examine the brief animation sequences sprinkled throughout the movie (500) Days of Summer. These scene-changes were some of the very last things to be completed for the movie, and they help orient viewers to the point in time of the next scene (within the 500 days).
Conventions in writing are like everything that happens after the footage has been pieced together. Once all the frames have been sequenced—all our sentences strung—the last job is to coordinate the extra pieces that will help pull the whole movie together. These last additions are everything from overall design down to punctuation. Notice how even the title of the movie coordinates with the scene-changes by placing the number in parentheses—a punctuation choice that makes the isolated numbers on the screen simple to understand.

Similarly, the occasional split screen in the movie is an unusual convention that’s both appealing and clarifying for these scenes. By playing Tom’s expectations and reality side by side, the split screen ups the heartbreak.
Larger convention choices like that also happen in writing when we tailor our images, layout, and so on to make the point clearer. And sometimes they can be unconventional, like the four pages in Stephenie Meyer’s novel *New Moon* with only one word each: the name of a month. That method for showing the empty-feeling passage of time was so effective for the story that they used it in the movie too.

And of course, as writers, we also have to coordinate every little piece of punctuation for *clarity* and *appeal*. Just like we wouldn’t want a boom mic hanging down into the shots, distracting from the movie, we want our conventions to work for us, not against us.

This article you’re reading employs a host of conventions aimed at both aesthetic appeal and content clarification. I’ve included relevant videos, pretty pictures, headings, bullets, numbered lists, frequent paragraph breaks, bold terms, em dashes for emphasis, parentheses for interesting side notes. I had you in mind, and I wanted you to like and understand what you are reading by having visual help along the way.

In the end, the job of the six traits we’ve examined is to make our grand ideas
really shine and leave our audience with plenty of valuable takeaways, so they won’t walk away saying whoop-dee-doo.

Works Cited


Media Attributions

- Ratatouille Movie Cover
Establishing Tone In Your Writing

CHRISTOPHER BLANKENSHIP

More than 100 years ago, Lev Kuleshov, a Soviet filmmaker, discovered that viewers interpreted an actor’s facial expression differently depending on what they were shown before it. They interpreted a man’s facial expression as showing hunger when paired with a steaming bowl of soup but as lustful when paired with a pretty woman on a couch. In fact, the shots of the actor were identical. We can see this in modern movies too. Leonardo DiCaprio’s intense stare seems distraught in Titanic, disturbed in Inception, and deranged in Shutter Island.

Similarly, the human voice is an amazing tool for conveying meaning with a flexibility we often take for granted. By changing small things in the sound of our voices, such as the pitch, the volume, or the length of the sounds, we can convey a wide variety of meaning, even when we use the same words. Imagine all of the ways you’ve ever heard someone say words like “fine” or “whatever,” and you’ll get a sense of just how much meaning is communicated purely through the way that the human voice produces words. And that communication DOES happen, just like my mom tried to teach me when she would say “don’t take that tone with me!” in response to my teenaged “fine” and “whatever” comments.

Tone is how we let the people we communicate with know our attitude about our topic or even about the reader. It lets our reader know that we’re passionate, angry, interested, indifferent, or any other emotion about the topic of discussion. It also lets the reader know how we view them: as a novice or expert, interested or apathetic, respected or not. And we establish tone in a variety of ways using sight and sound.

When we communicate in person, we use our body language as well as the sound of our voice to convey meaning. We lean forward and make eye contact to tell someone we’re interested in the topic; we lean back to indicate disinterest; we cross our arms to show resistance; we smile to show that we’re support-
ive. What may seem like a very simple in-person conversation is actually a very rich medium of communication where all of these elements work together to produce a specific effect.

Another filmmaking technique to establish tone is the reaction shot. Here, a director shows the audience how they should interpret the actions of the actors in the scene by having the background actors react in a certain way. During a marriage proposal, we know whether to be hopeful, worried, or angry depending upon how any friends or family in the background react to the event.

We can even see this effect in narrative writing. Novelist and screenwriter Steven Brust describes how he writes these types of reaction shots:

“He held out his arm, and she took it. Her friend glanced at them and gritted her teeth.”

vs.

“He held out his arm, and she took it. Her friend glanced at them, then looked away, suppressing a smile.”

The reaction of the friend in the first scene tells us as readers that we should feel frustrated or worried, whereas the second scene tells us we should feel happy or hopeful about the scene.

So, if tone is such a complex thing to build in media that are rich in sight, sound, and narrative possibilities, just how can someone establish a tone in a research paper or analytical essay where we only have printed words to work with? We use the tools at our disposal: words.

**WORD CHOICE AND TONE**

**Word choice** is one way that we set the tone for our readers. Consider three ways to refer to supporters of a politician:

1. These are examples common in the United States. While tone of voice is a little more universal, all language varies widely from culture to culture.
In the first example, we can tell that the writer has a favorable opinion of President Smith's supporters. She identifies them as loyal, a positive trait in our society; as citizens, which focuses on a positive relationship between the supporters and their country; and points out that they are working hard, an admirable trait for most people.

In the second example, the writer certainly has a negative opinion about President Smith's supporters. She refers to these supporters as delusional, meaning that they have false or unrealistic beliefs, and as acolytes, which can refer to followers of a religion but can also be used to describe someone who acts purely on belief rather than reason, often considered a negative for those governing a country.

While the first two examples refer to the same group of people, the attitude that the writer has about this group changes dramatically between the two. The third example, however, is more neutral, simply referring to people who support President Smith politically. Professors often expect this more neutral tone in more informative writing because it demonstrates that the writer is setting aside her personal biases about the topic and is trying to present information fairly. Journalists are also expected to use this kind of tone in their reporting, as are scientists in their research writing. The ability to be (or at least appear) unbiased carries quite a bit of weight in many types of written communication in our society.

TECHNICAL TERM: SENTENCE STRUCTURE AND TONE

Another way to set the tone is through sentence structure. The ways that sentences are assembled can show different attitudes and priorities in a text. Consider these two sentences that express very similar ideas in different ways:

“'The loyal citizens working hard for President Smith’”
vs.
“'The delusional acolytes of President Smith’”
vs.
“'President Smith's political supporters’”
“The senator made some very serious mistakes.”

vs.

“Very serious mistakes were made.”

In the first sentence, it’s very clear who made the mistakes: the senator; however, in the second sentence, we know that someone made some very serious mistakes, but it’s not clear who. This change is a grammatical one, changing the active voice to the passive voice, but this grammatical change also changes the tone. In the first sentence, the writer wants the reader to know who is responsible for the mistakes; however, in the second sentence, the writer wants show that they aren’t interested in who caused the mistakes, just that they were made. On the other hand, if the reader feels that the writer SHOULD be concerned with who’s responsible for the mistakes, then this tonal choice comes across as an attempt to obscure the truth rather than simply shift the emphasis.

There are many other ways sentence structure can establish the tone of writing. Long, complex sentences can tell the reader that the writer believes the topic is a complex one and needs careful attention. Combined with word choice, short sentences can provide a more sarcastic or ironic tone, such as an online comment on a The Salt Lake Tribune story about a visiting politician that simply reads “Utah is full. Go home.”

PERSPECTIVE AND TONE

A third common way that we can set a certain tone in our writing is through perspective. Take these two examples from student e-mails to their professors:

“I looked at my grade. Most of your comments are unclear or confusing, so I don’t know what to do to revise my paper.”

vs.
Both of these students are trying to accomplish the same goal: to get clarification on the feedback they received on their papers before they revise them. The first example, though, establishes a tone of blame and certainty. The way that the writer has described the problem shows that he blames the professor for it: “your comments are unclear.” On the other hand, the second example uses a tone of uncertainty and responsibility: “I'm not sure I understand some of them.” The first writer is stating, with absolute certainty, that the professor’s writing is confusing. The second writer is showing that she has tried to understand the feedback but doesn’t think she has succeeded.

So, who’s right here? Was the professor confusing or was the student just confused? Trick question. It isn’t about right or wrong; it’s about effective or ineffective. Tone, just like the other elements of style, is a rhetorical choice that writers make when considering their audience and purpose for writing. The attitude we express about a topic in our writing is just another way that we attempt to accomplish goals in our communication. The real question is, how do you think the professor might respond to these two different tones?

Audience, like in all rhetorical situations, matters here. Professors, although they hold the authority in a classroom, are professional teachers who want to see their students succeed. The professor might be willing to overlook the accusatory tone in service to the higher goal of helping a student who is clearly frustrated. On the other hand, imagine the same situation, but this time with the e-mail sent to a supervisor at work, whose primary goal is to manage employees and serve the business. Are they likely to be as forgiving?

Context also matters. The professor might take more offense at the tone of the first student if that student had skipped their one-on-one meeting where those comments could have been explained in detail and discussed. A supervisor might be more forgiving of that same tone if they had once had the writer’s job and understood their frustration with a difficult task.

Ultimately, tone is just another tool in your rhetorical tool belt. Even though we don’t have the rich sight and sound resources that we do in spoken communication, we can carefully consider how word choice, sentence structure, and per-
spective help a reader to understand our attitude toward our topic and audience in order to craft more effective written communication.

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- Leonardo DiCaprio in Shutter Island
Story As Rhetorical: We Can't Escape Story No Matter How Hard We Try

ROY CHRISTIANSEN

Years ago, my best friend from high school accused me of being confessional. Decades later the accusation still bothers me. In part, probably, because there is an element of truth to it. But also, and this is why I bring it up, because I think the accusation oversimplifies and discounts the role that story plays in our lives. To confess is to tell a story about ourselves. Confessional stories may include a particular moral framing, but nevertheless, a confessional story is a narration of our lives for a particular purpose, in this case, redemption or catharsis. To narrate our lives is to admit to a point of view and to ground our arguments in the lived experience of who we are. It is to push back on the so-called objective view, which holds that we can carefully reason through a position without our own motives interfering.

Speaking of motives, let’s take a look at the motives of writing teachers—both of teachers who embrace narrative and those who shun it as not sufficiently academically rigorous. Certainly, the role of story in writing classes has been debated vigorously off and on for many years. Did you know that writing teachers disagree about what kinds of writing they should use or teach, even if they (sometimes? often?) act as if there is a consensus? Seems writing teachers may be regular people after all.

A fuller sense of this debate came back to me recently when I attended a CCCC’s panel (a national conference for writing teachers) about teaching narrative in the writing classroom. During the panel, Irene Papoulis confessed how, in her first year of teaching, she lied about her actual beliefs about using stories in her writing classrooms. She bemused, “I find it amazing to think that so many years later I still strive to argue for storytelling as a form of analysis, and I still carry a nagging sense of shame about that, a murmur of ‘you’re touchy-feely, you’re not rigorous enough.’”

Rigor.

This is an important word. Teachers are sometimes engaged in a debate, maybe even a contest, concerning how rigorous their courses are in comparison to other colleagues. I suspect that, in fact, throughout your already lengthy acad-
emic careers, a lot of extra work, sometimes busy work, has landed on your lap because a teacher of yours was trying to prove herself a rigorous teacher.

Unfortunately, rigor is often defined, unknowingly at times, as that which students simply do not like: if students like a curriculum too much, we teachers, looking in from the outside, may assume the instructor is just having fun and really not teaching much at all.

I have much anecdotal evidence that students choose to write stories when given a chance. For many years I taught an assignment called the “Open Genre” where at the end of the term students could choose any written genre to study and then produce. By far most students chose fiction. I think this makes sense as we are constantly immersed in stories. Movies, arguably our most prolific art form, are stories. Video games, which make more money than even movies, are stories. Both have a basic plot where there are characters who face some challenge and then come to some sort of resolution.

Maybe stories are talked about less in writing classes because they are too fun.

**RHETORICAL STORY**

When some argue that writing classes focused on story or narrative are not rigorous, they are in effect arguing that story is not rhetorical. Rhetoric is a code word for rigorous. A rhetorical analysis ... now that sounds rigorous and academic. Personal narrative ... sounds squishy, personal, even wimpy.

And these decisions are rhetorical. Of course, these characterizations oversimplify. In Minds Made for Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts, Thomas Newkirk argues that “there is a conflict between the ways we treat narrative in school (as a type
of writing, often an easy one) and the central role narrative plays in our consciousness” (5). If this claim has at least some validity (it’s also worth noting that Newkirk is a composition scholar who directs the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes), then it’s odd that many writing teachers are apologetic about their narrative assignments. But regardless of Newkirk’s claim, the discipline of writing has often viewed narrative writing as insufficiently rhetorical, something to be done at the beginning of the semester to connect students with writing and get them started. But just as with any type of writing, creating an effective story requires a deliberate set of decisions that attempt to spark a particular response in readers.

**STORY AS MEANING-MAKING**

Not only is storytelling rhetorical, from a broader perspective, story is the method by which we understand the world and our place in it. No amount of emphasis on the so-called academic or the rhetorical or argumentative will ever move us away from story. Newkirk contends that “narrative is a form or mode of discourse that can be used for multiple purposes . . . —we use it to inform, to persuade, to entertain, to express. It is the ‘mother of all modes,’ a powerful and innate form of understanding” (6). Therefore, story is not simply rhetorical because writers make decisions about it.

It is rhetorical because story is embedded in all writing, regardless of form or genre.

**ACADEMIC ARGUMENT AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL**

In arguing that academic writing can be (and already is) narrative based, I’m arguing that academic writing is not nearly as objective as we often like to imagine. It is autobiographical. I’m also arguing that much of the academic writing I’ve done, which explicitly relies on narrative, is just as valid as any other type of academic writing. That is, my writing is revealing the truth of Thomas Newkirk’s argument that “[my] theories are really disguised autobiographies” (3). If we are indeed narrative beings, then surely we do not simply shut off the narrative machine the minute we start writing an academic or argumentative text, even if we may pretend that we do.

To explicitly make connections to one’s life in an argument piece does not make

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1. See Clint Johnson’s chapter "What Is Story?" for more on story as a mode.
it a less valid or less objective argument. It merely makes explicit what is always functioning in the background.

NARRATIVE AS ARGUMENT: A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

While taking an upper-division literature course with the theme of the Wall (as in THE wall that divided Berlin after World War II) in the '90s, I made an autobiographical move in my last paper for the class. We had been exploring how we define ourselves through the Other. The first part of my paper was traditional literary analysis applying this idea to the novels we had read. But in the second half of the paper, I reflected on how I define and label my professors. As I was at BYU, a private university owned by the LDS church, professors, for me, generally fit into a few Mormon types: overly didactic older prof; younger, more liberal female prof; testifying churchy professor, etc. Yet this particular class was taught by Gerhard Bach, an American literature professor who generally taught in Germany. He was a visiting professor and . . . not a member of the LDS church. His identity disturbed my naïve sense of order in the universe. "For two semesters I've been fascinated with understanding Dr. Bach's soul—why is he such a good teacher? What makes him such a good Christian (a person I respect), so understanding and non-judgmental . . . without the gospel of Christ I hold so dearly?" I wrote.

I cringe as I reread these words now, especially the word “soul.” It sounds too intimate, too familiar for a paper turned into a professor. And yet that’s where my thinking was at the time. I was merely being honest, maybe even confessional. At this moment in my paper, I narrated the happenings of the class. I was using literary devices and theories learned in class to figure out my own position and perspective within the English course and within life as an active Mormon.

By sharing this example in this essay, I’ve admitted to past beliefs I’d rather keep hidden from students. In fact, I’m a bit ashamed that I wrote that sentence, which to me now clearly demonstrates my narrow view of people who are not LDS. But this is part of my story. For many years, I was an active LDS member who served an LDS mission and went to BYU, and who was wrestling to figure out myself as a writer. In fact, before Bach’s class, I’d never received an A grade on a paper. I often say I learned to write in Bach’s class, and I believe a big part of why was Bach’s willingness to make the writing we did meaningful in real and present ways. We shared our writing with the class each week and then discussed the papers. This immediate audience allowed me to make that personal turn in my paper and to invoke my analysis of the class and this particular professor.
I received an A on that paper, so it seems my professor still found an argument in my personal story. These lurking autobiographies are, I believe, just below the surface of most of the arguments we make. As I have admitted, the very argument I am making in this essay actually supports how I see myself as an academic—it argues that my confessionary and autobiographical academic work counts as much as traditional-sounding objective academic writing.

All arguments are autobiographical.

**RHETORICAL MOVES: THE STORY... OF THIS ESSAY**

My colleague, Clint Johnson, and I teach in the Online Plus program together. During the 2016–’17 school year we were thinking about how best to teach narrative writing and how best to persuade our colleagues that narrative writing forms the backbone of all good writing. This is a challenge. While discussing these ideas, Clint and I have written pages and pages of notes. We’ve read many different articles. And we’ve gotten feedback on our OER texts from a number of people. Even after all of this, I was a bit lost as I tried to make the argument I’m making here that narrative is a part of all effective writing. Lost until Allison Fernley, a long-time colleague and friend, mentioned the book from which I’ve quoted above, *Minds Made for Stories*. I quickly scanned a few pages from the book online and ran across this line: “narrative is the deep structure of all good sustained writing” (19). I immediately ordered the book on Amazon. This was the missing link. We already had a lot of good sources on how important story is in our lives and how they shape our minds, but we did not have any sources directly arguing that even argumentative essays, at least the effective ones, also rely on a narrative structure.

And again, the move I just made in the last paragraph was to tell the story of my research. The progression of our ideas and filling this hole in our research demonstrates the contours of this debate. It is easier to make an argument about how to use narrative in the writing classroom than it is to argue that story or narrative is foundational for all writing. The first claim doesn't really even need to be made, as we all recognize short vignettes or stories in all types of writing, but the second claim has tension (Newkirk) because other writing teachers could certainly disagree and back up this disagreement with studies and reasoning. However, the story of our research, in this case, is a form of evidence in and of itself.
“ITCH AND SCRATCH”: A PRACTICAL STRATEGY

Ok, so let’s tackle this second claim: narrative is the deep structure of all sustained writing. Newkirk demonstrates how effective, informative, and argumentative essays are necessarily grounded in a good story. For example, Newkirk outlines his ideas in chapter three, aptly named “Itch and Scratch: How Form Really Works.” In one sense the chapter title gives away the entire thrust of the chapter—writers must create an itch that readers want to scratch. Kind of an interesting way to think about the purpose of writing, isn’t it?

He builds off this main claim by citing writing experts like Peter Elbow (grandfather figure for writing teachers), who says that “Narrative is a universal pattern of language that creates sequences of expectation and satisfaction—itch and scratch” (qtd. in Newkirk 38). He also fleshes out why all effective writing is narrative in structure. He explains that instructors can “help students unlock the dramatic structure of ideas and information—and they can exploit this drama in their writing” (39). And that “good arguments feel dramatic, and sometimes, when they speak back to common sense and accepted wisdom, they can be exhilaratingly liberating” (45).

That’s right... writing can be exhilarating and liberating when we see our arguments through the lens of story.

AN ARGUMENT ABOUT END-OF-LIFE CARE: SARA’S STORY

Sara Thomas Monopoli was pregnant with her first child when her doctors learned that she was going to die.

This is Atul Gawande’s first line in “Letting Go,” an essay about end-of-life care. The first four paragraphs outline the basic narrative of Sara’s diagnosis: lung cancer, 34, non-smoker, chemotherapy options but no cure. Not until the fifth paragraph does Gawande offer any analysis and even it is quite subtle: “Words like ‘respond’ and ‘long-term’ provide a reassuring gloss on a dire reality. There is no cure for lung cancer at this stage.”

As a reader, I begin to feel an itch. I’m already caught up in Sara’s story and not only do I want to know how it turns out, I’m already thinking about the ethical issues involved in end-of-life care. Gawande continues to narrate Sara’s story for several paragraphs, detailing the failed attempts at treatment, and then he asks the problematic question—scratching the itch that the reader has already been thinking about even though it has not been stated explicitly.

This is the moment in Sara’s story that poses a fundamental question for every-
one living in the era of modern medicine: What do we want Sara and her doctors to do now?

For nine paragraphs, Gawande cites research on cancer treatment, health care costs, and historical examples of how our early founding fathers died. Then there is a brief vignette about one of his own patients (Gawande is a surgeon): he is sitting with the patient when asked by her sister if the patient is dying. He is unsure. This unanswered question again creates an itch: how do we know in this world of technology when we and our loved ones are actually dying? But Gawande does not immediately answer the question. Instead, he launches into a more lengthy vignette about visiting the patients of Sara Creed, a hospice nurse. We get to know several people in hospice care and their various circumstances and the ethical dilemmas raised by their conditions. There’s dialogue with the patients:

"How’s your pain on a scale of one to ten?" Creed asked.

"A six," he said.

"Did you hit the pump?"

He didn’t answer for a moment. "I’m reluctant," he admitted.

"Why?" Creed asked.

"It feels like defeat," he said.

Most of these vignettes contrast with the earlier story of Sara Monopoli because these are much older patients. Yet Gawande uses these stories to help us see the grave difficulty that doctors, nurses, and patients have when trying to decide the best options for end-of-life care.

At this point, Gawande returns to the story of Sara Monopoli, a story which serves as the narrative arc holding together the research and other shorter vignettes. It’s now Thanksgiving five months after the initial lung cancer diagnosis. None of the treatments have worked and at this point, Gawande thinks, Sara’s doctor should have begun a conversation about end-of-life care, but didn’t. As readers, we know that Sara and her family do not want her to die in a hospital, but we are starting to realize that is exactly what will happen. Gawande uses Sara’s story to allow us to inhabit a family negotiating the difficult ethical questions about treatment and quality of life. We rush, as if reading a nail-biting short story, to get to the next bit about Sara, yet we must also read about studies, research, and other short vignettes to get there. We are propelled forward, hoping to itch the scratch.

It’s a fairly long article so Gawande has space to cite more research, discuss a
A successful medical program that allows patients to stay in hospice while receiving some treatment, and write several other vignettes. And then he makes what seems to be his overall claim:

But our responsibility, in medicine, is to deal with human beings as they are. People die only once. They have no experience to draw upon. They need doctors and nurses who are willing to have the hard discussions and say what they have seen, who will help people prepare for what is to come—and to escape a warehoused oblivion that few really want.

Gawande’s claim comes near the end of his essay. Sara’s story has given us a structural space in which to store the research and analysis offered. The claim retroactively to pulls together the overall ideas. Structurally, the individual stories do not matter as much as the overall narrative arc: Sara’s story. The structural power of the piece comes from the interweaving of story with reasoning, evidence, and vignettes.

**ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY**

Gawande’s essay and Newkirk’s claims set up a damning critique of the way much of argumentative writing is taught. Newkirk writes, “We can undermine critical thinking by treating the thesis . . . as the key to an effective argument” (45). Say what? I thought the thesis was the most important element of an argument, right? The thesis creates tension, as discussed above, and narrows the focus. But . . . in Gawande’s essay, the focus is communicated through story and subtle analysis. And while Newkirk doesn’t dismiss the thesis, he argues that too often we, as writing teachers and students, get too focused on placing it in the right spot rather than thinking carefully about how we will communicate the journey it took us to uncover that thesis.

Note the word “journey”—a journey is a story, like Frodo’s journey to Mordor in The Lord of the Rings. Someone too focused on the placement of the claim in Gawande’s essay may miss the forest for the trees. They may only see argumentative writing as a claim followed by three points, counter-arguments, and a conclusion. They would miss a beautifully painful narrative arc that begins and relies on Sara Monopoli’s story until the very last lines:

“It’s O.K. to let go,” he said. “You don’t have to fight anymore. I will see you soon.”

Later that morning, her breathing changed, slowing. At 9:45 a.m., Rich said, “Sara just kind of startled. She let a long breath out. Then she just stopped.”
THE FINAL MOVEMENT

I am arguing, along with Newkirk, that when we write we are asking our readers to come along with us on a journey. Even if this movement is not mentioned explicitly and even if it is not accomplished with literal plots, there is movement: a movement from one insight to another, the movement of inquiry. When we do not engage our readers in this movement, we lose an opportunity to allow them a window into our meaning-making process.

Midway through “Letting Go,” Gawande recounts how Sara Monopoli came to him about a secondary thyroid cancer which was, unlike the lung cancer, operable. Even though Gawande knew the lung cancer would kill Sara long before the thyroid cancer, he confides that he was unable to follow his own advice:

After one of her chemo therapies seemed to shrink the thyroid cancer slightly, I even raised with her the possibility that an experimental therapy could work against both her cancers, which was sheer fantasy. Discussing a fantasy was easier—less emotional, less explosive, less prone to misunderstanding—than discussing what was happening before my eyes.

This event could have been hidden within the layers of traditional argumentation. Yet, because Gawande makes visible the movement of his inquiry, we not only recognize him as a surgeon and an expert in end-of-life care, but as a flawed human being trying to make sense of difficult problems.

While we can try to escape our own stories when we make arguments, we most certainly don’t have to, nor should we.

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- Minds for Stories – Thomas Newkirk Book Cover
Imagine the first day of class in first year composition at your university. The moment your professor walked in the room, you likely began analyzing her and making assumptions about what kind of teacher she will be. You might have noticed what kind of bag she is carrying—a tattered leather satchel? a hot pink polka-dotted backpack? a burgundy brief case? You probably also noticed what she is wearing—trendy slacks and an untucked striped shirt? a skirted suit? jeans and a tee shirt?

It is likely that the above observations were only a few of the observations you made as your professor walked in the room. You might have also noticed her shoes, her jewelry, whether she wears a wedding ring, how her hair is styled, whether she stands tall or slumps, how quickly she walks, or maybe even if her nails are done. If you don't tend to notice any of these things about your professors, you certainly do about the people around you—your roommate, others in your residence hall, students you are assigned to work with in groups, or a prospective date. For most of us, many of the people we encounter in a given day are subject to this kind of quick analysis.

Now as you performed this kind of analysis, you likely didn’t walk through each of these questions one by one, write out the answer, and add up the responses to see what kind of person you are interacting with. Instead, you quickly took in the information and made an informed, and likely somewhat accurate, decision about that person. Over the years, as you have interacted with others, you have built a mental database that you can draw on to make conclusions about what a person’s looks tell you about their personality. You have become able to analyze quickly what people are saying about themselves through the way they choose to dress, accessorize, or wear their hair.

We have, of course, heard that you “can’t judge a book by its cover,” but, in fact, we do it all the time. Daily we find ourselves in situations where we are forced to make snap judgments. Each day we meet different people, encounter unfa-
miliar situations, and see media that asks us to do, think, buy, and act in all sorts of ways. In fact, our saturation in media and its images is one of the reasons why learning to do rhetorical analysis is so important. The more we know about how to analyze situations and draw informed conclusions, the better we can become about making savvy judgments about the people, situations and media we encounter.

**IMPLICATIONS OF RHETORICAL ANALYSIS**

Media is one of the most important places where this kind of analysis needs to happen. Rhetoric—the way we use language and images to persuade—is what makes media work. Think of all the media you see and hear every day: Twitter, television shows, web pages, billboards, text messages, podcasts. Even as you read this chapter, more ways to get those messages to you quickly and in a persuasive manner are being developed. Media is constantly asking you to buy something, act in some way, believe something to be true, or interact with others in a specific manner. Understanding rhetorical messages is essential to help us to become informed consumers, but it also helps evaluate the ethics of messages, how they affect us personally, and how they affect society.

Take, for example, a commercial for men’s deodorant that tells you that you’ll be irresistible to women if you use their product. This campaign doesn’t just ask you to buy the product, though. It also asks you to trust the company’s credibility, or ethos, and to believe the messages they send about how men and women interact, about sexuality, and about what constitutes a healthy body. You have to decide whether or not you will choose to buy the product and how you will choose to respond to the messages that the commercial sends.

Or, in another situation, a Facebook group asks you to support health care reform. The rhetoric in this group uses people’s stories of their struggles to obtain affordable health care. These stories, which are often heart-wrenching, use emotion to persuade you—also called pathos. You are asked to believe that health care reform is necessary and urgent, and you are asked to act on these beliefs by calling your congresspersons and asking them to support the reforms as well.

Because media rhetoric surrounds us, it is important to understand how rhetoric works. If we refuse to stop and think about how and why it persuades us, we can become mindless consumers who buy into arguments about what makes us value ourselves and what makes us happy. For example, research has shown that only 2% of women consider themselves beautiful (“Campaign”), which has been linked to the way that the fashion industry defines beauty. We are also told
by the media that buying more stuff can make us happy, but historical surveys show that US happiness peaked in the 1950s, when people saw as many advertisements in their lifetime as the average American sees in one year (Leonard).

Our worlds are full of these kinds of social influences. As we interact with other people and with media, we are continually creating and interpreting rhetoric. In the same way that you decide how to process, analyze or ignore these messages, you create them. You probably think about what your clothing will communicate as you go to a job interview or get ready for a date. You are also using rhetoric when you try to persuade your parents to send you money or your friends to see the movie that interests you. When you post to your blog or tweet you are using rhetoric. In fact, according to rhetorician Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is everywhere: "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion.' Food eaten and digested is not rhetoric. But in the meaning of food there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device of statesmen" (71–72). In other words, most of our actions are persuasive in nature. What we choose to wear (tennis shoes vs. flip flops), where we shop (Whole Foods Market vs. Wal-Mart), what we eat (organic vs. fast food), or even the way we send information (snail mail vs. text message) can work to persuade others.

Chances are you have grown up learning to interpret and analyze these types of rhetoric. They become so commonplace that we don’t realize how often and how quickly we are able to perform this kind of rhetorical analysis. When your teacher walked in on the first day of class, you probably didn’t think to yourself, “I think I’ll do some rhetorical analysis on her clothing and draw some conclusions about what kind of personality she might have and whether I think I’ll like her.” And, yet, you probably were able to come up with some conclusions based on the evidence you had.

However, when this same teacher hands you an advertisement, photograph or article and asks you to write a rhetorical analysis of it, you might have been baffled or felt a little overwhelmed. The good news is that many of the analytical processes that you already use to interpret the rhetoric around you are the same ones that you’ll use for these assignments.

The Rhetorical Situation, or Discerning Context

One of the first places to start is context. Rhetorical messages always occur in a specific situation or context. The president’s speech might respond to a specific global event, like an economic summit; that’s part of the context. You choose your clothing depending on where you are going or what you are doing; that’s
context. A television commercial comes on during specific programs and at specific points of the day; that’s context. A billboard is placed in a specific part of the community; that’s context, too.

In an article called “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer argues that there are three parts to understanding the context of a rhetorical moment: exigence, audience and constraints. Exigence is the circumstance or condition that invites a response; “imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer 304). In other words, rhetorical discourse is usually responding to some kind of problem. You can begin to understand a piece’s exigence by asking, “What is this rhetoric responding to?” “What might have happened to make the rhetor (the person who creates the rhetoric) respond in this way?”

The exigence can be extremely complex, like the need for a new Supreme Court justice, or it can be much simpler, like receiving an email that asks you where you and your friends should go for your road trip this weekend. Understanding the exigence is important because it helps you begin to discover the purpose of the rhetoric. It helps you understand what the discourse is trying to accomplish.

Another part of the rhetorical context is audience, those who are the (intended or unintended) recipients of the rhetorical message. The audience should be able to respond to the exigence. In other words, the audience should be able to help address the problem. You might be very frustrated with your campus’s requirement that all first-year students purchase a meal plan for on-campus dining. You might even send an email to a good friend back home voicing that frustration. However, if you want to address the exigence of the meal plans, the most appropriate audience would be the person/office on campus that oversees meal plans. Your friend back home cannot solve the problem (though she may be able to offer sympathy or give you some good suggestions), but the person who can change the meal plan requirements is probably on campus. Rhetors make all sorts of choices based on their audience. Audience can determine the type of language used, the formality of the discourse, the medium or delivery of the rhetoric, and even the types of reasons used make the rhetor’s argument. Understanding the audience helps you begin to see and understand the rhetorical moves that the rhetor makes.

The last piece of the rhetorical situation is the constraints. The constraints of the rhetorical situation are those things that have the power to “constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer 306). Constraints have a lot to do with how the rhetoric is presented. Constraints can be “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives” (Bitzer 306). Constraints limit the way the discourse is delivered or communicated. Constraints may be something as simple as your instructor limiting your proposal to one thousand
words, or they may be far more complex like the kinds of language you need to use to persuade a certain community.

So how do you apply this to a piece of rhetoric? Let’s say you are flipping through a magazine, and you come across an advertisement that has a large headline that reads “Why Some People Say ‘D’OH’ When You Say ‘Homer’” (“Why”). This ad is an Ad Council public service announcement (PSA) to promote arts education and is sponsored by Americans for the Arts and NAMM, the trade association of the international music products industry.

Since you want to understand more about what this ad means and what it wants you to believe or do, you begin to think about the rhetorical situation. You first might ask, “what is the ad responding to? What problem does it hope to address?” That’s the exigence. In this case, the exigence is the cutting of arts funding and children’s lack of exposure to the arts. According to the Ad Council’s website, “the average kid is provided insufficient time to learn and experience the arts. This PSA campaign was created to increase involvement in championing arts education both in and out of school” (“Arts”). The PSA is responding directly to the fact that kids are not getting enough arts education.

Then you might begin to think about to whom the Ad Council targeted the ad. Unless you’re a parent, you are probably not the primary audience. If you continued reading the text of the ad, you’d notice that there is information to persuade parents that the arts are helpful to their children and to let them know how to help their children become more involved with the arts. The ad tells parents that “the experience will for sure do more than entertain them. It’ll build their capacity to learn more. In fact, the more art kids get, the smarter they become in subjects like math and science. And that’s reason enough to make a parent say, ‘D’oh!,’ For Ten Simple Ways to instill art in your kids’ lives visit AmericansForTheArts.org” (“Why”). Throughout the text of the ad, parents are told both what to believe about arts education and how to act in response to the belief.

There also might be a secondary audience for this ad—people who are not the main audience of the ad but might also be able to respond to the exigence. For example, philanthropists who could raise money for arts education or legislators who might pass laws for arts funding or to require arts education in public schools could also be intended audiences for this ad.

Finally, you might want to think about the constraints or the limitations on the ad. Sometimes these are harder to get at, but we can guess a few things. One constraint might be the cost of the ad. Different magazines charge differently for ad space as well as placement within the magazine, so the Ad Council could have been constrained by how much money they wanted to spend to circulate the ad. The ad is also only one page long, so there might have been a limitation
on the amount of space for the ad. Finally, on the Ad Council’s webpage, they list the requirements for organizations seeking the funding and support of the Ad Council. There are twelve criteria, but here are a few:

1. The sponsor organization must be a private non-profit 501(c)3 organization, private foundation, government agency or coalition of such groups.
2. The issue must address the Ad Council’s focus on Health & Safety, Education, or Community. Applications which benefit children are viewed with favor—as part of the Ad Council’s Commitment to Children.
3. The issue must offer a solution through an individual action.
4. The effort must be national in scope, so that the message has relevance to media audiences in communities throughout the nation. (“Become”)

Each of these criteria helps to understand the limitations on both who can participate as rhetor and what can be said.

The exigence, audience and constraints are only one way to understand the context of a piece of rhetoric, and, of course, there are other ways to get at context. Some rhetoricians look at subject, purpose, audience and occasion. Others might look at the “rhetorical triangle” of writer, reader, and purpose.

An analysis using the rhetorical triangle would ask similar questions about audience as one using the rhetorical situation, but it would also ask questions about the writer and the purpose of the document. Asking questions about the writer helps the reader determine whether she or he is credible and knowledgeable. For example, the Ad Council has been creating public service announcements since 1942 (“Loose Lips Sink Ships,” anyone?) and is a non-profit agency. They also document their credibility by showing the impact of their campaigns in several ways: “Destruction of our forests by wildfires has been reduced from 22 million acres to less than 8.4 million acres per year, since our Forest Fire Prevention campaign began” and “6,000 Children were paired with a mentor in just the first 18 months of our mentoring campaign” (“About”). Based on this information, we can assume that the Ad Council is a credible rhetor, and whether or not we agree with the rhetoric they produce, we can probably assume it contains reliable information. Asking questions about the next part of the rhetorical triangle, the purpose of a piece of rhetoric, helps you understand what the rhetor is trying to achieve through the discourse. We can discern the purpose by asking questions like “what does the rhetor want me to believe after seeing this message?” or “what does the rhetor want me to do?” In some ways, the purpose takes the exigence to the next step. If the exigence frames the problem, the purpose frames the response to that problem.

The rhetorical situation and rhetorical triangle are two ways to begin to understand how the rhetoric functions within the context you find it. The key idea is to
understand that no rhetorical performance takes place in a vacuum. One of the first steps to understanding a piece of rhetoric is to look at the context in which it takes place. Whatever terminology you (or your instructor) choose, it is a good idea to start by locating your analysis within a rhetorical situation.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER: THE ARGUMENT

The rhetorical situation is just the beginning of your analysis, though. What you really want to understand is the argument—what the rhetor wants you to believe or do and how he or she goes about that persuasion. Effective argumentation has been talked about for centuries. In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle was teaching the men of Athens how to persuade different kinds of audiences in different kinds of rhetorical situations. Aristotle articulated three “artistic appeals” that a rhetor could draw on to make a case—logos, pathos, and ethos.

Logos is commonly defined as argument from reason, and it usually appeals to an audience’s intellectual side. As audiences we want to know the “facts of the matter,” and logos helps present these—statistics, data, and logical statements. For example, on our Homer ad for the arts, the text tells parents that the arts will “build their capacity to learn more. In fact, the more art kids get, the smarter they become in subjects like math and science” (“Why”). You might notice that there aren’t numbers or charts here, but giving this information appeals to the audience’s intellectual side.

That audience can see a continuation of the argument on the Ad Council's webpage, and again much of the argument appeals to logos and draws on extensive research that shows that the arts do these things:

- Allow kids to express themselves creatively and bolster their self-confidence.
- Teach kids to be more tolerant and open.
- Improve kids’ overall academic performance.
- Show that kids actively engaged in arts education are likely to have higher SAT scores than those with little to no arts involvement.
- Develop skills needed by the 21st century workforce: critical thinking, creative problem solving, effective communication, teamwork and more.
- Keep students engaged in school and less likely to drop out. (“Arts”)

Each bullet above is meant to intellectually persuade parents that they need to be more intentional in providing arts education for their children.

Few of us are persuaded only with our mind, though. Even if we intellectually
agree with something, it is difficult to get us to act unless we are also persuaded in our heart. This kind of appeal to emotion is called pathos. Pathetic appeals (as rhetoric that draws on pathos is called) used alone without logos and ethos can come across as emotionally manipulative or overly sentimental, but are very powerful when used in conjunction with the other two appeals.

Emotional appeals can come in many forms—an anecdote or narrative, an image such as a photograph, or even humor. For example, on their web campaign, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) uses an image of a baby chick and of Ronald McDonald wielding a knife to draw attention to their Chicken McCruely UnHappy Meal. These images are meant to evoke an emotional response in the viewer and, along with a logos appeal with the statistics about how cruelly chickens are treated, persuade the viewer to boycott McDonalds.

Pathos can also be a very effective appeal if the rhetor has to persuade the audience in a very short amount of time, which is why it is used heavily in print advertisements, billboards, or television commercials. An investment company will fill a 30-second commercial with images of families and couples enjoying each other, seeming happy, and surrounded by wealth to persuade you to do business with them.

The 30-second time spot does not allow them to give the 15-year growth of each of their funds, and pathetic appeals will often hold our interest much longer than intellectual appeals.

The ad promoting the importance of art uses humor to appeal to the audience's emotional side. By comparing the epic poet Homer to Homer Simpson and his classic “d'oh!” the ad uses humor to draw people into their argument about the arts. The humor continues as they ask parents if their kids know the difference between the Homers, “The only Homer some kids know is the one who can't write his own last name” (“Why”). The ad also appeals to emotion through its language use (diction), describing Homer as “one very ancient dude,” and describing The Odyssey as “the sequel” to The Iliad. In this case, the humor of the ad, which occurs in the first few lines, is meant to draw the reader in and help them become interested in the argument before the ad gets to the logos, which is in the last few lines of the ad.

The humor also makes the organization seem real and approachable, contributing to the ethos. The humor might lead you to think that Americans for the Arts is not a stuffy bunch of suits, but an organization you can relate to or one that has a realistic understanding of the world. Ethos refers to the credibility of the rhetor—which can be a person or an organization. A rhetor can develop credibility in many ways. The tone of the writing and whether that tone is appropriate
for the context helps build a writer’s ethos, as does the accuracy of the information or the visual presentation of the rhetoric.

In the Homer ad, the ethos is built in several ways. The simple, humorous and engaging language, such as “Greek Gods. Achilles Heel. Trojan Horse. All of these icons are brought to us by one very ancient dude—Homer. In The Iliad and its sequel, The Odyssey, he presented Greek mythology in everyday language” (“Why”) draws the audience in and helps the tone of the ad seem very approachable. Also, the knowledge of Greek mythology and the information about how the arts help children—which also contribute to the logos appeal—make the ad seem credible and authoritative. However, the fact that the ad does not use too many statistics or overly technical language also contributes to the ethos of the ad because often sounding too intellectual can come across as pompous or stuffy.

Aristotle’s artistic appeals are not the only way to understand the argument of rhetoric. You might choose to look at the claim or the unstated assumptions of a piece; someone else might consider the visual appeal of the rhetoric, like the font, page layout, types of paper, or images; another person might focus on the language use and the specific word choice and sentence structure of a piece. Logos, pathos, and ethos can provide a nice framework for analysis, but there are numerous ways to understand how a piece of rhetoric persuades (or fails to persuade).

Looking at the context and components of a piece of rhetoric often isn’t enough, though, because it is important to draw conclusions about the rhetoric—does it successfully respond to the exigence? Is it an ethical approach? Is it persuasive? These kinds of questions let you begin to create your own claims, your own rhetoric, as you take a stand on what other people say, do, or write.

BEGINNING TO ANALYZE

Once you have established the context for the rhetoric you are analyzing, you can begin to think about how well it fits into that context. You’ve probably been in a situation where you arrived way underdressed for an occasion. You thought that the dinner was just a casual get together with friends; it turned out to be a far more formal affair, and you felt very out of place. There are also times when discourse fails to respond to the situation well—it doesn’t fit. On the other hand, successful discourses often respond very well to the context. They address the problem, consider the audience’s needs, provide accurate information, and have a compelling claim. One of the reasons you work to determine the rhetorical sit-
Rhetorical analysis asks how discourse functions in the setting in which it is found. In the same way that a commercial for denture cream seems very out of place when aired during a reality television show aimed at teenagers, rhetoric that does not respond well to its context often fails to persuade. In order to perform analysis, you must understand the context and then you must carefully study the ways that the discourse does and does not respond appropriately to that context.

The bottom line is that the same basic principles apply when you look at any piece of rhetoric (your instructor’s clothing, an advertisement, the president’s speech): you need to consider the context and the argument. As you begin to analyze rhetoric, there are lots of different types of rhetoric you might encounter in a college classroom, such as a:

- Political cartoon
- Wikipedia entry
- Scholarly article
- Bar Graph
- Op-Ed piece in the newspaper
- Speech
- YouTube video
- Book chapter
- Photograph
- PowerPoint Presentation

All of the above types of discourse try to persuade you. They may ask you to accept a certain kind of knowledge as valid, they may ask you to believe a cer-
tain way, or they may ask you to act. It is important to understand what a piece of rhetoric is asking of you, how it tries to persuade you, and whether that persuasion fits within the context you encounter it in. Rhetorical analysis helps you answer those questions.

**IMPLICATIONS OF RHETORICAL ANALYSIS, OR “WHY DO THIS STUFF ANYWAY?”**

So you might be wondering if you know how to do this analysis already—you can tell what kind of person someone is by their clothing, or what a commercial wants you to buy without carefully listening to it—why do you need to know how to do more formal analysis? How does this matter outside a college classroom?

Well, first of all, much of the reading and learning in college requires some level of rhetorical analysis: as you read a textbook chapter to prepare for a quiz, it is helpful to be able to distill the main points quickly; when you read a journal article for a research paper, it is necessary to understand the scholar’s thesis; when you watch a video in class, it is useful to be able to understand how the creator is trying to persuade you. But college is not the only place where an understanding of how rhetoric works is important. You will find yourself in many situations—from boardrooms to your children’s classrooms or churches to city council meetings where you need to understand the heart of the arguments being presented.

One final example: in November 2000, Campbell’s Soup Company launched a campaign to show that many of their soups were low in calories and showed pre-pubescent girls refusing to eat because they were “watching their weight.” A very small organization called Dads and Daughters, a group that fights advertising that targets girls with negative body images, contacted Campbell’s explaining the problems they saw in an ad that encouraged young girls to be self-conscious about their weight, and asked Campbell’s to pull the ad. A few days later, Campbell’s Vice President for Marketing and Corporate Communications called. One of the dads says, “the Vice President acknowledged he had received their letter, reviewed the ad again, saw their point, and was pulling the ad,” responding to a “couple of guys writing a letter” (“Media”). Individuals who understand rhetorical analysis and act to make change can have a tremendous influence on their world.

**DISCUSSION:**

1. What are examples of rhetoric that you see or hear on a daily basis?
2. What are some ways that you create rhetoric? What kinds of messages are you trying to communicate?

Works Cited


Critical Reading

JENN KEPKA

In college, we often talk about being “critical.” You’ll hear terms like Critical Theory, Literary Criticism, Critical Thinking and Critical Reading thrown around every day. What does this mean, though?

For most of us, when we think of being critical, we automatically think of criticism: “That band sucks!” This isn’t the kind of criticism we’re talking about in college, however. When we talk about thinking or reading critically, we really mean that the reader or listener comes to the piece with an open mind and carefully considers what they are hearing, reading, or seeing. In other words, you’ve got to be ready to learn when you sit down with a new text, story, speech, or presentation. Critical takes then agree or disagree with parts or the whole of what has been presented.

Great! you say. I’m all ready for that! Of course, it’s not that simple. As the next section on analysis and response will talk about, setting aside our own personal opinions (or biases) is a challenging task, and it is often impossible; however, recognizing these lenses through which we view texts is necessary to really gain the most from your college reading.

In addition to approaching readings with a willing mind, we also need to be skeptical of what we read and consume. Uh, wait, what? you’re thinking. You just told me to be open-minded, and now I have to start off doubting everything? Yep! Welcome to college.

CRITICAL THINKING AND YOU

Skepticism can be useful as a reader and media consumer. In fact, because we are constantly bombarded with so many sources, skepticism has become necessary to deal with daily information overload. For example, if you participate in online social media, you likely do not choose who you “follow” or “friend” solely based on whether that person is a reliable source of information on all topics. You may discover that an expert on one type of news is unreliable on others. Maybe that translates to reading any headline passed on by your uncle or long-lost Kindergarten best friend with extra skepticism (or maybe it translates to not reading stories they share at all).

In college, we learn to practice a similar type of information filtering when we learn about research methods and sources. While reading, we should also prac-
tice skepticism. This means interrogating the texts we find (and the texts we’re presented) to find out whether we believe what they’re saying.

CRITICAL READING CHECKLIST

When you approach a new reading, whether it’s in your math textbook or posted to social media, several questions should guide whether you find the information reliable. This list will assist as you approach any media.

Critical Reading Checklist Questions

- What is the original source for the material?
- How does that source influence the piece?
- Who/what funded, produced, or distributed the original piece?
  - Did this have an influence on the outcome?
- Who is the intended primary audience for the material?
- What other audiences were perhaps expected?
- What was the original purpose of the piece?
- What type of evidence does the author/media creator present within the work?

Some of these questions can be asked before you even begin reading the piece itself. What is the original source for this material? Did that type of source have an influence on the piece?

This might seem like a simple question, but it’s often not. Most essays printed in college textbooks, for instance, were not written directly for that book. Textbooks themselves have a variety of authors and publication venues, and some are more reputable than others. Looking for the original source for your material will reveal who it was originally written for (and who paid for the work, if someone did). This may tell you more about the audience, the time and context of the piece, and its credibility. It can also explain why certain language choices were made: If you’re reading an essay that was originally published in an American college newspaper, the language will be different (perhaps less formal) than if
you’re reading an essay that was written for publication in a scholarly journal, or an essay that has been translated out of its original language.

Nearly every anthology (collection of essays or stories) will give credit to where the piece originally appeared. You may find this at the start of the essay or at the end of the book.

**Finding the Source for Other Media Types**

If you’re viewing a video online, you may also need to investigate the original source. Many videos on YouTube did not start their lives there. Finding out where the video originally appeared will again tell you more about the reasons why it was created and who it was intended to reach. In addition, if you’re looking at a video on YouTube, there’s always a chance that someone will remove the video. Finding a more permanent source for the video will be useful if you plan to cite it later. In general, you may find that channels maintained by large organizations — news organizations, libraries, or other media providers — will provide a more stable link than individual videos provided by private users. As an example, individual videos from the artist Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* visual album are available on YouTube. There is an official channel ([BeyonceVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/user/BeyonceVEVO)), that houses the videos through licensed agreement; however, other copies of the videos have appeared from time to time. Using the official version would allow more confidence in the permanence of the work (and would also likely link to other official media). It would also be a better source for viewing the video than looking at a 2-minute clip provided through another site.

Finding the original source for digital/visual media is also important because they can be edited or changed along the way. Consider the first *Star Wars* movie (Episode IV), that was created to be shown in movie theaters in 1977. Its special effects were built for the movie theaters of its time, as were its costumes and some of its themes. Later, viewers could see the movies at home on video and even on television. When *Star Wars* was broadcast for network viewers, however, it was altered: the actual shape of a television screen in the 1980s was much different than the wide movie theater screen, so some parts of the film were literally cut off. In addition, commercial breaks were necessary, and the film’s running time wasn’t a perfect fit for TV’s strict schedule, so it was edited further. Finally, some scenes and some language may have been deemed too violent or offensive for some audiences, so they, too, were altered. This all meant that two people could have both seen *Star Wars* but have had completely different experiences of the movie.
Different Sources, Different Considerations

The type of source makes a difference in how we look at a work. It would be unreasonable to hold a peer-reviewed scholarly journal article to the same scientific research standards as a blog post, for instance: though both are capable of presenting in-depth scientific research with exacting methods, blogs are better known for more informal reflection and observation. This doesn’t mean, however, that one type of source is inherently “better” than another type.

Wait, you’re thinking, that is definitely not what I’ve heard. That’s true: In college, in most classes, you will find a preference for certain types of sources. A description of what these sources are and how to use them is in the Source chapter. For now, let’s talk about how to critically approach different common sources of materials.

Printed materials:

Printed material has often received a pass for some elements of critical thinking. For many years, printing a book (or having an article accepted for publication in a journal) was an arduous process, and the privilege of being published was limited to a select (and debatably deserving) few. However, the idea that just because something has been printed, it is true — or that it should not be questioned — is and has always been patently false. Printed books, including textbooks, deserve the same critical approach as digital texts do. To investigate the credibility of printed works, look at the following:

- Who is the publisher?
- When was it published?
- Are there multiple editions? If so, do the most recent editions provide corrections to past editions?
- Who are the authors? What is their expertise?

This information will be available from the front pages of the book (look for publisher information and copyright information for dates, places, and companies of publication). Finding out whether the publishing house and authors themselves are authorities you trust will take more research, likely online. You might also look for reviews of the work by trusted sources.

Digital materials:

Digital materials have some credibility advantages (and some frequently noted
disadvantages) over printed materials. One major advantage in digital media is that errors can be corrected swiftly. When the wrong answer is printed in a math textbook, it might take an entirely new edition — and at least a year, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in printing and shipping fees — to correct the problem. A digital text, on the other hand, could be updated overnight.

This presents a challenge, however, in that digital texts are sometimes seen as less stable than printed texts. The words that appear in your printed newspaper this morning will still be there tonight, while the online version of the same story may have been updated four or five times in the interim. It is important to investigate how digital publishers for any content handle corrections and updates as part of your critical considerations. Therefore, consider these questions when looking at the source of digital media:

- Who is the publisher?
- When was it published?
- What are the update and/or correction policies held by the publisher and/or media creator?
- Who are the author(s) and creator(s) of the media? What is their expertise?

Take one popular source of digital information as an example: Wikipedia. The publisher of Wikipedia is the Wikimedia Foundation. We could research the Foundation itself — its mission statement, its ratings as a non-profit, current news stories about it — as one place to start. It might also be useful to investigate the update and correction policies on Wikipedia, which have changed over the years. One might conclude that Wikipedia is a fairly credible source of information based on these findings: namely, that it provides a transparent record of updates and changes for most articles, and that its publisher is generally considered reputable (for instance, with a high rating at Charity Navigator).

**How does the source influence the piece?**

This is a tricky consideration. The requirements for certain places will have an impact on how a piece was written. For example, an article published in a reputable scholarly journal will likely have to conform to certain patterns: It will have an introduction, a methods section, a discussion, conclusions, and a robust reference section. A blog post will probably have hyperlinks. In addition, where a piece was published may have an impact on the tone and the topic of a piece. If an opinion piece was originally published on a web site known for its critical coverage of a certain issue, that might influence how it was written. It might also influence what sources a writer brings in or how many visuals are included.
These are interesting questions to investigate as you begin reading, particularly if you’re not familiar with the source.

**Who/what funded the piece?**

Of similar concern to how a source’s requirements may influence a piece is whether and how a piece was paid for by an interested organization. The easiest example of this is perhaps to look at campaign literature from any election. At the end of any ad for a candidate, a small disclaimer about who paid for the advertisement must be added. The disclaimer is supposed to alert a viewer or reader that what they’re seeing was paid for and created by groups whose purpose is to see the advertised candidate get elected. This may have an effect on how much credibility a reader/viewer lends to the information they present. In other words, if an advertisement says, “Candidate X is a liar,” but it’s paid for by Candidate Z, then we might question Candidate Z’s motivations in making the claim. If a non-profit group or a news organization publishes the same headline, we may consider their information to be more credible.

Most publications won’t offer their sponsorship information quite as boldly as U.S. campaigns must. When you view a web site about a particular issue, it may in fact be difficult to see who’s behind the content. Take, for example, Biography.com. If I decide to search for a famous name online, one of the first hits I receive might be a link to a biography.com article about that person. The website itself sounds plain enough — it’s a site that provides biographies, right? What would be the problem? A brief investigation, though, reveals that Biography.com is actually owned by a television network — A&E — and was created to act as an additional resource for a series of biographical/entertainment television shows. Therefore, I can look at the information on the site through a new lens: these biographies were built with an entertainment purpose, not an informative one. It seems unlikely that I’ll find solid, objective biographical information there, despite the catchy name.

One of the quickest ways to figure out who funds what you’re reading is often to look at who holds the copyright on the materials. On websites, this is often found at the bottom of the page in very small type. You may also find information on the About page. It can be useful, as well, to look at the main page for any site instead of a branch. For example, if you were looking at www.somewebsite.com/page/animals/dolphins.html, to find out who is funding and publishing the site, you could go to just www.somewebsite.com. You can also search for website names online to find out more about them. This is particularly necessary if you plan to use more than one article or page as a source in research.
Who was the intended audience(s)?

Once you know where, when, how, and by whom a piece was published, you can begin to piece together audience information. For example, a piece written for publication in The New York Times may have a different intended audience than a piece written for the campus newspaper, even though both are written in the same type of media (a newspaper). In addition, timing can be important in considering audience: an opinion piece written in the 1980s for The New York Times would have an assumed audience of people who purchased and read a print version of the newspaper each day, which would have likely limited the audience mostly to college-educated, middle- and upper-class readers living in or near a few urban centers where the Times was regularly delivered. Now, opinion pieces for the paper are available online, often before they’re published in print, and can be read from anywhere in the world. Therefore, while the target audience may still be the same (current-events-interested, educated readers), the secondary audience is much broader (anyone with reliable Internet access).

The intended audience will change how a piece is written, what it is written about, and the evidence that’s used. A piece written for an online audience will likely contain links to other sources; it may contain multimedia or more color images; and it may be more likely to cite other websites or extremely current research. On the other hand, a piece written for a scholarly journal would have been written at least six months (but more likely, more than a year) before its publication, which makes linking to very recent research difficult. It would also be more likely to include references to other scholarly journal articles, as readers of journals are more likely to consider that type of research credible.

This is most interesting when argumentative presentations are involved. Consider what catches your eye or makes you more likely to follow or like something on social media. Are you most often swayed by numbers and statistics? Are you more likely to watch a video if it presents a strong storyline or an emotional tale? Are you more likely to share a study if it was conducted by a known, famous name, or if it was touted by a media company that you trust? Writers and media creators will consider how their audience is likely to respond when writing a persuasive piece, and they will try to incorporate the types of proof that will be most persuasive. Sometimes, that means more personal stories; sometimes, that means more statistics; sometimes, that means cat videos. Evaluate what you’re reading to figure out why the evidence presented was chosen. When a piece doesn’t convince you, it may be because you weren’t the intended audience — and it can be useful, then, to investigate whether this piece would have worked for the audience it was aimed at.
What was the purpose?

The type of evidence used may also be a reflection of a piece's purpose. As you may have read in the Assignment Analysis section, there are many reasons a writer might create a work. They include:

- To Summarize
- To Respond
- To Explain
- To Inform
- To Persuade
- To Illustrate
- To Entertain
- To Compare or Contrast
- To Show Causes or Effects
- To Classify or Divide
- To Tell a Story

Looking at the purpose behind what you’re reading may tell you why certain choices were made. If the intent is to entertain, then a story might have a happy (or suspenseful, or tragic) ending. If the purpose is to inform, however, that same story might end with a lesson. If the idea is to persuade, then you might notice the balance of information leans to one side.

Considering these questions when you start your reading will give you a way to evaluate a piece's credibility. One final step is necessary, however, and this is the most challenging piece of all.

Investigating your own bias.

Most of us have topics about which we aren't necessarily rational. Consider your love of a favorite sports team, for instance, or musical group. Is there a fact about the team that someone could tell you which would make you stop loving them? For example, I could read 100 articles about how my hometown team has the worst defense in the state and still consider them to be the best team in the world.

We often hold other opinions or beliefs that are anchored in something other than rational research or fact. When considering the credibility of sources, it's important to think about our own beliefs and biases and how these will influence our approach. One way to think about this is to take inventory of your beliefs on a topic before you begin reading about it. Ask yourself, Is there any-
thing this author could do to change my mind? If not, recognize that you’re coming to the reading with previously held convictions, and these may make it difficult to evaluate that author’s work.

This is particularly difficult to navigate when we read pieces with which we are likely to agree. Many of us have, at one time or another, suffered from confirmation bias, which is “the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s preexisting beliefs or hypotheses” (Wikipedia). This means that people are often likely to seek out information that supports what we already believe. We’re more likely to read magazines, watch television shows, listen to podcasts, and engage in conversation with those who will support the view we hold of the world. When we find a piece of media that agrees with us, we feel better about ourselves, and we’re more likely to approach the piece less critically — to believe it without question.

Combating confirmation bias requires the same attention as all critical reading. Look carefully at your sources. Ask yourself why you believe (or do not believe) what they’re saying. Portland State University has developed an excellent online resource for evaluating news and online sources (http://guides.library.pdx.edu/fakenews) that may also be helpful.

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This guide originally appeared in Jenn Kepka’s Better Writing from the Beginning text, an open resource licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Navigating Genres

KERRY DIRK

There’s a joke that’s been floating around some time now that you’ve likely already heard. It goes something like the following:

Q: What do you get when you rewind a country song?
A: You get your wife back, your job back, your dog back . . .

Maybe this joke makes you laugh. Or groan. Or tilt your head to the side in confusion. Because it just so happens that in order to get this joke, you must know a little something about country music in general and in particular country music lyrics. You must, in other words, be familiar with the country music genre.

Let’s look into country music lyrics a bit more. Bear with me on this is if you’re not a fan. Assuming I want to write lyrics to a country song, how would I figure out what lyrics are acceptable in terms of country songs? Listening to any country station for a short period of time might leave one with the following conclusions about country songs:

- Country songs tend to tell stories. They often have characters who are developed throughout the song.
- Country songs often have choruses that are broad enough to apply to a variety of verses.
- Country songs are often depressing; people lose jobs, lovers, and friends.
- Country songs express pride for the country style and way of life.
- Country songs are often political, responding to wars and economic crises, for example.

Given these characteristics, I would feel prepared to write some new country lyrics. But what would happen if I wanted to write a country song that didn’t do any of the above things? Would it still be a country song?

You are probably already familiar with many genres, although you may not know them as such; perhaps your knowledge of genres is limited to types of books, whether mystery, horror, action, etc. Now I’m going to ask you to stick with me while I show you how knowledge of genres goes far beyond a simple discussion of types. My purposes are to expand your definition of genre (or to introduce you to a definition for the first time) and to help you start thinking about how genres might apply to your own writing endeavors. But above all, I hope to give you an awareness of how genres function by taking what is often quite theoretical in the field of rhetoric and composition and making it a bit more tangible. So why
was I talking about country songs? I think that using such references can help you to see, in a quite concrete way, how genres function.

When I started writing this essay, I had some ideas of what I wanted to say. But first, I had to determine what this essay might look like. I’ve written a lot—letters, nonfiction pieces, scholarly articles, rants—but this was my first time writing an essay to you, a composition student. What features, I asked myself, should go into this essay? How personal could I get? What rhetorical moves might I use, effectively or ineffectively? I hoped that a similar type of essay already existed so that I would have something to guide my own writing. I knew I was looking for other essays written directly to students, and after finding many examples, I looked for common features. In particular, I noted the warm, personal style that was prevalent through every essay; the tone was primarily conversational. And more importantly, I noticed that the writer did not talk as an authoritative figure but as a coach. Some writers admitted that they did not know everything (we don’t), and others even went so far as to admit ignorance. I found myself doing what Mary Jo Reiff, a professor who studies rhetoric and composition, did when she was asked to write about her experience of writing an essay about teaching for those new to the field of composition. She writes, “I immediately called on my genre knowledge—my past experience with reading and writing similar texts in similar situations—to orient me to the expectations of this genre” (157).

I further acknowledged that it is quite rare that teachers of writing get to write so directly to students in such an informal manner. Although textbooks are directed at students, they are often more formal affairs meant to serve a different purpose than this essay. And because the genre of this essay is still developing, there are no formal expectations for what this paper might look like. In my excitement, I realized that perhaps I had been granted more freedom in writing this essay than is typical of an already established, although never static, genre. As a result, I decided to make this essay a mix of personal anecdotes, examples, and voices from teachers of writing. Such an essay seems to be the most fitting response to this situation, as I hope to come across as someone both informative and friendly. Why am I telling you this? Because it seems only appropriate that given the fact that I am talking about genre awareness, I should make you aware of my own struggles with writing in a new genre.

I will admit that the word genre used to have a bad reputation and may still make some people cringe. Genre used to refer primarily to form, which meant that writing in a particular genre was seen as simply a matter of filling in the blanks. Anne Freadman, a specialist in genre theory, points out that “it is this kind of genre theory with its failures that has caused the discredit of the very notion of genre, bringing about in turn its disuse and the disrepair many of us
found it in” (46). But genre theory has come a long way since then. Perhaps the shift started when the rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer wrote the following:

Due to either the nature of things or convention, or both, some situations recur. The courtroom is the locus for several kinds of situations generating the speech of accusation, the speech of defense, the charge to the jury. From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established. (13)

In other words, Bitzer is saying that when something new happens that requires a response, someone must create that first response. Then when that situation happens again, another person uses the first response as a basis for the second, and eventually everyone who encounters this situation is basing his/her response on the previous ones, resulting in the creation of a new genre. Think about George Washington giving the first State of the Union Address. Because this genre was completely new, he had complete freedom to pick its form and content. All presidents following him now have these former addresses to help guide their response because the situation is now a reoccurring one. Amy Devitt, a professor who specializes in the study of genre theory, points out that “genres develop, then, because they respond appropriately to situations that writers encounter repeatedly” (“Generalizing” 576) and because “if each writing problem were to require a completely new assessment of how to respond, writing would be slowed considerably. But once we recognize a recurring situation, a situation that we or others have responded to in the past, our response to that situation can be guided by past responses” (“Generalizing” 576). As such, we can see how a genre like the State of the Union Address helps for more effective communication between the president and citizens because the president already has a genre with which to work; he/she doesn’t have to create a new one, and citizens know what to expect from such an address.

The definition of genre has changed even more since Bitzer’s article was written; genres are now viewed as even more than repeating rhetorical situations. Carolyn Miller, a leading professor in the field of technical communication, argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered . . . on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). How might this look? These actions don’t have to be complex; many genres are a part of our daily lives. Think about genres as tools to help people to get things done. Devitt writes that:

genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different. People learn how to do small talk to ease the social discomfort of large group gatherings and meeting
new people, but advertisers learn how to disguise sales letters as winning sweepstakes entries. (Writing 1)

In other words, knowing what a genre is used for can help people to accomplish goals, whether that goal be getting a job by knowing how to write a stellar resume, winning a person’s heart by writing a romantic love letter, or getting into college by writing an effective personal statement.

By this point you might realize that you have been participating in many different genres—whether you are telling a joke, writing an email, or uploading a witty status on Facebook. Because you know how these genres function as social actions, you can quite accurately predict how they function rhetorically; your joke should generate a laugh, your email should elicit a response, and your updated Facebook status should generate comments from your online friends. But you have done more than simply filled in the blanks. Possibly without even thinking about it, you were recognizing the rhetorical situation of your action and choosing to act in a manner that would result in the outcome you desired. I imagine that you would probably not share a risqué joke with your mom, send a “Hey Buddy” email to your professor, or update your Facebook status as “X has a huge wart on his foot.” We can see that more than form matters here, as knowing what is appropriate in these situations obviously requires more rhetorical knowledge than does filling out a credit card form. Devitt argues that “people do not label a particular story as a joke solely because of formal features but rather because of their perception of the rhetorical action that is occurring” (Writing 11). True, genres often have formulaic features, but these features can change even as the nature of the genre remains (Devitt, Writing, 48). What is important to consider here is that if mastering a form were simply a matter of plugging in content, we would all be capable of successfully writing anything when we are given a formula. By now you likely know that writing is not that easy.

Fortunately, even if you have been taught to write in a formulaic way, you probably don’t treat texts in such a manner. When approaching a genre for the first time, you likely view it as more than a simple form: “Picking up a text, readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text’s purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader” (Devitt, Writing 12). We treat texts that we encounter as rhetorical objects; we choose between horror movies and chick flicks not only because we are familiar with their forms but because we know what response they will elicit from us (nail-biting fear and dreamy sighs, respectively). Why am I picking popular genres to discuss? I think I agree with Miller when she argues the following:

To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apologia, the inau-
In other words, Miller is saying that all genres matter because they shape our everyday lives. And by studying the genres that we find familiar, we can start to see how specific choices that writers make result in specific actions on the part of readers; it only follows that our own writing must too be purposefully written.

I like examples, so here is one more. Many of you may be familiar with The Onion, a fictitious newspaper that uses real world examples to create humorous situations. Perhaps the most notable genre of The Onion is its headlines. The purpose of these headlines is simple: to make the reader respond by laughing. While many of the articles are also entertaining, the majority of the humor is produced through the headlines. In fact, the headlines are so important to the success of the newspaper that they are tested on volunteers to see the readers' immediate responses. There are no formal features of these headlines besides the fact that they are all quite brief; they share no specific style. But they are a rhetorical action meant to bring about a specific response, which is why I see them as being their own genre. A few examples for those of you unfamiliar with this newspaper would help to explain what I'm saying. Here are a few of my personal favorites (politically charged or other possibly offensive headlines purposefully avoided):

- “Archaeological Dig Uncovers Ancient Race of Skeleton People”
- “Don’t Run Away, I’m Not the Flesh-Eating Kind of Zombie”
- “Time Traveler: Everyone In The Future Eats Dippin’ Dots”
- “I Am Under 18’ Button Clicked For First Time In History Of Internet”
- “Commas, Turning Up, Everywhere”
- “Myspace Outage Leaves Millions Friendless.”
- “Amazon.com Recommendations Understand Area Woman Better Than Husband”
- “Study: Dolphins Not So Intelligent On Land”
- “Beaver Overthinking Dam”
- “Study: Alligators Dangerous No Matter How Drunk You Are”
- “Child In Corner To Exact Revenge As Soon As He Gets Out” (The Onion)

I would surmise with near certainty that at least one of these headlines made you laugh. Why? I think the success lies in the fact that the writers of these headlines are rhetorically aware of whom these headlines are directed toward—college students like you, and more specifically, educated college students who know enough about politics, culture, and U.S. and world events to “get” these headlines.
And now for some bad news: figuring out a genre is tricky already, but this process is further complicated by the fact that two texts that might fit into the same genre might also look extremely different. But let’s think about why this might be the case. Devitt points out, “different grocery stores make for different grocery lists. Different law courts make for different legal briefs. And different college classes make for different research papers. Location may not be the first, second, and third most important qualities of writing, as it is for real estate, but location is surely among the situational elements that lead to expected genres and to adaptations of those genres in particular situations” (“Transferability” 218). Think about a time when you were asked to write a research paper. You probably had an idea of what that paper should look like, but you also needed to consider the location of the assignment. In other words, you needed to consider how your particular teacher’s expectations would help to shape your assignment. This makes knowing a genre about much more than simply knowing its form. You also need to consider the context in which it is being used. As such, it’s important to be aware that the research paper you might be required to write in freshman composition might be completely different than the research paper you might be asked to write for an introductory psychology class. Your goal is to recognize these shifts in location and to be aware of how such shifts might affect your writing.

Let’s consider a genre with which you are surely familiar: the thesis statement. Stop for a moment and consider what this term means to you. Ask your classmates. It’s likely that you each have your own definition of what a thesis statement should and should not look like. You may have heard never to start a thesis statement with a phrase like “In this essay.” Or you might have been taught that a thesis statement should have three parts, each of which will be discussed in one paragraph of the essay. I learned that many good thesis statements follow the formula “X because Y,” where “X” refers to a specific stance, and “Y” refers to a specific reason for taking that stance. For example, I could argue “School uniforms should be required because they will help students to focus more on academics and less on fashion.” Now, whether or not this is a good thesis statement is irrelevant, but you can see how following the “X because Y” formula would produce a nicely structured statement. Take this a step further and research “thesis statements” on the Internet, and you’ll find that there are endless suggestions. And despite their vast differences, they all fit under the genre of thesis statement. How is this possible? Because it comes back to the particular situation in which that thesis statement is being used. Again, location is everything.

I think it’s time to try our hand at approaching a genre with which I hope all of you are only vaguely familiar and completely unpracticed: the ransom note.
A SCENARIO

I’ve decided to kidnap Bob’s daughter Susie for ransom. I’m behind on the mortgage payments, my yacht payments are also overdue, and I desperately need money. It is well known that Bob is one of the wealthiest people in Cash City, so I’ve targeted him as my future source of money. I’ve never met Bob, although one time his Mercedes cut me off in traffic, causing me to hit the brakes and spill my drink; the stain still glares at me from the floor of the car. The kidnapping part has been completed; now I need to leave Bob a ransom note. Let’s look at a few drafts I’ve completed to decide which one would be most appropriate.

**Ransom Letter 1:**

If you ever want to see your daughter alive again, leave 1 million dollars by the blue garbage can at 123 Ransom Rd. at Midnight. Come alone and do not call the police.

**Ransom Letter 2:**

Hav daughter. Million $. Blu grbg can 123 Ransom Rd. 12AM. No poliz.

**Ransom Letter 3:**

Dear Bob,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. You have a lovely house, and I very much enjoyed my recent visit while you were out of town. Unfortunately, I have kidnapped your daughter. As I am currently unable to meet several financial demands, I am graciously turning to you for help in this matter. I am sure that we will be able to come to some mutually beneficial agreement that results in the return of your daughter and the padding of my wallet. Please meet with me at the Grounds Coffee House on First Street so that we may discuss what price is most fitting. Your daughter, meanwhile, remains in safe and competent hands. She is presently playing pool with my son Matt (a possible love connection?), and she says to tell you “Hi.”

Yours truly,

Jim

P.S. Please order me a skim vanilla latte, should you arrive before I do.

Immediately, you can probably determine that ransom letter one is the best choice. But have you considered why? What does the first letter have that the other two are lacking? Let’s first eliminate the most obvious dud—letter number
three. Not only does it mimic the friendly, familiar manner of two friends rather than the threatening note of a deranged kidnapper, but it also suggests both that there is no rush in the matter and that the price is negotiable. Letters one and two are closer; they both contain the same information, but letter two fails to be as rhetorically strong as number one. The spelling errors and choppy feel might suggest that the writer of the note is not intelligent enough to get away with the kidnapping. The first letter is the most rhetorically strong because it is well written and direct. All of these letters would qualify as fitting the genre of ransom letter, but the first one most obviously fits the rhetorical situation.

It may be worthwhile to note some particular challenges you might have to approaching your writing genres as rhetorical situations. Perhaps you have come from a writing background where you learned that certain rules apply to all writing. Just nod if these sound familiar:

- You must have a thesis statement at the end of the introduction.
- Every thesis statement should introduce three points of discussion.
- You cannot use “I” in writing.
- You cannot begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.
- Every paragraph should start with a topic sentence.

You get the point. These rules are appealing; they tell us exactly what to do and not to do with regard to writing. I remember happily creating introductions that moved from broad to specific (often starting with "In our world"), constructing three point thesis statements, and beginning paragraphs with "first," “second,” and “third.” I didn’t have to think about audience, or purpose, or even much about content for that matter. All that really mattered was that essay followed a certain formula that was called good writing. But looking back, what resulted from such formulas was not very good; actually, it was quite bad.

That is, of course, not to say that there aren’t rules that come with genres; the difference is that the rules change as the genre changes, that no rules apply to all genres, and that genres require more effort than simply following the rules. Because genres usually come with established conventions, it is risky to choose not to follow such conventions. These similarities within genres help us to communicate successfully; imagine the chaos that would ensue if news broadcasts were done in raps, if all legal briefs were written in couplets, or if your teacher handed you a syllabus and told you that it must first be decoded. In sum, “too much choice is as debilitating of meaning as is too little choice. In language, too much variation results eventually in lack of meaning: mutual unintelligibility” (Devitt, “Genre” 53).

But on a brighter note, genres also help us to make more efficient decisions when writing, as we can see how people have approached similar situations.
Creating a new genre each time that writing was required would make the writing process much longer, as we would not have past responses to help us with present ones (Devitt, "Generalizing" 576). As a result, the more you are able to master particular genres, the better equipped you may be to master genres that you later encounter:

> When people write, they draw on the genres they know, their own context of genres, to help construct their rhetorical action. If they encounter a situation new to them, it is the genres they have acquired in the past that they can use to shape their new action. Every genre they acquire, then, expands their genre repertoire and simultaneously shapes how they might view new situations. (Devitt, Writing 203)

Taking what Devitt says into account, think back to the previous discussion of the research paper. If you already have some idea of what a research paper looks like, you do not have to learn an entirely new genre. Instead, you just have to figure out how to change that particular genre to fit with the situation, even if that change just comes from having a different teacher.

Learning about genres and how they function is more important than mastering one particular genre; it is this knowledge that helps us to recognize and to determine appropriate responses to different situations—that is, knowing what particular genre is called for in a particular situation. And learning every genre would be impossible anyway, as Devitt notes that “no writing class could possibly teach students all the genres they will need to succeed even in school, much less in the workplace or in their civic lives. Hence the value of teaching genre awareness rather than acquisition of particular genres” (Writing 205). This approach helps to make you a more effective writer as well, as knowing about genres will make you more prepared to use genres that you won’t learn in college. For example, I recently needed to write a letter about removing a late fee on a credit card. I had never written this particular type of letter before, but I knew what action I was trying to accomplish. As a result, I did some research on writing letters and determined that I should make it as formal and polite as possible. The body of the letter ended up as follows:

> I have very much enjoyed being a card carrier with this bank for many years. However, I recently had a late fee charged to my account. As you will note from my previous statements, this is the first late fee I have ever acquired. I do remember making this payment on time, as I have all of my previous payments. I hope to remain a loyal customer of this bank for many years to come, so I would very much appreciate it if you would remove this charge from my account.

You can see that this letter does several things. First, I build credibility for myself
by reminding them that I have used their card for many years. Second, I ask them to check my records to show further that I am typically a responsible card carrier. And third, I hint that if they do not remove the late fee, I might decide to change to a different bank. This letter is effective because it considers how the situation affects the genre. And yes, the late fee was removed.

Chances are that I have left you more confused than you were before you began this essay. Actually, I hope that I have left you frustrated; this means that the next time you write, you will have to consider not only form but also audience, purpose, and genre; you will, in other words, have to consider the rhetorical effectiveness of your writing. Luckily, I can leave you with a few suggestions:

- First, determine what action you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to receive an A on a paper? Convince a credit card company to remove a late fee? Get into graduate school? If you don’t know what your goal is for a particular writing situation, you’ll have a difficult time figuring out what genre to use.
- Second, learn as much as you can about the situation for which you are writing. What is the purpose? Who is the audience? How much freedom do you have? How does the location affect the genre?
- Third, research how others have responded to similar situations. Talk to people who have written what you are trying to write. If you are asked to write a biology research paper, ask your instructor for examples. If you need to write a cover letter for a summer internship, take the time to find out about the location of that internship.
- And finally, ask questions.

**Discussion**

1. What are some genres that you feel you know well? How did you learn them? What are their common rhetorical features?
2. What rules have you been told to follow in the past? How did they shape what you were writing?
3. How much freedom do you enjoy when writing? Does it help to have a form to follow, or do you find it to be limiting?

**Works Cited**


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So You Wanna Be An Engineer, a Welder, a Teacher? Academic Disciplines and Professional Literacies

MARLENA STANFORD AND JUSTIN JORY

Many people today arrive at college because they feel it’s necessary. Some arrive immediately after high school, thinking that college seems like the obvious next step. Others arrive after years in the workforce, knowing college provides the credentials needed to advance their careers. And still others show up because college is a change, providing a way out of less than desirable life conditions.

We understand this tendency to view college as a necessary part of contemporary life. We did too as students. And now that we’re teachers, we still believe it’s necessary because we know it opens doors and grants access to new places, people, and ideas. And these things present opportunities for personal and professional growth. We hear about these opportunities every day when talking with our students.

But viewing college simply as a necessity can lead to a troublesome way of thinking about what it means to be a student. Because so many students today may feel like they must go to college, their time at school may feel like part of the daily grind. They may feel like they have to go to school to take classes; they may feel like they are only taking classes to get credit; and they may feel like the credit only matters because it earns the degree that leads to more opportunity. When students carry the added pressure of feeling like they must earn high grades to be a successful student and eventually professional (we don’t think this is necessarily true, by the way), the college experience can be downright stressful. All of these things can lead students to feel like they should get through school as quickly as possible so they can get a job and begin their lives.

Regardless of why you find yourself enrolled in college courses, we want to let you know that there are productive ways to approach your work as a student in college, and we argue they will pay off in the long run.

Students who see formal schooling as more than a means to an end will likely
have a more positive academic experience. The most savvy students will see the connections between disciplines, literacy development, professionalism, and their chosen career path. These students will have the opportunity to use their time in school to transform themselves into professionals in their chosen fields. They will know how to make this transformation happen and where to go to do it. They’ll understand that disciplinary and professional language matters and will view school as a time to acquire new language and participate in new communities that will help them meet their goals beyond the classroom. This transformation begins with an understanding of how the language and literacy practices within your field of study, your discipline, will transfer to your life as a professional.

Even students who are unsure about what to study or which professions they may find interesting can use their time spent in school to discover possibilities. While taking classes, for instance, they might pay attention to the practices, ideas, and general ways of thinking about the world represented in their class lectures, readings, and other materials, and they can consider the ways that these disciplinary values intersect with their own life goals and interests.

**UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLINARITY IN THE PROFESSIONS**

When you come to college you are not just coming to a place that grants degrees. When you go to class, you’re not only learning skills and subject matter, you are also learning about an academic discipline and acquiring disciplinary knowledge. In fact, you’re entering into a network of disciplines (e.g., engineering, English, and computer science), and in this network, knowledge is produced that filters into the world, and in particular, into professional industries. An academic discipline is defined as a field of knowledge within the university system with distinct problems and assumptions, methodologies, and ways of communicating information.¹ (Think about, for instance, how a scientist views the world

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¹ The term “discipline” refers to both a system of knowledge and a practice. The word “discipline” stems from the Greek word didasko (teach) and the Latin word disco (learn). In Middle English, the word “discipline” referred to the branches of knowledge, especially medicine, law, and theology. Shumway and Messer-Davidow, historians of disciplinarity, explain that during this time “discipline” also referred to “the ‘rule’ of monasteries and later to the methods of training used in armies and schools.” So the conceptualization of “discipline” as both a system of knowledge and as a kind of self-mastery or practice has been around for quite some time. In the 19th century, our modern definition of “discipline” emerged out of the many scientific societies, divisions, and specializations that occurred over time during the 17th and 18th centuries. Our modern conception of disci-
and conducts their study of things in the world in ways different than a historian.)

Entering into a discipline requires us to become literate in the discipline’s language and practice. If membership in a disciplinary community is what we’re after, we must learn to both “talk the talk” and “walk the walk.” At its foundation, disciplinarity is developed and supported through language—through what we say to those within a disciplinary community and to those outside of the community. Students begin to develop as members of a disciplinary community when they learn to communicate with the discipline’s common symbols and genres, when they learn to “talk the talk.” In addition, students must also learn the common practices and ways of thinking of the disciplinary community in order to “walk the walk.”

The great part of being a student is that you have an opportunity to learn about many disciplinary communities, languages, and practices, and savvy students can leverage the knowledge and relationships they develop in school into professional contexts. When we leave our degree programs, we hope to go on the job with a disciplined mind—a disposition toward the world and our work that is informed by the knowledge, language, and practices of a discipline.

Do you ever wonder why nearly every job calls for people who are critical thinkers and have good written communication skills? Underlying this call is an interest in disciplined ways of thinking and communicating. Therefore, using schooling to acquire the knowledge and language of a discipline will afford an individual with ways of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking that will be useful in the professional world.

The professions extend from disciplines and in turn, disciplines become informed by the professionals working out in the world. In nursing, for example, disciplinarity frames it not only as a collection of knowledge but also as the social practices that operate within a disciplinary community.

2. The basic relationship between disciplines and professions is that disciplines create knowledge and professions apply it. Each discipline comes with a particular way of thinking about the world and particular ways of communicating ideas. An experienced mathematician, for example, will have ways of thinking and using language that are distinct from those of an experienced historian. The professions outside of institutions of higher education also come with particular ways of thinking and communicating, which are often informed by related academic disciplines. So an experienced electrician will have ways of thinking and using language that are different from those of an experienced social worker. Both the electrician and the social worker could have learned these ways of thinking and using language within a discipline in a formal school setting, although formal schooling is not the only place to learn these ways of thinking and communicating.
academic instructors of nursing teach nursing students the knowledge, language, and practices of nursing. Trained nurses then go out to work in the world with their disciplined mind to guide them. At the same time, nurses working out in the world will meet new challenges that they must work through, which will eventually circle back to inform the discipline of nursing and what academic instructors of nursing teach in their classrooms.

It is important to realize that not all college professors and courses will “frame” teaching and learning in terms of disciplinarity or professionalism, even though it informs almost everything that happens in any classroom. As a result, it may be difficult to see the forest for the trees. Courses can become nothing more than a series of lectures, quizzes, assignments, activities, readings, and homework, and there may be few identifiable connections across these things. Therefore, students who are using school to mindfully transform into professionals will build into their academic lives periodic reflections in which they consider their disciplines and the ways they’re being trained in disciplinary thinking. They might stop to ask themselves: What have I just learned about being a nurse? About thinking like a nurse? About the language of nursing? This reflection may happen at various times throughout individual courses, after you complete a course, or at the end of completing a series of courses in a particular discipline. And don’t ever underestimate the value of forming relationships with your professors. They’re insiders in the discipline and profession and can provide great mentorship.

Okay, okay. Be more mindful of your education so that you acquire disciplinary and professional literacies. You get it. But what can you do—where can you look specifically—to start developing these literacies? There are many possible responses, but as writing teachers we will say this: Follow your discipline’s and profession’s texts. In these texts—and around them—is where literacy happens. It’s where you’re expected to demonstrate you can read and write (and think and act) like a professional.

**PROFESSIONAL LITERACY: READING AND WRITING LIKE A PROFESSIONAL**

So you wanna be a teacher, a welder, an engineer? Something else? It doesn’t matter what profession you’re interested in. One thing that holds across all professions is that, although the types of reading and writing will differ, you’ll spend a great deal of time reading and writing. Your ability to apply, demonstrate, and develop your reading and writing practices in school and then on the job will contribute greatly to your success as a professional.
You may be thinking, “I'm going to be a culinary artist and want to open a bakery. Culinary artists and bakers don't have to know how to read and write, or at least not in the ways we're learning to read and write in school.” While you may not write many academic essays after college, we can confidently say that you will be reading and writing no matter your job because modern businesses and organizations—whether large corporations or mom-and-pop startups—are built and sustained through reading and writing. When we say reading and writing builds and sustains organizations we mean that they produce all the things necessary to run organizations—every day. Reading and writing reflect and produce the ideas that drive business; they record and document productivity and work to be completed; reading and writing enable the production and delivery of an organization’s products and services; they create policies and procedures that dictate acceptable behaviors and actions; and perhaps most importantly, reading and writing bring individuals into relationships with one another and shape the way these people perceive themselves and others as members of an organization.

As a professional, you will encounter a variety of texts; you will be expected to read and respond appropriately to texts and to follow best practices when producing your own. This holds true whether you aspire to be a mechanic or welder, a teacher or an engineer. If you bring your disciplined mind to these reading and writing tasks, you will likely have more success navigating the tasks and challenges you meet on a daily basis.

**VIDEO: Professional Literacies in Action**

*Meet Michele, Renaissance Woman and Computer Science Major*
Conclusion

We hope this reading can transform the way you understand the discipline-specific ways of reading, writing, thinking, and using language that you encounter in all your college courses—even if these ways are not always brought to the forefront by your instructors. We might think of college courses as opportunities to begin acquiring disciplinary literacy and professional reading and writing practices that facilitate our transformation into the professionals we want to become. Said another way, if language is a demonstration of how we think and who we are, then we want to be sure we’re using it to the best of our ability to pursue our professional goals and interests in the 21st Century.
Works Cited


What Does the Professor Want? Understanding the Assignment

AMY GUPTILL

WRITING FOR WHOM? WRITING FOR WHAT?

The first principle of good communication is knowing your audience. This is where writing papers for class gets kind of weird. As Peter Elbow explains:

When you write for a teacher you are usually swimming against the stream of natural communication. The natural direction of communication is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn’t understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better. (Elbow 219)

Often when you write for an audience of one, you write a letter or email. But college papers aren’t written like letters; they’re written like articles for a hypothetical group of readers that you don’t actually know much about. There’s a fundamental mismatch between the real-life audience and the form your writing takes. It’s kind of bizarre, really.

It helps to remember the key tenet of the university model: you’re a junior scholar joining the academic community. Academic papers, in which scholars report the results of their research and thinking to one another, are the lifeblood of the scholarly world, carrying useful ideas and information to all parts of the academic corpus. Unless there is a particular audience specified in the assignment, you would do well to imagine yourself writing for a group of peers who have some introductory knowledge of the field but are unfamiliar with the specific topic you’re discussing. Imagine them being interested in your topic but also busy; try to write something that is well worth your readers’ time. Keeping an audience like this in mind will help you distinguish common knowledge in the field from that which must be defined and explained in your paper. Understanding your audience like this also resolve the audience mismatch that Elbow describes. As he notes, “You don’t write to teachers, you write for them” (Elbow 220).

Another basic tenet of good communication is clarifying the purpose of the
communication and letting that purpose shape your decisions. Your professor wants to see you work through complex ideas and deepen your knowledge through the process of producing the paper. Each assignment—be it an argumentative paper, reaction paper, reflective paper, lab report, discussion question, blog post, essay exam, project proposal, or what have you—is ultimately about your learning. To succeed with writing assignments (and benefit from them) you first have to understand their learning-related purposes. As you write for the hypothetical audience of peer junior scholars, you’re demonstrating to your professor how far you’ve gotten in analyzing your topic.

Professors don’t assign writing lightly. Grading student writing is generally the hardest, most intensive work instructors do.\(^1\) With every assignment they give you, professors assign themselves many, many hours of demanding and tedious work that has to be completed while they are also preparing for each class meeting, advancing their scholarly and creative work, advising students, and serving on committees. Often, they’re grading your papers on evenings and weekends because the conventional work day is already saturated with other obligations. You would do well to approach every assignment by putting yourself in the shoes of your instructor and asking yourself, “Why did she give me this assignment? How does it fit into the learning goals of the course? Why is this question/topic/problem so important to my professor that he is willing to spend evenings and weekends reading and commenting on several dozen novice papers on it?”

Most instructors do a lot to make their pedagogical (teaching) goals and expectations transparent to students: they explain the course learning goals associated with assignments, provide grading rubrics in advance, and describe several strategies for succeeding. Other professors ... not so much. Some students perceive more open-ended assignments as evidence of a lazy, uncaring, or even incompetent instructor. Not so fast! Professors certainly vary in the quantity and specificity of the guidelines and suggestions they distribute with each writing assignment. Some professors make a point to give very few parameters about an assignment—perhaps just a topic and a length requirement—and they likely have some good reasons for doing so. Here are some possible reasons:

**They figured it out themselves when they were students.** Unsurprisingly, your instructors were generally successful students who relished the culture and traditions of higher education so much that they strove to build an academic career. The current emphasis on student-centered instruction is relatively recent; your instructors much more often had professors who adhered to the classic model of college instruction: they gave lectures together with, perhaps,
one or two exams or papers. Students were on their own to learn the lingo and conventions of each field, to identify the key concepts and ideas within readings and lectures, and to sleuth out instructors’ expectations for written work. Learning goals, rubrics, quizzes, and preparatory assignments were generally rare.

They think figuring it out yourself is good for you. Because your professors by and large succeeded in a much less supportive environment, they appreciate how learning to thrive in those conditions gave them life-long problem-solving skills. Many think you should be able to figure it out yourself and that it would be good practice for you to do so. Even those who do include a lot of guidance with writing assignments sometimes worry that they’re depriving you of an important personal and intellectual challenge. Figuring out unspoken expectations is a valuable skill in itself.

They’re egg-heads. Many of your instructors have been so immersed in their fields that they may struggle to remember what it was like to encounter a wholly new discipline for the first time. The assumptions, practices, and culture of their disciplines are like the air they breathe; so much so that it is hard to describe to novices. They may assume that a verb like “analyze” is self-evident, forgetting that it can mean very different things in different fields. As a student, you voluntarily came to study with the scholars, artists, and writers at your institution. Rightly or wrongly, the burden is ultimately on you to meet them where they are.

Professors value academic freedom; that is, they firmly believe that their high-level expertise in their fields grants them the privilege of deciding what is important to focus on and how to approach it. College professors differ in this way from high school teachers who are usually obligated to address a defined curriculum. Professors are often extremely wary of anything that seems to threaten academic freedom. Some see specified learning goals and standardized rubrics as the first step in a process that would strip higher education of its independence, scholarly innovation, and sense of discovery. While a standardized set of expectations and practices might make it easier to earn a degree, it’s also good to consider the benefits of the more flexible and diversified model.

It is understandably frustrating when you feel you don’t know how to direct your efforts to succeed with an assignment. However, except for rare egregious situations, you would do well to assume the best of your instructor and to appreciate the diversity of learning opportunities you have access to in college. Like one first-year student told Keith Hjortshoj, “I think that every course, every assignment, is a different little puzzle I have to solve. What do I need to do here? When do I need to do it, and how long will it take? What does this teacher expect of me?” (Hjortshoj 4). The transparency that you get from some professors—along with guides like this one—will be a big help to you in situations where you have
to be scrappier and more pro-active, piecing together the clues you get from your professors, the readings, and other course documents.

**THE PROMPT: WHAT DOES “ANALYZE” MEAN ANYWAY?**

Often, the handout or other written text explaining the assignment—what professors call the assignment prompt—will explain the purpose of the assignment, the required parameters (length, number and type of sources, referencing style, etc.), and the criteria for evaluation. Sometimes, though—especially when you are new to a field—you will encounter the baffling situation in which you comprehend every single sentence in the prompt but still have absolutely no idea how to approach the assignment. No one is doing anything wrong in a situation like that. It just means that further discussion of the assignment is in order. Here are some tips:

**Focus on the verbs.** Look for verbs like “compare,” “explain,” “justify,” “reflect” or the all-purpose “analyze.” You’re not just producing a paper as an artifact; you’re conveying, in written communication, some intellectual work you have done. So the question is, what kind of thinking are you supposed to do to deepen your learning?

**Put the assignment in context.** Many professors think in terms of assignment sequences. For example, a social science professor may ask you to write about a controversial issue three times: first, arguing for one side of the debate; second, arguing for another; and finally, from a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective, incorporating text produced in the first two assignments. A sequence like that is designed to help you think through a complex issue. Another common one is a scaffolded research paper sequence: you first propose a topic, then prepare an annotated bibliography, then a first draft, then a final draft, and, perhaps, a reflective paper. The preparatory assignments help ensure that you’re on the right track, beginning the research process long before the final due date, and taking the time to consider recasting your thesis, finding additional sources, or reorganizing your discussion. If the assignment isn’t part of a sequence, think about where it falls in the semester, and how it relates to readings and other assignments. Are there headings on the syllabus that indicate larger units of material? For example, if you see that a paper comes at the end of a three-week unit on the role of the Internet in organizational behavior, then your professor likely wants you to synthesize that material in your own way. You should also check your notes and online course resources for any other guidelines about the workflow. Maybe you got a rubric a couple weeks ago and forgot about it. Maybe your instructor posted a link about “how to make an annotated bibliography” but then forgot to mention it in class.
**Try a free-write.** When I hand out an assignment, I often ask students to do a five-minute or ten-minute free-write. A free-write is when you just write, without stopping, for a set period of time. That doesn’t sound very “free;” it actually sounds kind of coerced. The “free” part is what you write—it can be whatever comes to mind. Professional writers use free-writing to get started on a challenging (or distasteful) writing task or to overcome writers block or a powerful urge to procrastinate. The idea is that if you just make yourself write, you can’t help but produce some kind of useful nugget. Thus, even if the first eight sentences of your free write are all variations on “I don’t understand this” or “I’d really rather be doing something else,” eventually you'll write something like “I guess the main point of this is …” and—booyah!—you’re off and running. As an instructor, I’ve found that asking students to do a brief free-write right after I hand out an assignment generates useful clarification questions. If your instructor doesn’t make time for that in class, a quick free-write on your own will quickly reveal whether you need clarification about the assignment and, often, what questions to ask.

**Ask for clarification the right way.** Even the most skillfully crafted assignments may need some verbal clarification, especially because students' familiarity with the field can vary enormously. Asking for clarification is a good thing. Be aware, though, that instructors get frustrated when they perceive that students want to skip doing their own thinking and instead receive an exact recipe for an A paper. Go ahead and ask for clarification, but try to convey that you want to learn and you’re ready to work.In general, avoid starting a question with “Do we have to …” because I can guarantee that your instructor is thinking, “You don’t have to do crap. You’re an adult. You chose college. You chose this class. You’re free to exercise your right to fail.” Similarly, avoid asking the professor about what he or she “wants.” You're not performing some service for the professor when you write a paper. What they “want” is for you to really think about the material.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potentially Annoying Questions</th>
<th>Preferable Alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't get it. Can you explain this more? or What do you want us to do?</td>
<td>I see that we are comparing and contrasting these two cases. What should be our focus? Their causes? Their impacts? Their implications? All of those things? or I’m unfamiliar with how art historians analyze a painting. Could you say more about what questions I should have in mind to do this kind of analysis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many sources do we have to cite?</td>
<td>Is there a typical range for the number of sources a well written paper would cite for this assignment? or Could you say more about what the sources are for? Is it more that we’re analyzing these texts in this paper, or are we using these texts to analyze some other case?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I have to do to get an A on this paper?</td>
<td>Could I meet with you to get feedback on my (pre-prepared) plans/outline/thesis/draft? or I’m not sure how to approach this assignment. Are there any good examples or resources you could point me to?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Rubrics As Road Maps

If a professor provides a grading rubric with an assignment prompt, thank your lucky stars (and your professor). If the professor took the trouble to prepare and distribute it, you can be sure that he or she will use it to grade your paper. He or she may not go over it in class, but it’s the clearest possible statement of what the professor is looking for in the paper. If it’s wordy, it may seem like those online “terms and conditions” that we routinely accept without reading. But you really should read it over carefully before you begin and again as your work progresses. A lot of rubrics do have some useful specifics. Mine, for example, often contain phrases like “makes at least six error-free connections to concepts or ideas from the course,” or “gives thorough consideration to at least one plausible counter-argument.” Even less specific criteria (such as “incorporates course concepts” and “considers counter-arguments”) will tell you how you should be spending your writing time.

Even the best rubrics aren’t completely transparent. They simply can’t be. Even well-written, nationally admired rubrics may still seem kind of vague. Take, for example, the Association of American Universities and Colleges critical thinking rubric as an example, what is the real difference between “demonstrating a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose” and “demonstrating adequate consideration” of the same? It depends on the specific context. So how can you know whether you’ve done that? A big part of what you’re learning, through feedback from your professors, is to judge the quality of your writing for yourself. Your future bosses are counting on that. At this point, it is better to think of rubrics as roadmaps, displaying your destination, rather than a GPS system directing every move you make.

Behind any rubric is the essential goal of higher education: helping you take charge of your own learning, which means writing like an independently motivated scholar. Are you tasked with proposing a research paper topic? Don’t just tell the professor what you want to do, convince him or her of the salience of your topic, as if you were a scholar seeking grant money. Is it a reflection paper? Then outline both the insights you’ve gained and the intriguing questions that remain, as a scholar would. Are you writing a thesis-driven analytical paper? Then apply the concepts you’ve learned to a new problem or situation. Write as if your scholarly peers around the country are eagerly awaiting your unique insights. Descriptors like “thoroughness” or “mastery” or “detailed attention” convey the vision of student writers making the time and rigorous mental effort to offer something new to the ongoing, multi-stranded academic conversation. What your professor wants, in short, is critical thinking.
What's Critical About Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is one of those terms that has been used so often and in so many different ways that if often seems meaningless. It also makes one wonder, is there such a thing as uncritical thinking? If you aren’t thinking critically, then are you even thinking?

Despite the prevalent ambiguities, critical thinking actually does mean something. The Association of American Colleges and Universities usefully defines it as “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion” (Rhodes).

That definition aligns with the best description of critical thinking I ever heard; it came from my junior high art teacher, Joe Bolger. He once asked us, “What color is the ceiling?” In that withering tween tone, we reluctantly replied, “Whiiiiite.” He then asked, “What color is it really?” We deigned to aim our pre-adolescent eyes upwards, and eventually began to offer more accurate answers: “Ivory?” “Yellow-ish tan.” “It’s grey in that corner.”

After finally getting a few thoughtful responses, Mr. Bolger said something like, “Making good art is about drawing what you see, not what you think you’re supposed to see.” The AAC&U definition, above, essentially amounts to the same thing: taking a good look and deciding what you really think rather than relying on the first idea or assumption that comes to mind.

The critical thinking rubric produced by the AAC&U describes the relevant activities of critical thinking in more detail. To think critically, one must ...

(a) “clearly state and comprehensively describe the issue or problem"
(b) “independently interpret and evaluate sources"
(c) “thoroughly analyze assumptions behind and context of your own or others’ ideas”
(d) “argue a complex position and one that takes counter-arguments into account”
(e) “arrive at logical and well-informed conclusions” (Rhodes).

While you are probably used to providing some evidence for your claims, you can see that college-level expectations go quite a bit further. When professors assign an analytical paper, they don’t just want you to formulate a plausible-sounding argument. They want you to dig into the evidence, think hard about

2. Thank you, Mr. Bolger!
unspoken assumptions and the influence of context, and then explain what you really think and why.

Interestingly, the AAC&U defines critical thinking as a “habit of mind” rather than a discrete achievement. And there are at least two reasons to see critical thinking as a craft or art to pursue rather than a task to check off. First, the more you think critically, the better you get at it. As you get more and more practice in closely examining claims, their underlying logic, and alternative perspectives on the issue, it’ll begin to feel automatic. You’ll no longer make or accept claims that begin with “Everyone knows that ...” or end with “That’s just human nature.” Second, just as artists and craftspersons hone their skills over a lifetime, learners continually expand their critical thinking capacities, both through the feedback they get from others and their own reflections. Artists of all kinds find satisfaction in continually seeking greater challenges. Continual reflection and improvement is part of the craft.

Critical thinking is hard work. Even those who actively choose to do it experience it as tedious, difficult, and sometimes surprisingly emotional. Nobel-prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that our brains aren’t designed to think; rather, they’re designed to save us from having to think. Our brains are great at developing routines and repertoires that enable us to accomplish fairly complex tasks like driving cars, choosing groceries, and having a conversation without thinking consciously and thoroughly about every move we make. Kahneman calls this “fast thinking.” “Slow thinking,” which is deliberate and painstaking, is something our brains seek to avoid. That built-in tendency can lead us astray. Kahneman and his colleagues often used problems like this one in experiments to gauge how people used fast and slow thinking in different contexts:

- A bat and ball cost $1.10.
- The bat costs one dollar more than the ball.
- How much does the ball cost?

Most people automatically say the ball costs $0.10 (Kahneman 44). However, if the bat costs $1 more, than the bat would cost $1.10 leading to the incorrect total of $1.20. The ball costs $0.05. Kahneman notes, “Many thousands of university students have answered the bat-and-ball puzzle, and the results are shocking. More than 50% of students at Harvard, MIT, and Princeton gave the intuitive—incorrect—answer.” These and other results confirm that “many people are overconfident, prone to place too much faith in their intuitions” (Kahneman 45). Thinking critically—thoroughly questioning your immediate intuitive responses—is difficult work, but every organization and business in the world needs people who can do that effectively. Some students assume that an
unpleasant critical thinking experience means that they're either doing something wrong or that it's an inherently uninteresting (and oppressive) activity. While we all relish those times when we're pleasently absorbed in a complex activity (what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow”), the more tedious experiences can also bring satisfaction, sort of like a good work-out (Csikszentmihalyi).

Critical thinking can also be emotionally challenging, researchers have found. Facing a new realm of uncertainty and contradiction without relying on familiar assumptions is inherently anxiety-provoking because when you’re doing it, you are, by definition, incompetent. Recent research has highlighted that both children and adults need to be able to regulate their own emotions in order to cope with the challenges of building competence in a new area (Rosen et al.). The kind of critical thinking your professors are looking for—that is, pursuing a comprehensive, multi-faceted exploration in order to arrive at an arguable, nuanced argument—is inevitably a struggle and it may be an emotional one. Your best bet is to find ways to make those processes as efficient, pleasant, and effective as you can.

The demands students face are not just from school. Professional working roles demand critical thinking, as 81% of major employers reported in an AAC&U-commissioned survey, and it’s pretty easy to imagine how critical thinking helps one make much better decisions in all aspects of life (“Raising the Bar”). Embrace it. And just as athletes, artists, and writers sustain their energy and inspiration for hard work by interacting with others who share these passions, look to others in the scholarly community—your professors and fellow students—to keep yourself engaged in these ongoing intellectual challenges. While writing time is often solitary, it's meant to plug you into a vibrant academic community. What your professors want, overall, is for you to join them in asking and pursuing important questions about the natural, social, and creative worlds.

WORKS CITED


This essay originally appeared in the Open SUNY textbook *Writing in College: From Competence to Excellence*. Jenn Kepka edited this essay from its original form in the text *College Writing: Getting Started*. 
How do you start writing a draft? There isn’t just one right way to begin writing. Some people dive right in, writing in complete sentences and paragraphs, while others start with some form of brainstorming or freewriting. Others choose a strategy based on the writing task and how familiar they are with the topic. A writing instructor may want you to try out different methods so that you can figure out what works best for you. You may want to have more than one method in case you get stuck and need to break out of a writing block. Here are some common strategies for getting started (sometimes called invention strategies).

There are several methods that help you generate ideas and see connections between ideas without writing in complete sentences. We can call these methods “brainstorming.” They all have some common rules:

- Write down all of your ideas; don’t eliminate anything until you are done brainstorming.
- Don’t bother with editing at this stage.
- Work as quickly as you can.
- If you get stuck, stop and review your work OR get someone else’s input.
- Each method can work as a solo technique or with others.

**CLUSTERING**

A cluster is a method of brainstorming that allows you to draw connections between ideas. This technique is also called a tree diagram, a map, a spider diagram, and probably many other terms.

1. To make a cluster, start with a big concept. Write this in the center of a page or screen and circle it.
2. Think of ideas that connect to the big concept. Write these around the big concept and draw connecting lines to the big concept.
3. As you think of ideas that relate to any of the others, create more connections by writing those ideas around the one idea that connects them and draw connecting lines.

Here’s an example:
Notice that you can use color, larger type, etc., to create organization and emphasis. Remember that your cluster doesn’t need to look like anyone else’s. Create the cluster in the way that makes the most sense to you. Once you have finished the cluster, you can use another technique to generate actual text.

**LISTING**

Listing is just what it sounds like: making a list of ideas. Here are two kinds of lists you might use.

**Brainstorm list:** Simply make a list of all the ideas related to your topic. Do not censor your ideas; write everything down, knowing you can cross some off later.

Here’s an example:
What I know/don't know lists: If you know that your topic will require research, you can make two lists. The first will be a list of what you already know about your topic; the second will be a list of what you don't know and will have to research.

OUTLINING

Outlining is a useful pre-writing tool when you know your topic well or at least know the areas you want to explore. An outline can be written before you begin to write, and it can range from formal to informal. However, many writers work best from a list of ideas or from freewriting. (Note: A reverse outline can be useful once you have written a draft, during the revision process. For more information, see the UW-Madison Writing Center Handbook's guide to Reverse Outlining.)

Traditional Outline

A traditional outline uses a numbering and indentation scheme to help organize your thoughts. Generally, you begin with your main point, perhaps stated as a thesis, and place the subtopics, usually the main supports for your thesis/main point, and finally flesh out the details underneath each subtopic. Each subtopic
is numbered and has the same level of indentation. Details under each subtopic are given a different style of number or letter and are indented further to the right. It’s expected that each subtopic will merit at least two details. NOTE: Most word-processing applications include outlining capabilities.

**Phrase:** Some outlines use a phrase for each item.

**Sentence:** Some outlines, particularly for oral presentations, use a complete sentence for each item.

**Paragraph:** Rarely, an outline may use a paragraph for each item.

**Q&A:** Some outlines are organized in a question/answer format.

**Here’s an example:**

I. Major Idea
   a. Supporting Idea
      i. Detail
      ii. Detail
   b. Supporting Idea
      i. Detail
      ii. Detail
      iii. Detail

**FREEWRITING**

Freewriting is a technique that actually generates text, some of which you may eventually use in your final draft. The rules are similar to brainstorming and clustering:

- Write as much as you can, as quickly as you can.
- Don’t edit or cross anything out. (Note: if you must edit as you go, just write the correction and keep moving along. Don’t go for the perfect word, just get the idea on the page.)
- Keep your pen, pencil, or fingers on the keyboard moving.
- You don’t need to stay on topic or write in any order. Feel free to follow tangents.
- If you get stuck, write a repeating phrase until your brain gets tired and gives you something else to write. (Variation: I like to complain at this point, so I write about the fact that I’m stuck, I really hate having to do this, why
isn’t it lunch-time already, etc.)

- Freewriting can be used just to get your mind working so that you can write an actual draft. In this case, you can write about whatever you want. Freewriting to generate ideas usually works best when you start with a prompt—an idea or question that gets you started. An example of a writing prompt might be “What do I already know about this topic?” Or “What is the first idea I have about my topic?” If you started with a list or an outline, you can freewrite about each item.

**LOOPING**

Looping is a technique built on freewriting. It can help you move within a topic to get all related ideas into writing.

1. To begin, start with a freewrite on a topic. Set a timer and write for 5-15 minutes (whatever you think will be enough time to get going but not so much that you will want to stop).
2. When the time period ends, read over what you’ve written and circle anything that needs to be fleshed out or that branches into new ideas. Select one of these for your next loop.
3. Freewrite again for the same time period, using the idea you selected from the first freewrite.
4. Repeat until you feel you have covered the topic or you are out of time.

**ASKING QUESTIONS**

To stimulate ideas, you can ask questions that help you generate content. Use some of the examples below or come up with your own.

- **Problem/Solution**: What is the problem that your writing is trying to solve? Who or what is part of the problem? What solutions can you think of? How would each solution be accomplished?

- **Cause/Effect**: What is the reason behind your topic? Why is it an issue? Conversely, what is the effect of your topic? Who will be affected by it?

- **The set of journalist’s questions** is probably the most familiar for writers. Using the journalist’s questions, sometimes called the five W's, is an effective way to write about the basic information about your topic. Here are the questions:

  - Who: Who is involved? Who is affected?
  - What: What is happening? What will happen? What should happen?
- Where: Where is it happening?
- When: When is it happening?
- Why/how: Why is this happening? How is it happening?

If you imagine the questions as a cube, and separate why and how into two, you can use that visual image to remember the six questions.

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During my first year in college, I feared many things: calculus, cafeteria food, the stained, sweet smelling mattress in the basement of my dorm. But I did not fear reading. I didn’t really think about reading at all, that automatic making of meaning from symbols in books, newspapers, on cereal boxes. And, indeed, some of my coziest memories of that bewildering first year involved reading. I adopted an overstuffed red chair in the library that enveloped me like the lap of a department store Santa. I curled up many evenings during that first, brilliant autumn with my English homework: Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day, Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street. I’d read a gorgeous passage, snuggle deeper into my chair, and glance out to the sunset and fall leaves outside of the library window. This felt deeply, unmistakably collegiate.

But English was a requirement—I planned to major in political science. I took an intro course my first semester and brought my readings to that same chair. I curled up, opened a book on the Chinese Revolution, started reading, and fell asleep. I woke up a little drooly, surprised at the harsh fluorescent light, the sudden pitch outside. Not to be deterred, I bit my lip and started over. I’d hold on for a paragraph or two, and then suddenly I’d be thinking about my classmate Joel’s elbows, the casual way he’d put them on the desk when our professor lectured, sometimes resting his chin in his hands. He was a long-limbed runner and smelled scrubbed—a mixture of laundry detergent and shampoo. He had black hair and startling blue eyes. Did I find him sexy?

Crap! How many paragraphs had my eyes grazed over while I was thinking about Joel’s stupid elbows? By the end of that first semester, I abandoned ideas of majoring in political science. I vacillated between intense irritation with my assigned readings and a sneaking suspicion that perhaps the problem was me—I was too dumb to read academic texts. Whichever it was—a problem with the readings or with me—I carefully chose my classes so that I could read novels, poetry, and plays for credit. But even in my English classes, I discovered, I had to read dense scholarly articles. By my Junior year, I trained myself to spend days from dawn until dusk hunkered over a carrel in the library’s basement armed with a dictionary and a rainbow of highlighters. Enjoying my reading seemed
hopelessly naïve—an indulgence best reserved for beach blankets and bathtubs. A combination of obstinacy, butt-numbingly hard chairs, and caffeine helped me survive my scholarly reading assignments. But it wasn’t fun.

Seven years later I entered graduate school. I was also working and living on my own, cooking for myself instead of eating off cafeteria trays. In short, I had a life. My days were not the blank canvas they had been when I was an undergraduate and could sequester myself in the dungeon of the library basement. And so, I finally learned how to read smarter, not harder. Perhaps the strangest part of my reading transformation was that I came to like reading those dense scholarly articles; I came to crave the process of sucking the marrow from the texts. If you can relate to this, if you also love wrestling with academic journal articles, take joy in arguing with authors in the margins of the page, I am not writing for you. However, if your reading assignments confound you, if they send you into slumber, or you avoid them, or they seem to take you way too long, then pay attention. Based on my experience as a frustrated student and now as a teacher of reading strategies, I have some insights to share with you designed to make the reading process more productive, more interesting, and more enjoyable.

JOINING THE CONVERSATION

Even though it may seem like a solitary, isolated activity, when you read a scholarly work, you are participating in a conversation. Academic writers do not make up their arguments off the top of their heads (or solely from creative inspiration). Rather, they look at how others have approached similar issues and problems. Your job—and one for which you’ll get plenty of help from your professors and your peers—is to locate the writer and yourself in this larger conversation. Reading academic texts is a deeply social activity; talking with your professors and peers about texts can not only help you understand your readings better, but it can push your thinking and clarify your own stances on issues that really matter to you.¹

In your college courses, you may have come across the term “rhetorical read-

¹ In this discussion I draw on Norgaard’s excellent discussion of reading as joining a conversation [1–28]. By letting you, the reader, know this in a footnote, I am not only citing my source (I’d be plagiarizing if I didn’t mention this somewhere), but I’m also showing how I enter this conversation and give you a trail to follow if you want to learn more about the metaphor of the conversation. Following standard academic convention, I put the full reference to Norgaard’s text at the end of this article, in the references.
Rhetoric in this context refers to how texts work to persuade readers—a bit different from the common connotation of empty, misleading, or puffed up speech. Rhetorical reading refers to a set of practices designed to help us understand how texts work and to engage more deeply and fully in a conversation that extends beyond the boundaries of any particular reading. Rhetorical reading practices ask us to think deliberately about the role and relationship between the writer, reader, and text.

When thinking about the writer, we are particularly interested in clues about the writer’s motivation and agenda. If we know something about what the writer cares about and is trying to accomplish, it can help orient us to the reading and understand some of the choices the writer makes in his or her work.

As readers, our role is quite active. We pay attention to our own motivation and agenda for each reading. On one level, our motivation may be as simple as wanting to do well in a class, and our agenda may involve wanting to understand as much as necessary in order to complete our assignments. In order to meet these goals, we need to go deeper, asking, “Why is my professor asking me to read this piece?” You may find clues in your course syllabus, comments your professor makes in class, or comments from your classmates. If you aren’t sure why you are being asked to read something, ask! Most professors will be more than happy to discuss in general terms what “work” they want a reading to do—for example, to introduce you to a set of debates, to provide information on a specific topic, or to challenge conventional thinking on an issue.

Finally, there is the text—the thing that the writer wrote and that you are reading. In addition to figuring out what the text says, rhetorical reading strategies ask us to focus on how the text delivers its message. In this way of thinking about texts, there is not one right and perfect meaning for the diligent reader to uncover; rather, interpretations of the reading will differ depending on the questions and contexts readers bring to the text.

**STRATEGIES FOR RHETORICAL READING**

Here are some ways to approach your reading that better equip you for the larger conversation. First, consider the audience. When the writer sat down to write your assigned reading, to whom was he or she implicitly talking? Textbooks, for the most part, have students like you in mind. They may be boring, but

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2. I draw on—and recommend—Rounsaville et al.’s discussion of rhetorical sensitivity, critical reading and rhetorical reading (1–35).
you’ve probably learned what to do with them: pay attention to the goals of the chapter, check out the summary at the end, ignore the text in the boxes because it’s usually more of a “fun fact” than something that will be on the test, and so on. Magazines in the checkout line at the supermarket also have you in mind: you can’t help but notice headlines about who is cheating or fat or anorexic or suicidal. Writers of scholarly sources, on the other hand, likely don’t think much about you at all when they sit down to write. Often, academics write primarily for other academics. But just because it’s people with PhDs writing for other people with PhDs doesn’t mean that you should throw in the towel. There’s a formula for these types of texts, just like there’s a formula for all the Cosmo articles that beckon with titles that involve the words “hot,” “sex tips,” “your man,” and “naughty” in different configurations.

It’s just that the formula is a little more complicated.

The formula also changes depending on the flavor of study (physics, management, sociology, English, etc.) and the venue. However, if you determine that the audience for your reading is other academics, recognize that you are in foreign territory. You won’t understand all of the chatter you hear on street corners, you may not be able to read the menus in the restaurants, but, with a little practice, you will be able to find and understand the major road signs, go in the right direction, and find your way.

How can you figure out the primary audience? First, look at the publication venue. (Here, to some extent, you can judge a book by its cover). If the reading comes from an academic journal, then chances are good that the primary audience is other academics. Clues that a journal is academic (as opposed to popular, like Time or Newsweek) include a citation format that refers to a volume number and an issue number, and often this information appears at the top or bottom of every page. Sometimes you can tell if a reading comes from an academic journal based on the title—e.g., do the Journal for Research in Mathematics Education or Qualitative Research in Psychology sound like they are written for a popular audience? What if you’re still not sure? Ask your reference librarians, classmates, your instructor, or friends and family who have more experience with these types of readings than you do.

There are two implications that you should be aware of if you are not the primary audience for a text. First, the author will assume prior knowledge that you likely don’t have. You can expect sentences like “as Durkheim has so famously argued . . .” or “much ink has been spilled on the implications of the modernization hypothesis” where you have no idea who Durkheim is or what the modernization hypothesis says. That’s OK. It might even be OK to not look these things up at all and still get what you need from the reading (but you won’t know that yet). In the first reading of an article, it’s smart to hold off on looking too many things
up. Just be prepared to face a wall of references that don’t mean a whole lot to you.

Second, if you’re not the primary audience, don’t be surprised if you find that the writing isn’t appealing to you. Whereas a novelist or a magazine writer works hard to draw us in as readers, many academic authors don’t use strategies to keep us hooked. In fact, many of these strategies (use of sensory language, suspense, etc.) would never get published in academic venues. By the same token, you’ll use very different strategies to read these scholarly texts.

You may be wondering: if you’re not the intended audience for the text, why do you have to read it in the first place? This is an excellent question, and one that you need to answer before you do your reading. As I mentioned earlier in the discussion of the role of the reader, you may need to do a little sleuthing to figure this out. In addition to the suggestions I provided earlier, look to your course notes and syllabus for answers. Often, professors will tell you why they assign specific readings. Pay attention: they will likely offer insights on the context of the reading and the most important points. If, after all of this, you still have no idea why you’re supposed to read six articles on the history of Newtonian physics, then ask your professor. Use the answers to help you focus on the really important aspects of the texts and to gloss over the parts that are less relevant to your coursework. If you remain confused, continue to ask for clarification. Ask questions in class—(your classmates will be grateful). Go to office hours. Most faculty love the opportunity to talk about readings that they have chosen with care.

Once you have an idea who the intended audience is for the article and why you are assigned to read it, don’t sit down and read the article from start to finish, like a good mystery. Get a lay of the land before you go too deep. One way to do this is to study the architecture of the article. Here are some key components to look for:

**The title.** As obvious as it sounds, pay attention to the title because it can convey a lot of information that can help you figure out how to read the rest of the article more efficiently. Let’s say that I know my reading will be about the Russian Revolution. Let’s say I even know that it will be about the role of music in the Russian Revolution. Let’s say the title is “‘Like the beating of my heart’: A discourse analysis of Muscovite musicians’ letters during the Russian Revolution.” This tells me not only the subject matter of the article (something about letters Russian musicians wrote during the Revolution) but it also tells me something about the methodology, or the way that the author approaches the subject matter. I might not know exactly what discourse analysis is, but I can guess that you can do it to letters and that I should pay particular attention to it when the author mentions it in the article. On the other hand, if the title of the arti-
The abstract. Not all of your readings will come with abstracts, but when they do, pay close attention. An abstract is like an executive summary. Usually one paragraph at the beginning of an article, the abstract serves to encapsulate the main points of the article. It’s generally a pretty specialized summary that seeks to answer specific questions. These include: the main problem or question, the approach (how did the author(s) do the work they write about in the article?), the shiny new thing that this article does (more on this later, but to be published in an academic journal you often need to argue that you are doing something that has not been done before), and why people who are already invested in this field should care (in other words, you should be able to figure out why another academic should find the article important). The abstract often appears in database searches, and helps scholars decide if they want to seek out the full article.

That’s a whole lot to accomplish in one paragraph.

As a result, authors often use specialized jargon to convey complex ideas in few words, make assumptions of prior knowledge, and don’t worry much about general readability. Abstracts, thus, are generally dense, and it’s not uncommon to read through an abstract and not have a clue about what you just read. This is a good place to re-read, highlight, underline, look up what you don’t know. You still may not have a firm grasp on everything in the abstract, but treat the key terms in the abstract like parts of a map when you see them in the main text, leading you to treasure: understanding the main argument.

The introduction. The introduction serves some of the same functions as the abstract, but there is a lot more breathing room here. When I started reading academic texts, I’d breeze through the introduction to get to the “meat” of the text. This was exactly the wrong thing to do. I can’t remember how many times I’d find myself in the middle of some dense reading, perhaps understanding the content of a particular paragraph, but completely unable to connect that paragraph with the overall structure of the article. I’d jump from the lily pad of one paragraph to the next, continually fearful that I’d slip off and lose myself in a sea of total confusion (and I often did slip).
If the author is doing her/his job well, the introduction will not only summarize the whole piece, present the main idea, and tell us why we should care, but it will also often offer a road map for the rest of the article. Sometimes, the introduction will be called “introduction,” which makes things easy. Sometimes, it’s not. Generally, treat the first section of an article as the introduction, regardless if it’s explicitly called that or not.

There are times where your reading will have the introduction chopped off. This makes your work harder. The two most common instances of introduction-less readings are assigned excerpts of articles and lone book chapters. In the first case, you only have a portion of an article so you cannot take advantage of many of the context clues the writer set out for readers. You will need to rely more heavily on the context of your course in general and your assignment in particular to find your bearings here. If the reading is high stakes (e.g., if you have to write a paper or take an exam on it), you may want to ask your professor how you can get the whole article. In the second case, your professor assigns a chapter or two from the middle of an academic book. The chapter will hopefully contain some introductory material (and generally will include much more than the middle of a journal article), but you will likely be missing some context clues that the author included in the introduction to the whole book. If you have trouble finding your footing here, and it’s important that you grasp the meaning and significance of the chapter, seek out the book itself and skim the introductory chapter to ground you in the larger questions that the author is addressing. Oddly, even though you’ll be doing more reading, it may save you time because you can read your assigned chapter(s) more efficiently.

Roadmaps included in the introduction are often surprisingly straightforward. They often are as simple as “in the first section, we examine . . . in the second section we argue . . . ” etc. Search for these maps. Underline them. Highlight them. Go back to them when you find your comprehension slipping.

**Section headings.** A section heading serves as a title for a particular part of an article. Read all of these to get a sense of the trajectory of the text before delving into the content in each section (with the exception of the introduction and the conclusion which you should read in detail). Get a passing familiarity with the meanings of the words in the section headings—they are likely important to understanding the main argument of the text.

**Conclusion.** When writing papers, you’ve likely heard the cliché “in the introduction, write what you will say, then say it, then write what you just said.” With this formula, it would seem logical to gloss over the conclusion, because, essentially, you’ve already read it already. However, this is not the case. Instead, pay close attention to the conclusion. It can help you make sure you understood the introduction.
Sometimes a slight re-phrasing can help you understand the author’s arguments in an important, new way. In addition, the conclusion is often where authors indicate the limitations of their work, the unanswered questions, the horizons left unexplored. And this is often the land of exam and essay questions . . . asking you to extend the author’s analysis beyond its own shores.

At this point, you have pored over the title, the introduction, the section headings, and the conclusion. You haven’t really read the body of the article yet. Your next step is to see if you can answer the question: what is the main argument or idea in this text?

Figuring out the main argument is the key to reading the text effectively and efficiently. Once you can identify the main argument, you can determine how much energy to spend on various parts of the reading. For example, if I am drowning in details about the temperance movement in the United States in the 19th Century, I need to know the main argument of the text to know if I need to slow down or if a swift skim will do. If the main argument is that women’s organizing has taken different forms in different times, it will probably be enough for me to understand that women organized against the sale and consumption of alcohol. That might involve me looking up “temperance” and getting the gist of women’s organizing. However, if the main argument were that scholars have misunderstood the role of upper-class white women in temperance organizing in Boston from 1840–1865, then I would probably need to slow down and pay closer attention.

Unless the reading is billed as a review or a synthesis, the only way that an academic text can even get published is if it claims to argue something new or different. However, unlike laundry detergent or soft drinks, academic articles don’t advertise what makes them new and different in block letters inside cartoon bubbles. In fact, finding the main argument can sometimes be tricky. Mostly, though, it’s just a matter of knowing where to look. The abstract and the introduction are the best places to look first. With complicated texts, do this work with your classmates, visit your campus writing center (many of them help with reading assignments), or drag a friend into it.

Once you understand the different parts of the text and the writer’s main argument, use this information to see how and where you can enter the conversation. In addition, keep your own agenda as a reader in mind as you do this work.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Collectively, these suggestions and guidelines will help you read and understand academic texts. They ask you to bring a great deal of awareness and
preparation to your reading—for example, figuring out who the primary audience is for the text and, if you are not that audience, why your professor is asking you to read it anyway. Then, instead of passively reading the text from start to finish, my suggestions encourage you to pull the reading into its constituent parts—the abstract, the introduction, the section headings, conclusion, etc.—and read them unevenly and out of order to look for the holy grail of the main argument. Once you have the main argument you can make wise decisions about which parts of the text you need to pore over and which you can blithely skim. The final key to reading smarter, not harder is to make it social. When you have questions, ask. Start conversations with your professors about the reading. Ask your classmates to work with you to find the main arguments. Offer a hand to your peers who are drowning in dense details. Academics write to join scholarly conversations. Your professors assign you their texts so that you can join them too.

Discussion

1. Pick one reading strategy above that you may have used in reading a text previously (like paying close attention to the introduction of a book, chapter, or article). Discuss the ways in which this strategy worked for you and/or didn’t work for you. Would you recommend friends use this strategy? (How) might you amend it, and when might you use it again?
2. The author writes in several places about reading academic texts as entering a conversation. What does this mean to you? How can you have a conversation with a text?
3. How might the reading strategies discussed in this article have an impact on your writing? Will you be more aware of your introduction, conclusion, and clues you leave throughout the text for readers? Talk with other writers to see what they may have learned about writing from this article on reading strategies.

Works Cited


I hate slow drivers. When I'm driving in the fast lane, maintaining the speed limit exactly, and I find myself behind someone who thinks the fast lane is for people who drive ten miles per hour below the speed limit, I get an annoyed feeling in my chest like hot water filling a heavy bucket. I wave my arms around and yell, “What . . . ? But, hey . . . oh come on!” There are at least two explanations for why some slow drivers fail to move out of the way:

1. They don’t know that the generally accepted practice of highway driving in the U.S. is to move to the right if an upcoming car wants to pass. Or,
2. They know the guidelines but don’t care.

But here’s the thing: writers can forget that their readers are sometimes just as annoyed at writing that fails to follow conventions as drivers are when stuck behind a car that fails to move over. In other words, there’s something similar between these two people: the knowledgeable driver who thinks, “I thought all drivers knew that the left lane is for the fastest cars,” and the reader who thinks, “I thought all writers knew that outside sources should be introduced, punctuated, and cited according to a set of standards.”

One day, you may discover that something you’ve written has just been read by a reader who, unfortunately, was annoyed at some of the ways you integrated sources. She was reading along and then suddenly exclaimed, “What . . . ? But, hey . . . oh come on!” If you’re lucky, this reader will try to imagine why you typed things the way you did, giving you the benefit of the doubt. But sometimes you’ll be slotted into positions that might not really be accurate. When this frustrated reader walks away from your work, trying to figure out, say, why you used so many quotations, or why you kept starting and ending paragraphs with them, she may come to the same conclusions I do about slow drivers:

1. You don’t know the generally accepted practices of using sources (especially in academic writing) in the U.S. Or,
2. You know the guidelines but don’t care.
And it will be a lot harder for readers to take you seriously if they think you’re ignorant or rude.

This judgment, of course, will often be unfair. These readers might completely ignore the merits of your insightful, stylistically beautiful, or revolutionarily important language—just as my anger at another driver makes me fail to admire his custom paint job. But readers and writers don’t always see eye to eye on the same text. In fact, some things I write about in this essay will only bother your pickiest readers (some teachers, some editors, some snobby friends), while many other readers might zoom past how you use sources without blinking. But in my experience, I find that teachers do a disservice when we fail to alert students to the kind of things that some readers might be annoyed at—however illogical these things sometimes seem. People are often unreasonably picky, and writers have to deal with that—which they do by trying to anticipate and preemptively fix whatever might annoy a broad range of readers. Plus, the more effectively you anticipate that pickiness, the more likely it is that readers will interpret your quotations and paraphrases in the way you want them to—critically or acceptingly, depending on your writing context.

It helps me to remember that the conventions of writing have a fundamentally rhetorical nature. That is, I follow different conventions depending on the purpose and audience of my writing, because I know that I’ll come across differently to different people depending on how well I follow the conventions expected in any particular writing space. In a blog, I cite a source by hyperlinking; in an academic essay, I use a parenthetical citation that refers to a list of references at the end of the essay. One of the fundamental ideas of rhetoric is that speakers/writers/composers shape what they say/write/create based on what they want it to do, where they’re publishing it, and what they know about their audience/readers. And those decisions include nitty-gritty things like introducing quotations and citing paraphrases clearly: not everyone in the entire world approaches these things the same way, but when I strategically learn the expectations of my U.S. academic audience, what I really want to say comes across smoothly, without little annoying blips in my readers’ experience. Notice that I’m not saying that there’s a particular right or wrong way to use conventions in my writing—if the modern U.S. academic system had evolved from a primarily African or Asian or Latin American cultural consciousness instead of a European one, conventions for writing would probably be very different. That’s why they’re conventions and not rules.

THE ANNOYANCES

Because I’m not here to tell you rules, decrees, or laws, it makes sense to call
my classifications annoyances. In the examples that follow, I wrote all of the annoying examples myself, but all the examples I use of good writing come from actual student papers in first-year composition classes at my university; I have their permission to quote them.

Armadillo Roadkill

Everyone in the car hears it: buh-BUMP. The driver insists to the passengers, “But that armadillo—I didn’t see it! It just came out of nowhere!” Sadly, a poorly introduced quotation can lead readers to a similar exclamation: “It just came out of nowhere!” And though readers probably won’t experience the same level of grief and regret when surprised by a quotation as opposed to an armadillo, I submit that there’s a kinship between the experiences: both involve anormal, pleasant activity (driving; reading) stopped suddenly short by an unexpected barrier (a sudden armadillo; a sudden quotation). Here’s an example of what I’m talking about:

We should all be prepared with a backup plan if a zombie invasion occurs. “Unlike its human counterparts, an army of zombies is completely independent of support” (Brooks 155). Preparations should be made in the following areas. . . .

Did you notice how the quotation is dropped in without any kind of warning? (Buh-BUMP.)

The Fix: The easiest way to effectively massage in quotations is by purposefully returning to each one in your draft to see if you set the stage for your readers—often, by signaling that a quote is about to come, stating who the quote came from, and showing how your readers should interpret it. In the above example, that could be done by introducing the quotation with something like this (new text bolded):

We should all be prepared with a backup plan if a zombie invasion occurs. Max Brooks suggests a number of ways to prepare for zombies’ particular traits, though he underestimates the ability of humans to survive in harsh environments. For example, he writes, “Unlike its human counterparts, an army of zombies is completely independent of support” (155). His shortsightedness could have a number of consequences. . . .

In this version, I know a quotation is coming (“For example”), I know it’s going to be written by Max Brooks, and I know I’m being asked to read the quote...
Dating Spider-Man: starting or ending a paragraph with a quotation.

An annoyance that’s closely connected to Armadillo Roadkill is the tendency writers sometimes have of starting or ending paragraphs with quotations. This isn’t technically wrong, and there are situations when the effect of surprise is what you’re going for. But often, a paragraph-beginning or paragraph-closing quotation feels rushed, unexplained, disjointed. It’s like dating Spider-Man. You’re walking along with him and he says something remarkably interesting—but then he tilts his head, hearing something far away, and suddenly shoots a web onto the nearest building and zooms away through the air. As if you had just read an interesting quotation dangling at the end of a paragraph, you wanted to hear more of his opinion, but it’s too late—he’s already moved on. Later, he suddenly jumps off a balcony and is by your side again, and he starts talking about something you don’t understand. You’re confused because he just dropped in and expected you to understand the context of what was on his mind at that moment, much like when readers step into a paragraph that begins with a quotation. Here’s an example:

[End of a preceding paragraph:] . . . Therefore, the evidence clearly suggests that we should be exceptionally careful about deciding when and where to rest. “When taking a nap, always rest your elbow on your desk rather skeptical (“he underestimates”). The sentence with the quotation itself also now begins with a “tag” that eases us into it (“he writes”).

Here’s an actual example from Alexsandra. Notice the way she builds up to the quotation and then explains it:

In the first two paragraphs, the author takes a defensive position when explaining the perception that the public has about scientists by saying that “there is anxiety that scientists lack both wisdom and social responsibility and are so motivated by ambition . . .” and “scientists are repeatedly referred to as ‘playing God’” (Wolpert 345). With this last sentence especially, his tone seems to demonstrate how he uses the ethos appeal to initially set a tone of someone that is tired of being misunderstood.

Alexsandra prepares us for the quotation, quotes, and then analyzes it. I love it. This isn’t a hard and fast rule—I’ve seen it broken by the best of writers, I admit—but it’s a wise standard to hold yourself to unless you have a reason not to.

Dating Spider-Man

An annoyance that’s closely connected to Armadillo Roadkill is the tendency writers sometimes have of starting or ending paragraphs with quotations. This isn’t technically wrong, and there are situations when the effect of surprise is what you’re going for. But often, a paragraph-beginning or paragraph-closing quotation feels rushed, unexplained, disjointed. It’s like dating Spider-Man. You’re walking along with him and he says something remarkably interesting—but then he tilts his head, hearing something far away, and suddenly shoots a web onto the nearest building and zooms away through the air. As if you had just read an interesting quotation dangling at the end of a paragraph, you wanted to hear more of his opinion, but it’s too late—he’s already moved on. Later, he suddenly jumps off a balcony and is by your side again, and he starts talking about something you don’t understand. You’re confused because he just dropped in and expected you to understand the context of what was on his mind at that moment, much like when readers step into a paragraph that begins with a quotation. Here’s an example:

[End of a preceding paragraph:] . . . Therefore, the evidence clearly suggests that we should be exceptionally careful about deciding when and where to rest. “When taking a nap, always rest your elbow on your desk
and keep your arm perpendicular to your desktop” (Piven and Borgenicht 98). After all, consider the following scenario. . . .

There’s a perfectly good reason why this feels odd—which should feel familiar after reading about the Armadillo Roadkill annoyance above. When you got to the quotation in the second paragraph, you didn’t know what you were supposed to think about it; there was no guidance.

The Fix is the same: in the majority of situations, readers appreciate being guided to and led away from a quotation by the writer doing the quoting. Readers get a sense of pleasure from the safe flow of hearing how to read an upcoming quotation, reading it, and then being told one way to interpret it. Prepare, quote, analyze.

I mentioned above that there can be situations where starting a paragraph with a quotation can have a strong effect. Personally, I usually enjoy this most at the beginning of essays or the beginning of sections—like in this example from the very beginning of Jennifer’s essay:

“Nothing is ever simple: Racism and nobility can exist in the same man, hate and love in the same woman, fear and loyalty, compromise and idealism, all the yin-yang dichotomies that make the human species so utterly confounding, yet so utterly fascinating” (Hunter). The hypocrisy and complexity that Stephen Hunter from the Washington Post describes is the basis of the movie Crash (2004).

Instantly, her quotation hooks me. It doesn’t feel thoughtless, like it would feel if I continued to be whisked to quotations without preparation throughout the essay. But please don’t overdo it; any quotation that opens an essay or section ought to be integrally related to your topic (as is Jennifer’s), not just a cheap gimmick.

Uncle Barry and His Encyclopedia of Useless Information

You probably know someone like this: a person (for me, my Uncle Barry) who constantly tries to impress me with how much he knows about just about everything. I might casually bring up something in the news (“Wow, these health care debates are getting really heated, aren’t they?”) and then find myself barraged by all of Uncle Barry’s ideas on government sponsored health care—which then drifts into a story about how his cousin Maxine died in an
underfunded hospice center, which had a parking lot that he could have designed better, which reminds him of how good he is at fixing things, just like the garage door at my parents' house, which probably only needs a little. . . . You get the idea. I might even think to myself, "Wait, I want to know more about that topic, but you're zooming on before you contextualize your information at all." This is something like reading an essay that relies too much on quotations. Readers get the feeling that they're moving from one quotation to the next without ever quite getting to hear the real point of what the author wants to say, never getting any time to form an opinion about the claims. In fact, this often makes it sound as if the author has almost no authority at all.

Addressing this issue, David M. Potter comments, "Whether Seward meant this literally or not, it was in fact a singularly accurate forecast for territorial Kansas" (199). Of course, Potter's view is contested, even though he claims, "Soon, the Missourians began to perceive the advantages of operating without publicity" (200). Interestingly, "The election was bound to be irregular in any case" (201).

Wait—huh? This author feels like Uncle Barry to me: grabbing right and left for topics (or quotes) in an effort to sound authoritative.

**The Fix** is to return to each quotation and decide why it's there and then massage it in accordingly. If you just want to use a quote to cite a fact, then consider paraphrasing or summarizing the source material (which I find is usually harder than it sounds but is usually worth it for the smoothness my paragraph gains). But if you quoted because you want to draw attention to the source's particular phrasing, or if you want to respond to something you agree with or disagree with in the source, then consider taking the time to surround each quotation with guidance to your readers about what you want them to think about that quote.

In the following passage, I think Jessica demonstrates a balance between source and analysis well. Notice that she only uses a single quotation, even though she surely could have chosen more. But instead, Jessica relies on her instincts and remains the primary voice of authority in the passage:

Robin Toner's article, "Feminist Pitch by a Democrat named Obama," was written a week after the video became public and is partially a response to it. She writes, "The Obama campaign is, in some ways, subtly marketing its candidate as a post-feminist man, a generation beyond the gender conflicts of the boomers." Subtly is the key word. Obama is a passive character throughout the video, never directly addressing the camera. Rather, he is shown indirectly through speeches, intimate conversations.
with supporters and candid interaction with family. This creates a sense of intimacy, which in turn creates a feeling of trust.

Toner’s response to the Obama video is like a diving board that Jessica bounces off of before she gets to the really interesting stuff: the pool (her own observations). A bunch of diving boards lined up without a pool (tons of quotes with no analysis) wouldn’t please anyone—except maybe Uncle Barry.

Am I in the Right Movie?

When reading drafts of my writing, this is a common experience: I start to read a sentence that seems interesting and normal, with everything going just the way I expect it to. But then the unexpected happens: a quotation blurs itself into the sentence in a way that doesn’t fit with the grammar that built up to quotation. It feels like sitting in a movie theater, everything going as expected, when suddenly the opening credits start for a movie I didn’t plan to see. Here are two examples of what I’m talking about. Read them out loud, and you’ll see how suddenly wrong they feel.

1. Therefore, the author warns that a zombie’s vision “are no different than those of a normal human” (Brooks 6).
2. Sheila Anne Barry advises that “Have you ever wondered what it’s like to walk on a tightrope—many feet up in the air?” (50)

In the first example, the quotter’s build-up to the quotation uses a singular subject—a zombie’s vision—which, when paired with the quotation, is annoyingly matched with the plural verb are. It would be much less jolting to write, “a zombie’s vision is,” which makes the subject and verb agree. In the second example, the quotter builds up to the quotation with a third-person, declarative independent clause: Sheila Anne Barry advises. But then the quotation switches into second person—you—and unexpectedly asks a question—completely different from the expectation that was built up by the first part of the sentence.

The Fix is usually easy: you read your essay out loud to someone else, and if you stumble as you enter a quotation, there’s probably something you can adjust in your lead-in sentence to make the two fit together well. Maybe you’ll need to choose a different subject to make it fit with the quote’s verb (reader instead of readers; each instead of all), or maybe you’ll have to scrap what you first wrote and start over. On occasion you’ll even feel the need to transparently modify the quotation by adding an [s] to one of its verbs, always being certain to use square
brackets to show that you adjusted something in the quotation. Maybe you’ll even find a way to quote a shorter part of the quotation and squeeze it into the context of a sentence that is mostly your own, a trick that can have a positive effect on readers, who like smooth water slides more than they like bumpy slip-and-slides. Jennifer does this well in the following sentence, for example:

In *Crash*, no character was allowed to “escape his own hypocrisy” (Muller), and the film itself emphasized that the reason there is so much racial tension among strangers is because of the personal issues one cannot deal with alone.

She saw a phrase that she liked in Muller’s article, so she found a way to work it in smoothly, without the need for a major break in her thought. Let’s put ourselves in Jennifer’s shoes for a moment: it’s possible that she started drafting this sentence using the plural subject *characters*, writing “In *Crash*, no characters were allowed. . . .” But then, imagine she looked back at the quote from Muller and saw that it said “escape his own hypocrisy,” which was a clue that she had to change the first part of her sentence to match the singular construction of the quote.

**I Can’t Find the Stupid Link**

You’ve been in this situation: you’re on a website that seems like it might be interesting and you want to learn more about it. But the home page doesn’t tell you much, so you look for an “About Us” or “More Information” or “FAQ” link. But no matter where you search—Top of page? Bottom? Left menu?—you can’t find the stupid link. This is usually the fault of web designers, who don’t always take the time to test their sites as much as they should with actual users. The communication failure here is simple: you’re used to finding certain kinds of basic information in the places people usually put it. If it’s not there, you’re annoyed.

Similarly, a reader might see a citation and have a quick internal question about it: *What journal was this published in? When was it published? Is this an article I could find online to skim myself? This author has a sexy last name—I wonder what his first name is?* Just like when you look for a link to more information, this reader has a simple, quick question that he or she expects to answer easily. And the most basic way for readers to answer those questions (when they’re reading a work written in APA or MLA style) is (1) to look at the information in the
citation, and (2) skim the references or works cited section alphabetically, looking for the first letter in the citation. There's an assumption that the first letter of a citation will be the letter to look for in the list of works cited.

In short, the following may annoy readers who want to quickly learn more about the citation:

[Essay Text] A respected guide on the subject suggests, "If possible, always take the high ground and hold it" (The Zombie Survival Guide 135).


The reader may wonder when The Zombie Survival Guide was published and flip back to the works cited page, but the parenthetical citation sends her straight to the Z's in the works cited list (because initial A's and The's are ignored when alphabetizing). However, the complete works cited entry is actually with the B's (where it belongs).

The Fix is to make sure that the first word of the works cited entry is the word you use in your in-text citation, every time. If the works cited entry starts with Brooks, use (Brooks) in the essay text.

Citations not including last names may seem to complicate this advice, but they all follow the same basic concept. For instance, you might have:

- **A citation that only lists a title.** For instance, your citation might read ("Gray Wolf General Information"). In this case, the assumption is that the citation can be found under the G section of the works cited page. Leah cites her paraphrase of a source with no author in the following way, indicating that I should head to the G's if I want to learn more about her source:

  Alaska is the only refuge that is left for the wolves in the United States, and once that is gone, they will more than likely become extinct in this country ("Gray Wolf General Information").

- **A citation that only lists a page number.** Maybe the citation simply says (25). That implies that somewhere in the surrounding text, the essay writer must have made it stupendously clear what name or title to look up in the works cited list. This happens a lot, since it's common to introduce a quotation by naming the person it came from, in which case it would be repetitive to name that author again in the citation.

- **A quotation without a citation at all.** This happens when you cite a work that is both A) from a web page that doesn't number the pages or paragraphs and B) is named in the text surrounding the quotation. Readers will
I Swear I Did Some Research!

Let’s look in depth at this potentially annoying passage from a hypothetical student paper:

It’s possible that a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the universe will open new doors of understanding. If theories from sociology, communication, and philosophy joined with physics, the possibilities would be boundless. This would inspire new research, much like in the 1970s when scientists changed their focus from grand-scale theories of the universe to the small concerns of quantum physics (Hawking 51).

In at least two ways, this is stellar material. First, the author is actually voicing a point of view; she sounds knowledgeable, strong. Second, and more to the point of this chapter, the author includes a citation, showing that she knows that ethical citation standards ask authors to cite paraphrases and summaries—not just quotations.

But on the other hand, which of these three sentences, exactly, came from Hawking’s book? Did Hawking claim that physics experts should join up with folks in other academic disciplines, or is that the student writer? In other words, at which point does the author’s point of view meld into material taken specifically from Hawking?

I recognize that there often aren’t clean answers to a question like that. What we read and what we know sometimes meld together so unnoticeably that we don’t know which ideas and pieces of information are “ours” and which aren’t. Discussing “patchwriting,” a term used to describe writing that blends words and phrases from sources with words and phrases we came up with ourselves, scholar Rebecca Moore Howard writes, “When I believe I am not patchwriting, I am simply doing it so expertly that the seams are no longer visible—or I am
doing it so unwittingly that I cannot cite my sources” (91). In other words, all the moves we make when writing came from somewhere else at some point, whether we realize it or not. Yikes. But remember our main purpose here: to not look annoying when using sources. And most of your instructors aren’t going to say, “I understand that I couldn’t tell the difference between your ideas and your source’s because we quite naturally patchwrite all the time. That’s fine with me. Party on!” They’re much more likely to imagine that you plopped in a few extra citations as a way of defensively saying, “I swear I did some research! See? Here’s a citation right here! Doesn’t that prove I worked really hard?”

**The Fix:** Write the sentences preceding the citation with specific words and phrases that will tell readers what information came from where. Like this (bolded words are new):

It’s possible that a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the universe will open new doors of understanding. I **believe that** if theories from sociology, communication, and philosophy joined with physics, the possibilities would be boundless. This would inspire new research, **much like the changes Stephen Hawking describes happening** in the 1970s when scientists changed their focus from grand-scale theories of the universe to the small concerns of quantum physics (51).

Perhaps these additions could still use some stylistic editing for wordiness and flow, but the source-related job is done: readers know exactly which claims the essay writer is making and which ones Hawking made in his book. The last sentence and only the last sentence summarizes the ideas Hawking describes on page 51 of his book.

One warning: you’ll find that scholars in some disciplines (especially in the sciences and social sciences) use citations in the way I just warned you to avoid. You might see sentences like this one, from page 64 of Glenn Gordon Smith, Ana T. Torres-Ayala, and Allen J. Heindel’s article in the *Journal of Distance Education*:

Some researchers have suggested “curriculum” as a key element in the design of web-based courses (Berge, 1998; Driscoll, 1998; Meyen, Tangen, & Lian, 1999; Wiens & Gunter, 1998)

Whoa—that’s a lot of citations. Remember how the writer of my earlier example cited Stephen Hawking because she summarized his ideas? Well, a number of essays describing the results of experiments, like this one, use citations with a different purpose, citing previous studies whose general conclusions support the study described in this new paper, like building blocks. It’s like saying to your potentially skeptical readers, “Look, you might be wondering if I’m a quack. But I can prove I’m not! See, all these other people published in similar areas! Are you
going to pick fights with all of them too?" You might have noticed as well that these citations are in APA format, reflecting the standards of the social sciences journal this passage was published in. Well, in this kind of context APA’s requirement to cite the year of a study makes a lot of sense too—after all, the older a study, the less likely it is to still be relevant.

CONCLUSION: USE YOUR TURN SIGNALS

You may have guessed the biggest weakness in an essay like this: what’s annoying varies from person to person, with some readers happily skimming past awkward introductions to quotations without a blink, while others see a paragraph-opening quotation as something to complain about on Facebook. All I’ve given you here—all I can give you unless I actually get to know you and your various writing contexts—are the basics that will apply in a number of academic writing contexts. Think of these as signals to your readers about your intentions, much as wise drivers rely on their turn signals to communicate their intentions to other drivers. In some cases when driving, signaling is an almost artistic decision, relying on the gut reaction of the driver to interpret what is best in times when the law doesn’t mandate use one way or the other. I hope your writing is full of similar signals. Now if I could only convince the guy driving in front of me to use his blinker....

DISCUSSION

1. Because so many of these guidelines depend on the writer’s purpose, publication space, and audience, it can be difficult to know when to follow them strictly and when to bend them. What are some specific writing situations where a writer is justified to bend the standards of how to incorporate sources?
2. Choose one of the annoyances. Then, look through a number of different pieces of writing from different genres and collect two examples of writers who followed your chosen guideline perfectly and two who didn’t. For each source you found, jot a sentence or two describing the context of that source and why you think its writer did or did not follow the guideline.
3. Rank the annoyances in order of most annoying to least annoying, pretending that you are a college professor. Now, rank them from the point of view of a newspaper editor, a popular blogger, and another college student. What changes did you make in your rankings?
Works Cited


Patterns of organization can help your readers follow the ideas within your essay and your paragraphs, but they can also work as methods of development to help you recognize and further develop ideas and relationships in your writing. Here are some strategies that can help you with both organization and development in your essays.

MAJOR PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

Read the following sentences:

1. Now take the pie out of the oven and let it cool on the stovetop.
2. Mix the dry ingredients with the liquid ingredients.
3. Set the pie crust aside while you make the filling.

How did it feel to read the above list? A bit confusing, I would guess. That's because the steps for making a pie were not well organized, and the steps don't include enough detail for us to know exactly what we should do. (Like what are the dry and liquid ingredients?) We all know that starting instructions from the beginning and giving each detailed step in the order it should happen is vital to having a good outcome, in this case a yummy pie! But it's not always so simple to know how to organize or develop ideas, and sometimes there's more than one way, which complicates things even further.

First, let's take a look at a couple of ways to think about organization.

General to Specific or Specific to General

It might be useful to think about organizing your topic like a triangle:
The first triangle represents starting with the most general, big picture information first, moving then to more detailed and often more personal information later in the paper. The second triangle represents an organizational structure that starts with the specific, small-scale information first and then moves to the more global, big picture stuff.

For example, if your topic is air pollution in Portland, Oregon, an essay that uses the general-to-specific organizational structure might begin this way:

Many people consider Portland, Oregon, to be an environmentally friendly, pollution-free place to live. They would be shocked to know how many pollutants are in the air causing a multitude of health problems in Portland's citizens.

An essay that uses the specific-to-general structure might start like this:

When Nancy moved to Portland, Oregon, with her husband and two kids, she expected to find a clean, pollution-free city. She was shocked and angered when her daughter was diagnosed with asthma caused by air pollution.

What's the difference between these two introductions? And how might they appeal to the intended audience for this essay (Portland voters) in different ways? The first introduction is looking at the big picture of the problem and mentions pollution's impact on all citizens in Portland, while the second introduction focuses on one specific family. The first helps readers see how vast the problem really is, and the second helps connect readers to a real family, making an emotional appeal from the very beginning. Neither introduction is necessar-
ily better. You’ll choose one over the other based on the kind of tone you’d like to create and how you’d like to affect your audience. It’s completely up to you to make this decision.

**Does the Triangle Mean the Essay Keeps Getting More Specific or More Broad until the Very End?**

The triangle is kind of a general guide, meaning you’re allowed to move around within it all you want. For example, it’s possible that each of your paragraphs will be its own triangle, starting with the general or specific and moving out or in. However, if you begin very broadly, it might be effective to end your essay in a more specific, personal way. And if you begin with a personal story, consider ending your essay by touching on the global impact and importance of your topic.

**Are There Other Ways to Think about Organizing My Ideas?**

Yes! Rather than thinking about which of your ideas are most specific or personal or which are more broad or universal, you might consider one of the following ways of organizing your ideas:

- Most important information first (consider what you want readers to focus on first)
- Chronological order (the order in time that events take place)
- Compare and contrast (ideas are organized together because of their relationship to each other)

The section on Methods of Development, below, offers more detail about some of these organizational patterns, along with some others.

**Exercise**

Choose one of the following topics, and practice writing a few opening sentences like we did above, once using the general-to-specific format and once using the specific-to-general. Which do you like better? What audience would be attracted to which one? Share with peers to see how others tackled this challenge. How would you rewrite their sentences? Why? Discuss your changes and listen to how your peers have revised your sentences. Taking in other people’s ideas will help you see new ways to approach your own writing and thinking.

Topics:
1. Facing fears
2. Safety in sports
3. Community policing
4. Educating prisoners
5. Sex education
6. A book or movie that impacted you
7. One thing you would change about your community
8. Beauty standards
9. Toxic masculinity
10. How the media affects identity formation
11. Gender roles
12. Race in America
13. The value of art in society
14. Travel as part of a well-rounded education
15. Drugs and alcohol
16. Advice to new parents
17. Advice to teachers
18. The value of making mistakes
19. How you’d spend a million dollars
20. What a tough day at work taught you about yourself or others.

**METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT**

The methods of development covered here are best used as ways to look at what’s already happening in your draft and to consider how you might emphasize or expand on any existing patterns. You might already be familiar with some of these patterns because teachers will sometimes assign them as the purpose for writing an essay. For example, you might have been asked to write a cause-and-effect essay or a comparison-and-contrast essay.

It’s important to emphasize here that patterns of organization or methods of developing content usually happen naturally as a consequence of the way the writer engages with and organizes information while writing. That is to say, most writers don’t sit down and say, “I think I’ll write a cause-and-effect essay today.” Instead, a writer might be more likely to be interested in a topic, say, the state of drinking water in the local community, and as the writer begins to explore the topic, certain cause-and-effect relationships between environmental pollutants and the community water supply may begin to emerge.

So if these patterns just occur naturally in writing, what’s the use in knowing about them? Well, sometimes you might be revising a draft and notice that some of your paragraphs are a bit underdeveloped. Maybe they lack a clear
topic, or maybe they lack support. In either case, you can look to these common methods of development to find ways to sharpen those vague topics or to add support where needed. Do you have a clear cause statement somewhere but you haven’t explored the effects? Are you lacking detail somewhere where a narrative story or historical chronology can help build reader interest and add support? Are you struggling to define an idea that might benefit from some comparison or contrast? Read on to consider some of the ways that these strategies can help you in revision. And if you want to learn more, check out what the New York Times has to say in their learning blog article, “Compare-Contrast, Cause-Effect, Problem Solution: Common ‘Text Types’ in The Times.”

Cause and Effect (or Effect and Cause)

Do you see a potential cause-and-effect relationship developing in your draft? The cause-and-effect pattern may be used to identify one or more causes followed by one or more effects or results. Or you may reverse this sequence and describe effects first and then the cause or causes. For example, the causes of water pollution might be followed by its effects on both humans and animals. You may use obvious transitions to clarify cause and effect, such as “What are the results? Here are some of them...” or you might simply use the words cause, effect, and result, to cue the reader about your about the relationships that you’re establishing.

Problem-Solution

At some point does your essay explore a problem or suggest a solution? The problem-solution pattern is commonly used in identifying something that’s wrong and in contemplating what might be done to remedy the situation. There are probably more ways to organize a problem-solution approach, but here are three possibilities:

- Describe the problem, followed by the solution.
- Propose the solution first and then describe the problems that motivated it.

Here’s an example article from the New York Times, “Rough Times Take Bloom Off a New Year’s Rite, the Rose Parade,” that explores the cause and effect relationship (from 2011) between Pasadena’s budgetary challenges and the ability of their Rose Parade floats to deck themselves out in full bloom.
Here’s an example article from the New York Times, “Monks Embrace Web to Reach Recruits,” that highlights an unexpected approach by a group of Benedictine monks in Rhode Island; they’ve turned to social media to grow their dwindling membership. Monks on Facebook? Who knew?

Chronology or Narrative

Do you need to develop support for a topic where telling a story can illustrate some important concept for your readers? Material arranged chronologically is explained as it occurs in time. A chronological or narrative method of development might help you find a way to add both interest and content to your essay. Material arranged chronologically is explained as it occurs in time. This pattern may be used to establish what has happened. Chronology or narrative can be a great way to introduce your essay by providing a background or history behind your topic. Or you may want to tell a story to develop one or more points in the body of your essay. You can use transitional words like then, next, and finally to make the parts of the chronology clear.

Comparison and Contrast

Are you trying to define something? Do you need your readers to understand what something is and what it is not? The comparison-and-contrast method of development is particularly useful in extending a definition, or any-
Savers to Spenders: How Children Became a Consumer Market. To encourage his readers to think about why and how children are being marketed to by advertisers, the author uses a historical chronology of how the spending habits of children changed over a number of decades.

Here’s an example article from the New York Times: “Who Wants to Shop in a Big Box Store, Anyway?” The author explores some interesting differences between the average American and average Indian consumer to contemplate the potential success of big box stores in India and also to contemplate why these giant big box corporations, like Walmart

where you need to show how a subject is like or unlike another subject. For example, the statement is often made that drug abuse is a medical problem instead of a criminal justice issue. An author might attempt to prove this point by comparing drug addiction to AIDS, cancer, or heart disease to redefine the term “addiction” as a medical problem. A statement in opposition to this idea could just as easily establish contrast by explaining all the ways that addiction is different from what we traditionally understand as an illness. In seeking to establish comparison or contrast in your writing, some words or terms that might be useful are by contrast, in comparison, while, some, and others.

These four methods of development—cause and effect, problem-solution, chronology or narrative, and comparison and contrast—are just a few ways to organize and develop ideas and content in your essays. It’s important to note that they should not be a starting point for writers who want to write something authentic—something that they care deeply about. Instead, they can be a great way to help you look for what’s already happening with your topic or in a draft, to help you to write more, or to help you reorganize some parts of an essay that seem to lack connection or feel disjointed. Look for organiza-
or Target, might have to rethink their business model.

Notice where they combine strategies (e.g., a problem-solution pattern that uses cause-and-effect organization, or a comparison-contrast pattern that uses narrative or chronology to develop similarities or differences). Pay attention to how different writers emphasize and develop their main ideas, and use what you find to inspire you in your own writing. Better yet, work on developing completely new patterns of your own.

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- Patterns of Organization – Triangles by Carol Burnell, Jaime Wood, Monique Babin, Susan Pesznecker, and Nicole Rosevear
Transitions and Organization

JENN KEPKA

As we’ve discussed, the major purpose of writing is to communicate with an audience. Keeping that in mind means everything we do when writing a paper must be done for the benefit of whomever is reading. That’s hard; it means that sometimes, things that look perfectly fine to us or sound OK out loud will need to be changed because other people bring different ideas and demands to our writing.

It also means that we need to go out of our way to be helpful to anyone who’s sitting down to read our work. Every step of the writing process is built to help readers, from the title — which tells them what they’re getting in to — to the conclusion, which reminds them what they’ve read. Along the way, we use other organizational signs to let the reader know what’s going on.

Whenever we pause to signal the reader about what’s about to happen, we use a transitional word or phrase. Transitions are simply brief, common signals that are put in place for the reader. They are often one of the final things that a writer will edit and add in a paper.

The most common place to find transitions is at the beginning or end of a paragraph. In an essay, transitions signal that one piece of a paper is coming to a close or that a new section is about to start. Common transition lines include:

- First, we have to consider...
- A second point in favor of this proposal is...
- The next day, I started...
- Finally, I want to make clear...

Transitions often help provide a logical order to a piece. Logical order means that the writer has made decisions about how to organize the essay that they’re writing. If, for instance, I decided to write a paper about the ways to be a good student, I could likely think of dozens, maybe even hundreds, of pieces of advice. However, to write an essay, I would need to narrow that down, and then I’d probably want to list my top 3 (or 5, or 10) reasons in an order that would make sense to my reader. That’s what it means to put a paper in logical order. Every time you see a Top Ten list online, that writer has used logical order to organize her paper.
Transitions signal that logical order by reminding the reader where we are in the list. First, Second, Third, Fifth, Last, etc. all tell my reader what kind of progress she's making. These words are small but important.

We also use transitions to show changes in time or location. For instance, in a narrative essay, you might want to let the reader know that you're going to jump ahead from your first swimming lesson as a four-year-old to your gold-medal-winning competition at the 2025 Olympics. When you write, “Fifteen years later, I put on my Speedos and started to climb the pool ladder,” that date at the beginning of your sentence is a clear transition. Without it, the reader will be lost (and wondering what a four-year-old is doing in a Speedo swimsuit).

When a piece is written in time order, we say it uses chronological order to organize itself. Transitions are vital to chronological order; without them, your hopelessly reader won’t know whether an hour or a day has passed.

Transitions also can signal to the reader that we’re about to encounter a different kind of information. For example, if I’m in the middle of providing facts about why everyone should wear a seatbelt, and I decide that a story is necessary to keep the reader’s attention, I might say, “Let’s consider an example.” This tells my reader that I’m moving from the lecture to the story.

Signals like this are important because readers tackle different parts of our writing with different levels of attention. They also help a reader figure out where a main idea, a supporting idea, or a minor detail might be happening in a piece. If you’ve ever had to read and analyze a text, looking for a main idea, you know that words like “First,” and “Finally” often signal that a major point is being made, while a tag like “For example” means that something smaller, an illustration or a detail, is about to be shared.

Use these signposts in your own writing to keep readers interested and focused.

**Special Cases**

Some kinds of writing require special transitions. For example, as we’ve already discussed, narrative writing will require the use of time transitions in nearly every case. You’ve got to name a time and give hints about the duration of an event when telling a story.

Example Writing also requires the use of transitions. Because Example (also called Exemplification or Illustration) writing uses logical organization, you’ll find that ordinal numbers are key to providing clear transitions. (Ordinal Numbers are numbers that demonstrate an order, or a position: First, Second, Third, Fourth, and etc.).
Comparison or Contrast writing requires a writer to provide transitions not just at the start of paragraphs but also within the text. In fact, in Comparisons, transitions carry the meaning of the paper. They are more than just organization: they actually tell your reader what you mean.

For example, if I’m comparing Tuesday and Wednesday, then I’ll need to use comparison transition words when talking about them. I might write:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday is the second day of the week, and Wednesday is the third day.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Without a comparison word, that’s a boring sentence that tells my reader almost nothing. So, instead, I could add a transition phrase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday is the second day of the week, unlike Wednesday, which is the third day.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Yeah, still boring, but that’s because my topic is bad. At least now my reader knows that I’m saying this is a big difference between Tuesday and Wednesday.

**Transition Word Resources**

You can find great lists of comparison words in nearly every substantial grammar book and resource. I’ve listed a few below.

- Michigan State University, credited to Professors Gregory M. Campbell, Michael Buckoff, and John A. Dowell: “Transition Words” (permalink: [https://perma.cc/9TCJ-H4WP](https://perma.cc/9TCJ-H4WP)).
  - This is an excellent resource with dozens of common transition words listed. The words are divided into different types/uses of transitional words and phrases.

- Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL):
  - This is a brief listing of the most common college-level transition words: “Transitional Devices” (permalink: [https://perma.cc/6BVY-KUEG](https://perma.cc/6BVY-KUEG)).
is also a short explanation reading about using transitions (permalink: https://perma.cc/B2FK-K2AL).

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Developing Relationships Between Ideas

MONIQUE BABIN, CAROL BURNELL, SUSAN PESZNECKER, NICOLE ROSEVEAR, AND JAIME WOOD

So you have a main idea, and you have supporting ideas, but how can you be sure that your readers will understand the relationships between them? How are the ideas tied to each other? One way to emphasize these relationships is through the use of clear transitions between ideas. Like every other part of your essay, transitions have a job to do. They form logical connections between the ideas presented in an essay or paragraph, and they give readers clues that reveal how you want them to think about (process, organize, or use) the topics presented.

WHY ARE TRANSITIONS IMPORTANT?

Transitions signal the order of ideas, highlight relationships, unify concepts, and let readers know what’s coming next or remind them about what’s already been covered. When instructors or peers comment that your writing is choppy, abrupt, or needs to “flow better,” those are some signals that you might need to work on building some better transitions into your writing. If a reader comments that she’s not sure how something relates to your thesis or main idea, a transition is probably the right tool for the job.

WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO BUILD IN TRANSITIONS?

There’s no right answer to this question. Sometimes transitions occur spontaneously, but just as often (or maybe even more often) good transitions are devel-
oped in revision. While drafting, we often write what we think, sometimes without much reflection about how the ideas fit together or relate to one another. If your thought process jumps around a lot (and that's okay), it's more likely that you will need to pay careful attention to reorganization and to providing solid transitions as you revise.

When you're working on building transitions into an essay, consider the essay's overall organization. Consider using reverse outlining and other organizational strategies presented in this text to identify key ideas in your essay and to get a clearer look at how the ideas can be best organized. See the “Reverse Outlining” section in the “Revision” portion of this text, for a great strategy to help you assess what's going on in your essay and to help you see what topics and organization are developing. This can help you determine where transitions are needed.

Let's take some time to consider the importance of transitions at the sentence level and transitions between paragraphs.

**SENTENCE-LEVEL TRANSITIONS**

Transitions between sentences often use “connecting words” to emphasize relationships between one sentence and another. A friend and coworker suggests the “something old something new” approach, meaning that the idea behind a transition is to introduce *something new* while connecting it to *something old* from an earlier point in the essay or paragraph. Here are some examples of ways that writers use connecting words (highlighted with red text and italicized) to show connections between ideas in adjacent sentences:

**To Show Similarity**

When I was growing up, my mother taught me to say "please" and “thank you” as one small way that I could show appreciation and respect for others. *In the same way,* I have tried to impress the importance of manners on my own children.

Other connecting words that show similarity include *also, similarly,* and *likewise.*

**To Show Contrast**

Some scientists take the existence of black holes for granted; *however,* in 2014,
a physicist at the University of North Carolina claimed to have mathematically proven that they do not exist.

Other connecting words that show contrast include *in spite of, on the other hand, in contrast*, and *yet*.

**To Exemplify**

The cost of college tuition is higher than ever, so students are becoming increasingly motivated to keep costs as low as possible. *For example*, a rising number of students are signing up to spend their first two years at a less costly community college before transferring to a more expensive four-year school to finish their degrees.

Other connecting words that show example include *for instance, specifically, and to illustrate*.

**To Show Cause and Effect**

Where previously painters had to grind and mix their own dry pigments with linseed oil inside their studios, in the 1840s, new innovations in pigments allowed paints to be premixed in tubes. *Consequently*, this new technology facilitated the practice of painting outdoors and was a crucial tool for impressionist painters, such as Monet, Cezanne, Renoir, and Cassatt.

Other connecting words that show cause and effect include *therefore, so, and thus*.

**To Show Additional Support**

When choosing a good trail bike, experts recommend 120–140 millimeters of suspension travel; that’s the amount that the frame or fork is able to flex or compress. *Additionally*, they recommend a 67–69 degree head-tube angle, as a steeper head-tube angle allows for faster turning and climbing.

Other connecting words that show additional support include *also, besides, equally important, and in addition*.

**A WORD OF CAUTION**

Single-word or short-phrase transitions can be helpful to signal a shift in ideas.
within a paragraph, rather than between paragraphs (see the discussion below about transitions between paragraphs). But it's also important to understand that these types of transitions shouldn't be frequent within a paragraph. As with anything else that happens in your writing, they should be used when they feel natural and feel like the right choice. Here are some examples to help you see the difference between transitions that feel like they occur naturally and transitions that seem forced and make the paragraph awkward to read:

**Too Many Transitions:** The Impressionist painters of the late 19th century are well known for their visible brush strokes, for their ability to convey a realistic sense of light, and for their everyday subjects portrayed in outdoor settings. *In spite of this fact*, many casual admirers of their work are unaware of the scientific innovations that made it possible this movement in art to take place. *Then*, in 1841, an American painter named John Rand invented the collapsible paint tube. *To illustrate the importance of this invention*, pigments previously had to be ground and mixed in a fairly complex process that made it difficult for artists to travel with them. *For example*, the mixtures were commonly stored in pieces of pig bladder to keep the paint from drying out. *In addition*, when working with their palettes, painters had to puncture the bladder, squeeze out some paint, and then mend the bladder again to keep the rest of the paint mixture from drying out. *Thus*, Rand’s collapsible tube freed the painters from these cumbersome and messy processes, allowing artists to be more mobile and to paint in the open air.

**Subtle Transitions that Aid Reader Understanding:** The Impressionist painters of the late 19th century are well known for their visible brush strokes, for their ability to convey a realistic sense of light, and for their everyday subjects portrayed in outdoor settings. *However*, many casual admirers of their work are unaware of the scientific innovations that made it possible for this movement in art to take place. In 1841, an American painter named John Rand invented the collapsible paint tube. *Before this invention*, pigments had to be ground and mixed in a fairly complex process that made it difficult for artists to travel with them. The mixtures were commonly stored in pieces of pig bladder to keep the paint from drying out. When working with their palettes, painters had to puncture the bladder, squeeze out some paint, and then mend the bladder again to keep the rest of the paint mixture from drying out. Rand’s collapsible tube freed the painters from these cumbersome and messy processes, allowing artists to be more mobile and to paint in the open air.
TRANSITIONS BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS AND SECTIONS

It's important to consider how to emphasize the relationships not just between sentences but also between paragraphs in your essay. Here are a few strategies to help you show your readers how the main ideas of your paragraphs relate to each other and also to your thesis.

Use Signposts

Signposts are words or phrases that indicate where you are in the process of organizing an idea; for example, signposts might indicate that you are introducing a new concept, that you are summarizing an idea, or that you are concluding your thoughts. Some of the most common signposts include words and phrases like first, then, next, finally, in sum, and in conclusion. Be careful not to overuse these types of transitions in your writing. Your readers will quickly find them tiring or too obvious. Instead, think of more creative ways to let your readers know where they are situated within the ideas presented in your essay. You might say, “The first problem with this practice is...” Or you might say, “The next thing to consider is...” Or you might say, “Some final thoughts about this topic are...”

Use Forward-Looking Sentences at the End of Paragraphs

Sometimes, as you conclude a paragraph, you might want to give your readers a hint about what's coming next. For example, imagine that you're writing an essay about the benefits of trees to the environment and you've just wrapped up a paragraph about how trees absorb pollutants and provide oxygen. You might conclude with a forward-looking sentence like this: “Trees benefits to local air quality are important, but surely they have more to offer our communities than clean air.” This might conclude a paragraph (or series of paragraphs) and then prepare your readers for additional paragraphs to come that cover the topics of trees' shade value and ability to slow water evaporation on hot summer days. This transitional strategy can be tricky to employ smoothly. Make sure that the conclusion of your paragraph doesn't sound like you're leaving your readers hanging with the introduction of a completely new or unrelated topic.

Use Backward-Looking Sentences at the Beginning of Paragraphs

Rather than concluding a paragraph by looking forward, you might instead begin a paragraph by looking back. Continuing with the example above of an
essay about the value of trees, let’s think about how we might begin a new paragraph or section by first taking a moment to look back. Maybe you just concluded a paragraph on the topic of trees’ ability to decrease soil erosion and you’re getting ready to talk about how they provide habitats for urban wildlife. Beginning the opening of a new paragraph or section of the essay with a backward-looking transition might look something like this: “While their benefits to soil and water conservation are great, the value that trees provide to our urban wildlife also cannot be overlooked.”

**EVALUATE TRANSITIONS FOR PREDICTABILITY OR CONSPICUOUSNESS**

Finally, the most important thing about transitions is that you don’t want them to become repetitive or too obvious. Reading your draft aloud is a great revision strategy for so many reasons, and revising your essay for transitions is no exception to this rule. If you read your essay aloud, you’re likely to hear the areas that sound choppy or abrupt. This can help you make note of areas where transitions need to be added. Repetition is another problem that can be easier to spot if you read your essay aloud. If you notice yourself using the same transitions over and over again, take time to find some alternatives. And if the transitions frequently stand out as you read aloud, you may want to see if you can find some subtler strategies.

**EXERCISE: TRY OUT SOME NEW TRANSITION STRATEGIES**

Choose an essay or piece of writing, either that you’re currently working on, or that you’ve written in the past. Identify your major topics or main ideas. Then, using this chapter, develop at least three examples of sentence-level transitions and at least two examples of paragraph-level transitions. Share and discuss with your classmates in small groups, and choose one example of each type from your group to share with the whole class. If you like the results, you might use them to revise your writing. If not, try some other strategies.
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Providing Good Feedback

JENN KEPKA

Think about the most helpful feedback you’ve ever received from a teacher, a coach, a parent, or a friend. What did they tell you? How did they phrase it? Why did you believe what they were saying?

In general, we accept feedback best from people we trust because we believe they have our best interests at heart. In a college class where the faces around you change frequently, it’s hard to develop that level of trust. So in peer review, we have to create credibility — that’s trustworthiness — through a process of Restating, Praising, and Criticizing.

RESTATING

The first step in providing good peer feedback is to prove to your peer that you’ve actually read and tried to understand her writing. If you’ve ever been through peer review before, you know that receiving feedback where the reader has completely missed your point is discouraging; it’s also hard when someone else doesn’t seem to have paid much attention to what you’re saying.

To show a writer that we’re on her side, we can restate her main idea (also known as her thesis or topic sentence). This will show that we’ve read the piece and tried our best to understand what the writer wanted to say — not what we wanted to hear, but what she was trying to say.

To provide a good restatement of the piece, follow these steps:

1. Read the piece at least twice.
   - On your first read, don’t pause to highlight or make notes or mark mistakes — just read to see what’s going on.
   - On the second read, start to mark places where...
you have questions, places that you particularly like, or places where you’re sure some fix is needed.

2. After you’ve read the piece, get a separate piece of paper and, without looking, write down a sentence or two that sums up what you think is the author’s main point.

  ◦ Try to complete this sentence: I thought your major point was ______________.
  ◦ Sometimes, in an early draft, it can be hard to nail down a precise main point. In this case, try to put yourself in the writer’s shoes, and think, “What do I think they most want to say in this whole thing?” Then fill in this sentence: The point I think you want to make here is __________, though you also spend time saying __________ and/or ______________.

You may need to complete this process more than once just to feel secure that you understand what the piece is saying. That’s great! That means you really are working with the paper, and your peer will appreciate your efforts.

If you provide peer feedback in person, this is also a valuable place to start. Think how much nicer it would be to have someone say, “What I thought you were writing about was ________” rather than just having him jump in with criticism.

**GIVING POSITIVE FEEDBACK (PRAISE, OR WHAT’S WORKING)**

We tend to focus on what’s going wrong in a paper because, as writers and students, we want to know what to fix as we go through the revision process. However, most good feedback will include a section on what’s actually working in a paper, too. Positive feedback encourages a writer in a couple of ways:
• It shows him/her that the reviewer isn’t just “out to get me.”
• It can demonstrate some patterns or habits that are worth repeating. For example, if someone says, “I thought your transitions were well done,” you can be prepared to add more and use them more confidently in the next paper.
• It builds credibility for the reviewer by providing feedback a reader is more likely to agree with before providing critical comments.

However, positive feedback is only useful if it’s specific. Think how nice it is to see “Good job!” written on top of a paper — and then think about how useless that comment is if you really want to fix the paper. What do I do when I get a “good work!” comment? I probably just turn the paper in without any more revision.

Good, positive feedback should give the writer somewhere to go. It should encourage by making clear points about what’s working, where, and why. So instead of saying, “I thought this was funny!”, a good comment might say, “The way you turn the words around in the second paragraph so it’s almost like a tongue-twister was funny, and the dialogue in the third paragraph made me laugh out loud.” The writer can look at these and go, a-ha! I’m funny. I should add more like those two.

**To provide useful positive feedback:**

1. Number the paragraphs (in a longer work) or sentences (in a one-paragraph or one-page work) in the piece you’re reading so you can refer to them easily.
2. Provide two or three one-sentence comments that point out things the writer has done that were interesting, clever, funny, surprising, smart, or lovely.
   - Don’t just look for funny jokes or big words (although complimenting the vocabulary of a section is a good piece of feedback!). Also consider how the writer uses detail, whether the story is believable (and why or how), if the title is informative, if the overall question being answered is creative, if the answer the student
gives to the question of the assignment is unexpected, if the organization is clear, and if the introduction and/or conclusion are particularly strong.

3. Always keep your focus on the idea of helpful feedback. Letting someone know they’ve chosen a nice font isn’t helpful, but letting her know that you like the places she’s chosen to break up her paragraphs will be!

GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK (CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM)

Some writers struggle with giving negative feedback at all; others want to dive right in and provide only criticism. A balance of these two instincts is necessary in order to give useful feedback.

Think, again, about helpful feedback you’ve received in the past; now, think of a time when you received criticism that wasn’t helpful. Generally, writers respond to bad, negative feedback in one of two ways: 1). “How DARE you insult my beloved work? I’m not listening to ANYTHING you have to say!” or 2). “You’re sooooo right, it’s terrible, it’s all trash, I’m throwing the whole thing away and starting over, or maybe I’ll just give up!”

The results are the same: no revision is completed. Since the entire point of getting peer feedback is to get good ideas to help you revise, bad feedback is bad for the process.

To give the best critical feedback, then, reviewers must remember that the writer should be able to act on whatever you say. That means no bland, vague statements. If someone writes, “I just didn’t like it,” on a paper, there’s not much I (the writer) can do with that, other than cry or plot revenge. If, instead, someone writes, “I didn’t like paragraph 2 because it felt like the voice changed completely from the rest of the story,” then I can act on that. I can look at paragraph 2 and make changes.
Here are a few tips for providing good critical feedback:

1. Be specific. State where problems are found by line number or paragraph number. Quote or re-write sentences that need to be edited and show the problems clearly.
2. Ask questions. There’s a huge difference between saying “I got lost in paragraph 2” and “What did you mean by ____ in paragraph 2?” The second one gives the writer something to do — she can answer that question and fix the paragraph.
3. Limit yourself to a reasonable number of critical comments. Aim for an equal ratio of negative to positive feedback.
   - This isn’t just an ego-saver! If a paper is in such an early draft that you can only find 2 positive things to say, the author probably doesn’t need a pile of criticism yet.
4. Be aware of the goals the writer had for the piece. Make sure you aren’t trying to get him/her to say something you like instead of letting him/her say what s/he likes.
5. Don’t critique spelling, grammar, or punctuation unless you are an expert.
   - Colleges provide resources to help with mechanical errors, so don’t pretend to be an expert in commas if you aren’t one. It’s easier to get someone else more confused than it is to be really helpful.
   - Also, remember the writer may still need to rewrite and to do a final edit, so picking out every single spelling mistake might not be the best use
of your time (unless the writer asks you to).

Finally, as a general guideline, don't write anything you wouldn't say to the writer face-to-face. Always sign your name to anything you write on, as well, so that the writer can follow up if she has questions.
Receiving Feedback

JENN KEPKA

This is the hard part. It’s difficult enough to acknowledge to ourselves that things are wrong with our own work; it can feel worse when we have to hand over a recently written draft to someone we don’t yet know very well. *What if they don’t like it? What if they laugh in the wrong place? What if they don’t know what they’re doing? What if they take this last-minute draft and assume that I’m a terrible writer?*

This is the second benefit to trading papers with other students. Yes, handing over your paper makes you vulnerable — but the student you trade with is having exactly that same experience. Learning comes from vulnerability, from admitting that we don’t know everything, that we might — on occasion — need some help.

Peer Review relies on collaboration — the art of working together to create something. When you collaborate with someone else, you share ideas — you don’t compete to see who’s got the better idea (or paper). Instead, your goal is to make the best end product — paper, project, presentation — that you can.

Go into Peer Review with this mindset, and you’ll have a successful session no matter with whom you’re paired. Remind yourself, as you edit, that your goal is to help make the paper you’re looking at into the best version of itself that you can. Remind yourself, as well, when you hand over your own work, that everyone who reads it is supposed to be doing exactly the same thing — trying to help that paper become the best paper it can be.

Writing classes require trust. Sometimes, particularly in writing that requires observation or story-telling, you may be sharing personal details. It can feel crushing to receive even the gentlest feedback when it’s aimed at writing about an emotional or meaningful piece. But always remember: any feedback you receive is not about you, as a person, or even you, as a writer: it’s about the paper that’s in front of you. The feedback you receive is on the two or three (or five, or eight, less than one) hours of time and effort that you put into this particular paper in this particular class for this particular week. Negative feedback doesn’t mean you’re a bad writer, just as glowing feedback doesn’t mean you’re the next Shakespeare. It’s only about what’s in front of your classmates right now.

Negative feedback generally means that the reader struggled with something in your piece: either they couldn’t follow the timeline, or they couldn’t see enough detail to understand your point, or they were otherwise confused. It
never means they don’t like you; it just means they found places where your work could use some changes. Whether you take their suggestions or not is up to you. You own your own work. However, remember that they want to help, so their feedback should have some use to you. Use it to decide where to spend time as you revise.

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Writing Is Recursive

CHRISTOPHER BLANKENSHIP

In a recent interview, Steven Pinker, Harvard professor and author of *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*, was asked how he approaches the revision of his own writing. His answer? “Recursively and frequently.”

What does Pinker mean when he says “recursively,” though?

You're probably familiar with the root of the word: “cursive.” It’s the style of writing that you may have been taught in elementary school or that you’ve seen in historical documents like the Declaration of Independence or Constitution.

“Cursive” comes from the Latin word *currere*, meaning “to run.” Combine this meaning with the English prefix “re-” (to do again), and you have some clues for the meaning of “recursive.”

In modern English, recursion is used to describe a process that loops or “runs again” until a task is complete. It’s a term often used in computer science to indicate a program or piece of code that continues to run until certain conditions are met, such as a variable determined by the user of the program. The program would continue counting upwards—running—until it came to that variable.

So, what does recursion have to do with writing?

You’ve probably heard writing teachers talk about the idea of the “writing process” before. In a nutshell, although writing always ends with the creation of a “product,” the process that leads to that product determines how effective the writing will be. It’s why a carefully thought-out essay tends to be better than one that’s written the night before the due date. It’s also why college writing teachers often emphasize the idea of process in their classes in addition to evaluating final products.

There are many ways to think about the writing process, but here’s one that my students have said makes sense to them. It involves five separate ways of thinking about a writing task:
Invention: Coming up with ideas.

This can include thinking about what you want to accomplish with your writing, who will be reading your writing and how to adapt to them, the genre you are writing in, your position on a topic, what you know about a topic already, etc. Invention can be as formal as brainstorm activities like mind mapping and as informal as thinking about your writing task over breakfast.

Research: Finding new information.

Even if you’re not writing a research paper, you still generally have to figure out new things to complete a writing task. This can include the traditional reading of books, articles, and websites to find information to cite in a paper, but it can also include just reading up on a topic to learn more about it, interviewing an expert, looking at examples of the genre that you’re using to figure out what its characteristics are, taking careful notes on a text that you’re analyzing, or anything else that helps you to learn something important for your writing.

Drafting: Creating the text.

This is the part that we’re all familiar with: putting words down on paper, writing introductions and conclusions, and creating cohesive paragraphs and clear sentences. But, beyond the words themselves, drafting can also include shaping the medium for your writing, such as creating an e-portfolio where your writing will be displayed. Writing includes making design choices, such as formatting, font and color use, including and positioning images, and citing sources appropriately.

Revision: Literally, seeing the text again.

I’m talking about the big ideas here: looking over what you’ve created to see if you’ve accomplished your purpose, that you’ve effectively considered your audience, that your text is cohesive and coherent, and that it does the things that other texts in that genre do.

Editing: Looking at the surface level of the text.

Editing sometimes gets lumped in with revision (or replaces it entirely). I think it’s helpful to consider them as two separate ways of thinking about a text.
Editing involves thinking about the clarity of word choice and sentence structure, noticing spelling and grammatical errors, making sure that source citations meet the requirements of your citation style, and other such issues. Even if editing isn’t big-concept like revision is, it’s still a very important way of thinking about a writing task.

Now, you may be thinking, “Okay, that’s great and all, but it still doesn’t tell me what recursion has to do with writing.” Well, notice how I called these five ways of thinking rather than “steps” or “stages” of the writing process? That’s because of recursion.

In your previous writing experiences, you’ve probably thought about your writing in all of the ways listed above, even if you used different terms or organized the ideas differently. However, Nancy Sommers, a researcher in rhetoric and writing studies, has found that student writers tend to think about the writing process in a simple, linear way that mimics speech:

This process starts with thinking about the writing task and then moves through each part in order until, after editing, you’re finished. Even if you don’t do this every time, I’m betting that this linear process is probably familiar to you, especially if you just graduated high school.

On the other hand, Sommers also researched how experienced writers approach a writing task. She found that their writing process is different from that of student writers:

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1. “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” in College Composition and Communication 31.4, 378-88.
Unlike student writers, professional writers, like Steven Pinker, don’t view each part of the writing process as a step to be visited just once in a particular order. Yes, they generally begin with invention and end with editing, but they view each part of the process as a valuable way of thinking that can be revisited again and again until they are confident that the product effectively meets their goals.

For example, a colleague and I wrote a chapter for a book on working conditions at colleges, a topic we’re interested in.

- When we started, we had to come up with an idea for the text by talking through our experiences and deciding on a purpose for the text. [Invention]
- Although we both knew something about the topic already, we read articles and talked to experts to learn more about it. [Research]
- From that research, we decided that our original idea didn’t quite fit with the research that was out there already, so we made some changes to the big idea. [Invention]
- After that, we sat down and, over several sessions on different days, created a draft of our text. [Drafting]
- When we read through the text, we discovered that the order of the information didn’t make as much sense as we had first thought, so we moved around some paragraphs, making changes to those paragraphs to help the
flow of the new order. [Revision]

- After that, we sent the rough draft to the editors of the book for feedback. When we got the chapter back, the editors commented that our topic didn’t quite fit the theme of the book, so, using that feedback, we changed the focus of the ideas. [Invention]

- Then we changed the text to reflect those new ideas. [Revision]

- We also got feedback from peer reviewers who pointed out that one part of the text was a little confusing, so we had to learn more about the ideas in that section. [Research]

- We changed the text to reflect that new understanding. [Revision and Editing]

- After the editors were satisfied with those revisions, we proofread the article and sent it off for final approval. [Editing]

In this process, we produced three distinct drafts, but each of those drafts represents several different ways that we made changes, small and large, to the text to better craft it for our audience, purpose, and context.

One goal of required college writing courses is to help you move from the mindset of the student writer to that of the experienced writer. Revisiting the big ideas of a writing task can be tough. Cutting several paragraphs because you find that they don’t meet the purpose of the writing task, throwing out research sources and having to search for more, completely reorganizing a text, or even reconsidering the genre can be a lot of work. But if you’re willing to put aside the linear steps and view invention, research, drafting, revision, and editing as ways of thinking that can be revisited over and over again until you accomplish your goal, you will become a more successful writer.

Although your future professors, bosses, co-workers, clients, and patients may only see the final product, mastering a complex, recursive writing process will help you to create effective texts for any situation you encounter.

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What is Revision?

JENN KEPKA

Revision means what it looks like: *RE-vision, to see again.*

So great, you’re thinking. *That sounds easy.*

Well... it’s not. (Surprise!) Revision requires us to look at our own work again with fresh eyes. That’s tricky for a number of reasons:

- Maybe you poured your heart and soul into your paper, spending hours crafting each beautiful sentence about a treasured memory. If so, it’s going to be hard to go back and tear into that work. You might already think it’s got nothing left to change, and every fix might feel like running a stake through your heart.
- Maybe you threw together a draft the night before the rough draft deadline, and when you look at it again, you can’t even remember what you were thinking. You’d rather throw the whole thing out and start again then try to fix the paper up. Revision is going to feel like swimming with weights on your legs.
- Maybe you’ve tried to read and look for mistakes before, only to have nothing really jump out at you. Yet later, when you get the paper back with a grade, there are obvious mistakes all over. Revision can seem pointless or frightening if you’ve had that experience.

If your past experience with revision has been negative — or you have no experience with revision at all — then take a moment to consider why. What is it you don’t like about this experience? Why might you have avoided it in the past?

You’ll likely be asked to reflect on these questions after major writing assignments, so take some time to think about them now.

**REASONS WE HATE REVISION: IT’S TIME CONSUMING**

“I have rewritten — often several times — every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.” — Vladimir
Many writers despise the process of revision because it’s the most work-intensive piece of the process. It is painful and painstaking. In college, perhaps the most annoying part of the revision process is that it takes time.

If you’ve been in college for more than a day, you’ve figured out that everything takes time, from finding your classrooms or remembering your log-in names and passwords to reading your textbooks. Writing your papers takes time. Understanding your readings takes time. Meeting with your teachers takes time. Going to class takes time. Waiting in line at the bookstore takes time. You get it. You’re there.

In the middle of all of this, many instructors ask you to produce writing on a short timetable: sometimes, an essay will be assigned and due within two weeks. Sometimes, a paragraph is due by the next class period. Where, then, will we find time for revision?

The only way to find time is to make time: good writing requires planning ahead.

Whenever possible, build one extra day into your writing schedule. If you have a paper due next Thursday, plan to finish it no later than Tuesday night; then, reserve time — even if it’s just thirty minutes — on Wednesday to re-read the paper and revise. Of course, having more time will be better. The longer the gap between writing and revising that you can reserve, the stronger your abilities as an editor will be.

So — do you have time to revise? Sure. If we think of revision as something that’s extra, on top of the assignment, then it’s easy to leave it off. Think of it instead as part of the assignment. You’re required to write not just any paper, but a good, final draft; that means you are expected to revise every college paper before you turn it in.

Writing classes that require a first draft due date — whether for peer revision or instructor review — have this revision schedule built in, but most assignments, whether for class or work, will not be so kind. Building a habit of revision in college, where you’re expected to be spending hours each week on your classwork, will help you when you leave college and no longer have that “study time” written down on your schedule.

### REASONS WE HATE REVISION: IT’S TOO HARD

As we talked about when discussing peer revision, it’s difficult to think critically about our own work. Sometimes, it’s hard to find things wrong because our
work is in our own voice, filled with our own thoughts, and makes perfect sense to us. Sometimes, it’s hard to find things right with our own work because we’ve been convinced that we’re not good writers — or we feel that this particular paper isn’t good.

However, remember that you’re not the whole audience for what you’re writing — which means that your judgment, while still the most important in many ways, isn’t the final judgment.

Take, for instance, this flyer, used to advertise a flight show. It was likely written by either a friend of the performer or someone who stood to make money from his performance. Therefore, that writer probably knew most of the information — time, date, location, names — by heart. In fact, it may have been Daredevil Buton himself who wrote this ad. This has clearly been revised — it mentions that last week’s show had to be canceled due to wind. That correction, you’ll see, is very small — the sign is trying to lure people in with its daring promises.

Revising our work requires us to pretend to be the person reading the flyer, not the person who’s being talked about. In his everyday life, it’s hard to believe that Mr. Buton introduced himself as Human Fly; yet here, he had to add that in to draw attention.

This is exactly what we need to do in revision. Pretend you’re an outsider. You’re just looking at the paper to hear a story, learn a lesson, figure out what a reading means. What do you find to admire? What gaps do you need to fill in?

Ask yourself: What would my instructor say while reading this? What would my classmate still need to know?

This is why time is so important for the revision process. When you read a paper you’ve just finished writing, your brain will fill in pieces that aren’t on the paper. The further away from the paper you can move, the better your ability to read it with distance.
Some of us don't like revising because we've tried it before and had less than stellar results. Students often say they don't revise because they feel they don't catch the right details, or they don't revise because they don't know where to start. Both of these are challenging situations, and both of them can be fixed by taking up a structured way of revision. The next few pages will introduce a way of thinking about revision that should help you efficiently attack any paper or piece of writing and garner some useful results.

However, it’s important to remember that the goal of revision isn’t perfection. No piece of writing is perfect. Even one that you love, a favorite from childhood or a recent inspiration, has flaws. Maybe the writer wishes they could do it again; maybe some audiences find the piece boring, too long or too short, offensive, unfunny, or otherwise bad. No piece of writing is perfect, and certainly no piece of writing produced under a high-pressure deadline is expected to be flawless.

Revision means re-seeing. Seeing again lets us improve our work; it doesn't guarantee everything will be fixed. Just because you revise doesn't mean you'll get an A on every paper. It does mean that every paper will be better than it started, and that you'll be a better writer at the end of every paper, and that’s our goal.

“I don’t write easily or rapidly. My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn’t work, or what simply is not alive.” — Susan Sontag

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Reverse Outlining

MONIQUE BABIN, CAROL BURNELL, SUSAN PESZNECKER, NICOLE ROSEVEAR, AND JAIME WOOD

Often, outlining is recommended as an early component of the writing process, a way to organize and connect thoughts so the shape of what you are going to write is clear before you start drafting it. This is a tool many writers use that is probably already familiar to you.

Reverse outlining, though, is different in a few ways. First, it happens later in the process, after a draft is completed rather than before. Second, it gives you an opportunity to review and assess the ideas and connections that are actually present in the completed draft. This is almost an opposite approach from traditional outlining, as the traditional pre-writing outline considers an initial set of ideas, which might shift as the draft is actually being written and new ideas are added or existing ones are moved, changed, or removed entirely. A reverse outline can help you improve the structure and organization of your already-written draft, letting you see where support is missing for a specific point or where ideas don’t quite connect on the page as clearly as you wanted them to.

HOW TO CREATE A REVERSE OUTLINE

1. At the top of a fresh sheet of paper, write your primary thesis or claim for the text you want to outline. This should be the thesis exactly as it appears in your draft, not the thesis you know you intended. If you can’t find the actual words, write down that you can’t find them in this draft of the paper—it’s an important note to make!
2. Draw a line down the middle of the page, creating two columns below your thesis.
3. Read, preferably out loud, the first body paragraph of your draft.
4. In the left column, write the single main idea of that paragraph (again, this should be using only the words that are actually on the page, not the ones you want to be on the page). If you find more than one main idea in a paragraph, write down all of them. If you can’t find a main idea, write that down, too.
5. In the right column, state how the main idea of that paragraph supports the thesis.
6. Repeat steps 3-5 for each body paragraph of the draft.

Once you have completed these steps, you have a reverse outline! It might look
a little something like this (this one is only looking at two paragraphs of a draft for the sake of example; yours will likely be looking at more paragraphs than just two):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THESIS: Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of The Hunger Games, creates as much danger for herself as she faces from others over the course of the film.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAIN IDEA</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body ¶ 1: She volunteers to fight in the games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body ¶ 2: Shooting the apple out of the pig’s mouth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WORKING WITH THE RESULTS OF YOUR REVERSE OUTLINE

Now what? You’ve probably already made some observations while completing this. Often students will speak up in class after we create these to tell me that they notice places where they are repeating themselves or that some of their paragraphs have too many points or don’t clearly support the thesis.

There are a number of observations that can be made with the aid of a reverse outline, and a number of ways it can help you strengthen your paper. Try considering the following questions as you review yours.

**Do Multiple Paragraphs Share the Same Main Idea?**

If so, you might try combining them, paring back the information for that specific idea so it doesn’t feel imbalanced in how much space it takes up, and/or organizing these paragraphs about the same point so they are next to each other in the paper.

**Do Any Paragraphs Have Multiple Main Ideas?**

Each paragraph should have only one primary focus. If you notice a paragraph does have more than one main idea, you could look for where some of those ideas might be discussed in other paragraphs and move them into a paragraph already focusing on that point, or select just the one main idea you think is most

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important to this paragraph and cut the other points out, or you might split that paragraph into multiple paragraphs and expand on each main idea.

**Do Any Paragraphs Lack a Clear Main Idea?**

If it was hard for you to find the main idea of a paragraph, it will also be hard for your reader to find. For paragraphs that don’t yet have a main idea, consider whether the information in that paragraph points to a main idea that just isn’t written on the page yet. If the information does all support one main idea, adding that idea to the paragraph might be all that is needed. Alternatively, you may find that some of the ideas fit into other paragraphs to support their ideas, or you may not need some of them in the next draft at all.

**Do Any Main Ideas Not Connect Clearly and Directly Back to the Thesis?**

Since the point of almost every paper is to support its thesis statement, this one can be critical. It should be clear how the main idea of each paragraph supports the thesis or claim of the paper. If that connection is not directly stated, ask yourself how the main idea of that paragraph furthers your thesis and then write that response.

**Do Ideas Flow from Paragraph to Paragraph? Are There Gaps in Reasoning?**

If a paper starts out introducing something that is a problem in a community, then presents a solution to the problem, and then talks about why the problem is...well, a problem, this organization is likely to confuse readers. Reorganizing to introduce the problem, discuss why it is a problem, and then move on to proposing a solution would do good work to help strengthen the next draft of this paper.

Note that you may need to move, revise, or add transition statements after moving paragraphs around.

*Reverse Outlining* by Monique Babin, Carol Burnell, Susan Pesznecker, Nicole Rosevear, Jaime Wood is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
On a Thursday night in January 2016, Jerry Seinfeld performed solo to a sold-out audience at Abravanel Hall in Salt Lake City. Over 2,700 people filled the long sloping rectangle of the main floor and the three rounded tiers of gold-leafed balconies lining its sides. Eighteen-thousand Bohemian crystals glimmered from enormous square chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. From the far back wall, two spotlights followed the legendary comedian back and forth across the stage as he paced inside their circle, telling his jokes. One of the spotlights smoothly drifted right or left as needed. The other wasn’t working so well.

Seinfeld stepped out of the faulty beam numerous times. He ignored it, continuing his set like a pro and doing what he does best: making people laugh. But an underlying tension increased the longer the problem went on. Adults fidgeted in their cushioned seats and muttered to their neighbors. If the jerky spotlight had been staged, Seinfeld would have referred to it by now. Whether the cause was malfunctioning equipment or the ineptitude of an operator, the issue should’ve been solved thirty minutes ago. It was detracting from the act.

Finally, Seinfeld made a choice to say something. He stopped and gestured at
the back wall, asking, "What’s the deal with the spotlight? I'm sixty-one years old! How hard can it be? Look, I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll face the direction I'm going to walk."

The tangent bounced with Seinfeld's characteristic high- and low-pitched cadence, sending the already amused audience into louder peals. After an exaggerated turn, he slowly lifted his foot and stepped forward, waiting for the spotlight to join him. When the beam lurched again despite his overt cue, Seinfeld threw up his arms like, “Really?” Everyone roared. Tension released into belly-deep laughter. Tears formed, stomachs cramped, lungs gasped. What had been distracting was now hilarious. He'd transformed the malfunction into a successful gag and a memorable part of the show.

As writers, we need to learn such alchemy in order to do things, be things, and make things in the world. Comedians like Jerry Seinfeld are masters of language, and that mastery allows them to make whole careers out of words and gestures that do something special: generate laughs. We can likewise harness the power of language to transform our writing situations into audience gold, whether we are creating impromptu wisecracks or funeral elegies, factual reports or fantastical stories. Any type of writing can be more effective if it catches and holds the attention of its audience—in other words, if it succeeds at being memorable.

How? Authors Chip and Dan Heath (one brother a Stanford professor, the other a teacher and textbook publisher) give a useful acronym in their book Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die. They say memorable ideas are

- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Story-based

Examining these keys for “SUCCESs” via Seinfeld's spotlight fiasco provides a lens for considering the ways language/writing can be a resource for doing more and being heard and making a contribution that's remembered.

SIMPLE

Consider the simplicity of Seinfeld's response. He stopped. He focused his gaze at the origin of the spotlight. He took a direct approach. And he kept it concise. He could have gone into a drawn-out rant, venting anger instead of appealing to the audience. Instead, he kept his grievance simple and funny.
We can’t always be brief, but we can stay focused. Notice how the first four paragraphs of this article give only details relevant to the spotlight story. The anecdote avoids digressions about the weather or other parts of the show or the charity the ticket money supported. It sticks to only what’s needed to make the story stick with the audience. We can do the same in any genre. Selecting and maintaining a simple focus ties everything into one tidy, memorable package.

UNEXPECTED

It’s also important to know that comedy thrives on irony—or in other words, the unexpected. The more unpredictable the punchline, the bigger the laughs.

“I’m sixty-one years old!” was unexpected on two levels. First, what did that have to do with a defective spotlight? Juxtaposition, in which you compare things that seem unrelated, can be a great tool for creating irony. Second, in American culture, we don’t expect an older person to blurt out his age, which doubled the element of surprise.

But how much does unexpectedness matter outside of comedy? We might be surprised. The human brain is programmed to dismiss what it already understands but perk up when startled by something new. Awareness of that unfamiliar thing might improve chances of survival, so our minds snap to attention. Writers who incorporate the unexpected in strategic ways—with a shocking statistic in a report or a fresh take on a classic recipe or an unheard-of position on a controversial subject—are more likely to hook their audience. Without such surprise, our chances of being memorable are low.

CONCRETE

Masters of language also recognize that all external input comes in five tangible forms: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The mind connects concrete input, such as a citrusy scent, to previous knowledge, like Grandma’s grapefruit trees, while abstract ideas often vaporize.

By gesturing at the spotlight and emphasizing his turn and step, Seinfeld gave the audience features to see. Written descriptions do that too: gold balconies, crystal chandeliers, adults fidgeting in cushioned seats. The marvel of language is that it can conjure images in our minds even without pictures and let us hear things even when the words are read silently, like how the direct quotes make Seinfeld’s voice come alive. The same is true with the other senses. For example,
mentioning stomachs cramping and lungs gasping invites us to feel the audience's physical response.

When instructors say, “Show, don’t tell,” this is what they mean. Telling is weaker because it gives a secondhand report: how it was a classy concert hall where nobody would expect crappy equipment, how Seinfeld griped about the spotlight, how everyone thought it was really funny. On the other hand, showing with concrete details means readers experience firsthand input and draw their own stronger conclusions.

What about when writers aren’t telling a story? Regardless of genre, concrete ideas are easier for people to grasp. We might not comprehend a blue whale's thirty-meter length, but tell us that’s more than two school buses and we can picture it. It’s better to make details tangible.

CREDIBLE

What about the biggest aspect in Seinfeld’s favor—his reputation? The audience came because they love him, and they were prepared to laugh at anything he said. But even people who aren’t famous can still use credibility to their advantage.

One way is to borrow fame, as this article does by showcasing a celebrity. Take advantage of any impressive sources. Was the study done by Harvard? Is the quote from a renowned authority? Mention those bragging rights the way this article drops “legendary comedian” into the first paragraph and credits a Stanford professor and a textbook publisher for the SUCCESs acronym. Don’t just bury that validity in the citations at the end.

Writers can also buy cred by touting their own expertise: experiences with the topic, relevant places they’ve worked or volunteered, observations that sharpened their perspective, surveys or interviews they’ve done, classes they’ve taken, even their age. Being a sixty-one-year-old über-successful comedian is impressive, and maybe being an eighteen-year-old college newbie or a thirty-five-year-old returning student will affect the audience's opinion too. Weigh possible credentials against the writing situation and include ones that will give it the best boost.

EMOTIONAL

Seinfeld used emotion when he asked the spotlight person, “How hard can it be?” He gave voice to everyone’s frustrations, as if speaking collectively.
Projecting emotion is important but tricky. Good writers don’t want to overdo it, and they don’t want to use fallacious or unethical approaches, such as fear mongering. Done well, emotional appeals can have a powerful lingering effect. We recall how entertaining a comedian was even after we forget the jokes. We relive the wave of pity from a photo we saw of a shelter dog. We revisit the excitement of a thrilling solution we read in a recent proposal. Emotions last.

Aim for the kind of vibe that best fits the audience and purpose, and find effective ways to solicit those emotions. Choose details that summon the right mood, just as gold leaf and Bohemian crystals convey the classy feel of Abravanel Hall. Pick words that match the seriousness or humor, like how the spotlight “lurched” and everyone “roared.” Add colors, photos, or other visuals that correspond, such as Seinfeld’s memorably amusing snapshot above—perfect for an article about memorability via comedy.

**STORY-BASED**

Most crucially of all, tell a story. It’s one of the best ways to appeal to emotion—and appeal to humans. Think how quickly a sad story can make the audience teary or a silly one can make them laugh. Think how closely people listen when a story is told.

Some people assume storytelling is only for memoirs or fiction writing or movies, but in reality, stories are everywhere. This instructional article employed the story about Seinfeld to make several points, and even Seinfeld’s short bit follows a story shape:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hook—stops, gestures at the back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conflict—“What’s the deal with the spotlight?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complications—“I’m sixty-one years old! How hard can it be?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>epiphany—“Look, I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll face the direction I’m going to walk.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climax—exaggerated turn and step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resolution—spotlight jerks, audience roars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The best story type for each piece of writing will depend on its situation and purpose and audience, but using miniature stories like the spotlight tale can be a great method for highlighting a writer’s subject in a memorable way. Writers also use the story-arc sequence—hook the audience, spell out the conflict, outline complications, reveal an epiphany, stage a climax, and grant resolution—in all kinds of genres to engage readers with the tension of waiting for resolution. Audiences love it, just as Seinfeld’s audience melted into laughter.¹

**CONCLUSION**

The twitchy spotlight never improved during that January show. Its glow continued to bumble across the stage like an intoxicated firefly. But as far as Seinfeld and his audience were concerned, the situation had been resolved by converting it into humor.

That’s the power of language to do things, be things, and make things in the world. That’s the power our writing can have when we master language/writing as a resource.

**Works Cited**


¹ For more on integrating story techniques, check out the Open English @ SLCC resources “Adding the Storyteller’s Tools to Your Writer’s Toolbox,” “Movies Explain the World of Writing,” or “The Narrative Effect.”
Dash That Oxford Comma!  
Prestige and Stigma in Academic Writing  
CHRISTIE BOGLE  

THE COMMON COMMA

Once upon a time, way back in the third grade, Mrs. MaGee told me never to put a comma before the “and” in my lists. She said that the “and” means the same thing as a comma.

And so I never did. I wrote “balls, bats and mitts.”

Years later, another teacher told me that I should always put a comma before the “and” in my lists because it clarifies that the last two items in my list are not a set. He said to write “Amal, Mike, Jose, and Lin.”

Logic told me that the third-grade teacher was right because, if the last two in the list were a set, the “and” would have come sooner as “balls and bats and mitts” or “Amal, Mike, and Jose and Lin.” But that is also just odd. What if I really did mean to have two sets? Now I felt like I had to write “Balls. Also, bats and mitts.” It felt like juggling. If this is confusing, I’m pretty sure that I’ve made my point. These rigid rules felt so awkward! Things I can say effortlessly out loud are, all of a sudden, impossible on paper. Who wrote these rules?

That’s actually a valid question. Who did write them? Novices to the study of language sometimes imagine that language started back in a day when there were pure versions of all the world languages that younger and lazier speakers continue to corrupt, generation after generation. They imagine a perfect book of grammar that we should all be able to reference. Nothing about that scenario is actually true.

HISTORY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

So, why and how did we get all those rules? Way back around the 1700s, we finally started to get some books written about the structure of language, specifically for teaching. These, even then, were vastly different from the work being done by linguists in the field who were interested in marking language
as it is, not how they thought it should be. As time went on, people introduced writing rules that originated in other languages, like Latin, and imposed them on English. These misapplications have followed us into modern times. Many of the guidebooks for writing are filled with these exceptions to the natural ways that English once worked. They include, surprisingly, the rule against double negatives (“we don’t need no stinking badges!”) and other standard prohibitions against language that was quite normal long ago (and still is in non-standard varieties of English).

Some more of those gems include “never say ‘I’ in an essay,” “don’t use passive voice,” and “don’t start a sentence with ‘and’ or ‘but.’” We can sprinkle in the Latin rule, “don’t split infinitives” (think Star Trek’s “to boldly go”) and unnecessary restrictions like “adverbs go after the verb, not before.” These rules have interesting histories but the history doesn’t necessarily support their persistence. In fact, most of them can be dismissed as simple preferences of some dead white guy from centuries ago. They don’t obey any rule of logic, though some obey a system from a different language that has no application in English.

A great example is the double negative. In the 1700s the location of the royalty and their dialects determined what was “correct.” The south of England used double negatives but the north of England (where royalty lived) did not use them. Something so simple as location dictated what went into the books. Then in 1762, Robert Lowth wrote Short Introduction to English Grammar and relegated the southern usage to “uncultivated speech” instead of what it really is, which is an emphasis on the negative point being made. The American usage that developed from before Lowth’s writing is retained today in many dialects, but famously so in Southern varieties and African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

“GRAMMARS,” NOT GRAMMAR

What is happening here? Am I arguing that grammar rules are okay to break sometimes? I am taking up an argument that seems to be at an academic impasse. Linguists believe that there is more than one grammar. We say “grammars.” Stephen Pinker, a cognitive psychologist, offers his take on this phenomenon in an article for The Guardian called “Stephen Pinker: 10 ‘grammar rules’ it’s okay to break sometimes.” He characterizes the debate between descriptive and prescriptive grammarians like this:

Prescriptivists prescribe how language ought to be used. They uphold standards of excellence and a respect for the best of our civilisation,
and are a bulwark against relativism, vulgar populism and the dumbing down of literate culture. Descriptivists describe how language actually is used. They believe that the rules of correct usage are nothing more than the secret handshake of the ruling class, designed to keep the masses in their place. Language is an organic product of human creativity, say the Descriptivists, and people should be allowed to write however they please.

His point is that some think that every rule of grammar is worth preserving lest the language devolves out of existence. Others believe that the actual use of the language (any language) and the natural changes that occur are a good thing. Sometimes, as is the case with the double negative, before the rule against it was made, people used “incorrect” phrases all the time. So, the argument about preserving rules and allowing change is kind of mixed up. Pinker describes the conflict experts have, but it’s even more complicated by the history.

Still, I reference Pinker because he is a cognitive psychologist that studies both linguistics and composition. Even more importantly, he is also a best-selling author of nonfiction. Pinker has made boring and dry topics like linguistics and neuroscience feel easy, even to the average reader. That’s a kind of magic that I want to bottle and sell. So, I look to him on matters of writing. Pinker and I agree that when it comes to grammar, it should be addressed with the goal of being understood, not of being “right.”

Navigating the rules of grammar is not just hard for those that speak in “dialects” (or different grammars) of English. It is hard even for those who grew up in a middle-class culture speaking a relatively standard form called Standard American English (SAE). Those born into families and communities speaking SAE struggle with the rules like:

- What do I do with commas and semicolons?
- Do I use who or whom?
- Which word: there, they’re or their; too, two or to?

and so forth.

Even your professors make common speech errors. Try my favorite test. See how many times members of college faculty say “there’s” when they should have said “there are.” No one speaks like a textbook.

One of my favorite debates, because it is so utterly pointless, is of the Oxford comma. This phenomenon is the one I opened with. Do you always or never put
a comma before the “and” in the list? The Oxford comma is the one that says “yes, always.” I was taught “no, never.” So, who wins?

John McWhorter pleads a case that I buy. He says neither side wins. In his article “Should we give a damn about the Oxford comma?” he argues that “to treat the failure to use the Oxford comma as a mark of mental messiness is a handy way to look down on what will perhaps always be a majority of people attempting to write English.” And that is a key argument for me. Much of what we do when looking down our nose at particular errors is to demonstrate disdain for our differences on the page. In fact, for the rest of this document, let’s not call them “errors.” Let’s call them “varieties of speech/writing.”

### STIGMA AND PRESTIGE

As frustrating or embarrassing it is to be called to the carpet for your variety of speech, these grammar scuffles are mere annoyances when they occur between English speakers of the same general class, race, and economic status. However, when we approach minority English language speakers and English language learners, we pass into a new territory that borders on classism and racism.

To understand this, you must understand the terms stigma and prestige. These terms apply to a number of sociological situations. Prestige is, very simply, what we grant power and privilege to. Remember the history of the double negative from the 1700s? The book taught that single negation is a mark of prestige.

On the other hand, stigmatized varieties of English are those that people try to train you out of using. If you were raised in the Appalachian region of America, you may have some varieties of speech that other people dislike and hope you will lose. Things like “y’all” and “a-” prefixes on “a huntin’ and a fishin’” are discouraged; some think it means the speaker is uneducated. By being negated, double negatives became stigmatized.

This distinction is “classist” because it assumes characteristics and abilities based on a person’s variety of speech. It may sound strange, but speech is not a mark of intellect or ability. One famous example is of Eudora Welty, a renown Appalachian author. A story is told that during her stay in a college dormitory she was passed over by the headmistress for opportunities to have tickets to plays and cultured events. When she confronted the headmistress about the oversight, she explained that she had doubted Welty's interest in the theater because of her accent. Of course, now, Welty is an honored and prestigious author. Her variety of speech did not affect her ability to produce effective writing that communicates to her audience.
Some varieties of English are stigmatized because they represent racial minority speech patterns, even though they are legitimately home-grown American English. How many of us can easily hear and understand what is culturally Black English, Spanglish, or Chicano English, but know that those varieties won’t go into your next essay for History 1700?

Students learning English, or even just Standard American English, will vary in their ability to represent prestigious language patterns, even though what they write or say is generally understood. For example, people from India may have grown up speaking a different variety of English. The same is true for some people from Hong Kong when it was a British holding. British English with a Chinese accent was their standard, and they struggle to be understood in America.

So, for multilingual and/or multivariety speakers, one challenge of writing is the expectation that they will sound as narrowly experienced in language as monolingual speakers. This is what Lippi-Green called standard language ideology. It’s the practice of prestige and stigma. It is a rather bizarre sort of prestige to value evidence of less experience, but that’s exactly what unaccented language is. A middle- to upper-class white American who travels nowhere and learns nothing of consequence can still sound perfectly prestigious merely by speaking their natural English variety. We actually prefer (or privilege) the appearance of ignorance.

There are a rare few that can perfectly compartmentalize languages. Linguistic geniuses (I use that term loosely) exist—those who can sound perfectly natural in several varieties or languages. It is an ability that only the teensiest percentage of people with just the right exposure, talent, age, and experience will ever achieve. The rest of us can increase our range of speech and writing contexts, but our own idiosyncrasies will always exist, and we will be (unnecessarily) embarrassed by them.

**WHAT TEACHING EXPERTS KNOW**

Teaching professionals continue to debate how to teach in a way that combats linguistic stigma and shifts toward preferring linguistic diversity. From the CCCC’s Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) circa 1974, we read:

> We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false
advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

So, since before many of your teachers were born, an international body of composition instructors has acknowledged that students have a right to their own language. Ever since then, the struggle to maintain a standard and find ways to work with differences have played out in the profession. Today, we have experts in the field that suggest utilizing “vernacular speech” (that’s your everyday speech) to improve the quality of writing, to a point. Peter Elbow writes in his book *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing* about the ways that we can utilize spoken, everyday language as a way of improving the readability of text and ease the writing process.

Steven Pinker (you know—the one whose writing skill we should bottle and sell), like Peter Elbow, believes a more conversational tone in writing can improve its quality. He says that there are ways of scientifically assessing clarity and ease for readers. For example, this type of research takes on the debate of whether or not a typist should place one or two spaces after periods. It may seem trivial, but it’s a debate that has lasted since word processors were programmed to intelligently space punctuation. Researchers strapped people down in front of a computer screen and measured eye movement while reading to settle the debate. Much to my surprise, it turns out that two spaces are easier to read than one (Johnson).

**WHAT YOU, THE STUDENT, SHOULD KNOW**

I don’t know if I would always go so far as to do scientific experimentation on readers in order to make writing decisions, but choosing rules that make things easier feels like a really good idea, doesn’t it? The New SRTOL document authors argue, “it is one thing to help a student achieve proficiency in a written dialect and another thing to punish him for using variant expressions of that dialect.” So, in modern times, teachers want you to recognize and utilize a standard in writing without punishing your speech. You want to learn how to do the same with yourself and others.

However useful it is to accept variations in classroom English, there are, in fact, varieties of English that are native to the United States (not spoken anywhere else) that are not so easy to understand. Some examples are Louisiana’s Cajun creole and Hawaiian Pidgin creole. Theorists that give nods of approval to teaching within varieties they understand may not be addressing a large enough
group of English varieties. If we are suggesting a student use their native language ways to improve readability, sometimes the student’s writing will be unintelligible to the teacher and peers. It’s a whole different job to have everyone learn new languages in your composition class.

I assume that when CCCCs composed these sentences, “Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity... We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language,” they were being sincere, but it might be a stretch. Your teachers are not experts on every variety of English or the many creoles. Neither are you. There is still a way to manage the goals we have.

The updated version of the Students’ Right to Their Own Language makes a request of teachers when they say, “Since English teachers have been in large part responsible for the narrow attitudes of today’s employers, changing attitudes toward dialect variations does not seem an unreasonable goal, for today’s students will be tomorrow’s employers.” English faculty have continued to teach SAE (also called Educated American English or EAE) in one part because it’s what the rest of the country thinks that educated writers should use for speech and writing. So, even though teachers accept that the standard is a myth, we find the standard useful and the prestige/stigma problem lingers because we continue to use it. This is where you—the students—can help. Let’s revisit the value that standard language has and the work it does.

One of the undeniable benefits of a standard is that it is a lingua franca. This term roughly means “the language everyone shares.” With so many variations of English, it is just clearer to write in one variety than to learn them all. This different idea of a standard is about ease and convenience, not prestige. Teaching within one standard is a system-wide rhetorical choice to be understood by the largest audience possible. Ignoring what that should be and focusing on what that is seems like a better way of determining what we call the standard. So, most of us aim for a sort of amalgam of language that is acceptable to most people without sticking rigidly to arbitrary rules.

**LOSE THE ‘TUDE**

What you, the students, probably want to know is how to write. The more important point that I hope you will walk away with is this: STROL says, "The attitudes that [you] develop in the English class will often be the criteria [you] use for choosing [your] own employees," (emphasis mine). So, what you learn about writing in English class follows you as you make choices and impacts your
options in the economy, but so do your attitudes about language and people. Spencer Kimball is often credited with this admonition, “Love people, not things; use things, not people.” I would apply a similar sentiment to language.

Don’t only use language with people you understand.

Use language to understand people.

As a student, you expect to leave school with more skills and greater flexibility. In that spirit, seeking diversity in your language education makes sense. As you become our future employers and employees, you will inherit the opportunity to reject stigma toward linguistic diversity. You can do so by accepting these simple facts (adapted from Rosina Lippi-Green’s "Linguistic Facts of Life"): 

- Language is complex and diverse.
- Language is not a moral marker.
- Language is not an intellectual marker.
- Language serves to communicate between people.
- Language changes.

By embracing these facts, you can feel less shame or stigma in your own language and others’. If you accept language differences as natural, you might choose to expose yourself to and understand more languages and varieties. You will write aiming to be understood by a majority of readers for convenience, not for fear of judgment.

So, fine, Oxford Comma when you wanna—but dash linguistic stigma.

Works Cited


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The American Recycling Myth

JON HAZLETT

Jon Corey Hazlett is a doctoral candidate in history at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. His research explores the intersection of the business world and the environmental movement in the United States. He is currently writing a dissertation examining the history of solid waste recycling as it was shaped by numerous industrial interests in the postwar era. This essay was first published in the UW-Madison *Edge Effects online journal* on September 14, 2017.

A dump truck passing piles of flattened cardboard at a recycling center

This July, China notified the World Trade Organization that it planned to begin
banning the importation of certain types of “foreign garbage” perceived as a threat to the Chinese environment. The proposed ban includes numerous types of waste plastic and unsorted paper that are commonly collected as recyclable items in the United States.

This announcement sent shock waves through the recycling industry. Large, multi-national garbage hauling corporations like Waste Management Inc. have already begun to redirect shipments of lower-grade waste plastic to alternative destinations. Meanwhile, the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, the primary trade association for the array of companies involved with recycling, called the ban “catastrophic” for the industry. Given recycling's ubiquitous status as a “green” practice in municipalities throughout the United States, it is striking that neither organization expressed concern about the status of local collection programs or the potential environmental effects the ban may bring to the United States.

Despite the panic among recycling companies, most American households diligently filling their recycling bins have not heard about the Chinese ban. How is it that a potentially “catastrophic” event does not ring alarm bells for consumers concerned with environmental protection? And why is an industry, built on the “ecological” practice of recycling, seemingly unconcerned about the environmental consequences of this ban? The answer lies in the ways Americans have been trained to think about recycling.

The Recycling Myth

Popular ideas about the purpose and origin of recycling programs help obscure the actual processes at work in the recycling industry. They suggest that recycling programs resulted solely from consumer demand for conservation and a cleaner environment. This misconception began at the height of the environmental movement in the late-1960s when environmentalists championed the ideal of individual and local action. Within a year of the first Earth Day in 1970, over 3,000 small-scale community collection centers were launched. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a leading proponent of recycling programs, lauded the boom in recycling centers as an example of the power of motivated consumers to develop waste management systems that conserved both natural resources and energy. With this message of individual power, environmentalists helped associate recycling in many Americans’ minds with such small-scale, local collection programs.
Even detractors of the recycling movement located its power in the motivations of consumer demand, albeit in a more cynical manner. At the height of the recycling boom of the 1990s, journalist John Tierney eviscerated municipal programs as nothing more than wastes of time and money that environmental groups used to legitimize their existence. According to Tierney, recycling as we know it was born in 1987 as “Americans concluded that [it] was their only option” to address a growing crisis of shrinking landfill space. Citizens “embraced recycling as a transcendental experience” and an “atonement for the sin of excess,” Tierney claimed. As he describes it, the idea of recycling as a form of ecological redemption was simply a delusion Americans conjured to assuage themselves of their consumer guilt. Environmental groups then capitalized upon these feelings to serve their own bureaucratic ends. The misperception of recycling as an individual, environmentally redemptive act survived such critiques in the mid-90s and remains in place today.

One result of this perception of recycling as a local activity is that while many Americans today may understand the commodity chains that carried their plastic soda bottles from overseas factories to their pantries in the United States, when tossing the bottle into their recycling bins, few consider the chains that could carry it back again.
Recycling’s Industrial Origins

Whether hopeful or cynical, the idea that recycling was primarily an outgrowth of environmentally conscious consumers obscures the role that industry played in establishing recycling infrastructure and shaping American misperceptions of the practice. Likewise, it prevents us from seeing how industries used these misperceptions to their political and economic advantage. When industry enters the picture, we can see that the perception of recycling as an ecological activity began decades before Earth Day and with very different motivations.

Wastewater treatment lagoons at Weyerhaeuser and St. Regis pulp mills.

In the 1940s, for instance, leaders of the paper industry founded the National Council for Stream Improvement (NCSI) to research and develop concepts of internal wastewater recycling. Their goal was to increase energy efficiency as well as stave off increasing calls for pollution control regulations. This in turn allowed mills to employ residual wood chips in the production of paper rather than burning them to produce energy. The concepts of industrial waste recycling that NCSI used in the 1940s and 1950s laid the foundation for ideas about closed-loop production systems that would drive the popular recycling movement.

As the environmental movement evolved in the 1960s, paper companies joined forces with a wide array of other industries to transform the practice of industrial
recycling into an approach to handling consumer waste. A new concept of resource recovery, promoted by the federal government under the Resource Recovery Act of 1970, called for the private development of processing facilities focused on resource and land conservation. These new facilities operated on a three-stage waste management process. The first step was the separation and collection of recyclable materials from the waste stream. Next came the incineration of any combustible material to produce energy. Last, what remained traveled to the landfill. Leaders from numerous companies, including Monsanto Co., The Mead Corporation, American Can Co., Reynolds Metals Co., and Union Carbide, formed the National Center for Resource Recovery (NCRR) to promote this type of recycling as a private industry.

In addition to lobbying efforts and research programs, NCRR developed educational programs to help instill consumer confidence in this model for recycling. One such effort was an in-depth curriculum guide for high school teachers. Even as the guide reiterated the growing narrative of individual responsibility for pollution, it also described the technologically driven process of waste resource recovery as part of a natural cycle, greenwashing the activities of a industry whose raw materials were entirely supplied by American consumption. "The concept of resource recovery actually copies the pattern of recycling found in nature, where all matter is combined, broken down, and recombined in a never-ending process," the guide insisted. "We can learn to work with this process instead of against it by applying the recycling principles of nature to solid waste."

Recycling in the Classroom

Industry was not the only voice equating recycling with natural processes and minimizing its relationships to American consumption and waste. Environmental organizations also framed recycling as way to return garbage to natural cycles. Chief among these organizations was Environmental Action Coalition in New York City. The Environmental Action Coalition, organizers of the Earth Day 1970 demonstrations in New York, were steadfast promoters of market-based environmental action, and recycling become their flagship cause. Leaders of the organization believed that an educated public would exert their consumer power and work alongside businesses to develop more sustainable waste management systems.

Also like the NCRR, a major part of the Environmental Action Coalition’s operations in the 1970s centered on the development of education programs that connected elementary school children to the world of waste around them. “Don’t Waste Waste” established seven key concepts for teachers to draw upon to implement a comprehensive lesson plan about solid waste issues. Teachers were encouraged to bring trash into the classroom to discuss its origins and demonstrate how many resources were used for packaging. Other activities focused on disposal and recycling with lesson plans describing how to create a miniature landfill in the classroom. One of the most popular activities taught the students how to make their own recycled paper with scrap paper from the classroom.

More important than simply establishing the children’s personal connection with solid waste disposal, the lessons focused on the broader definitions of recycling that the Environmental Action Coalition championed. The lessons provided a description of recycling as an inherent part of the natural world. “To contrast with man’s destruction,” the material instructed, “initiate a discussion on how nature recycles everything, if left to its own devices.” Leaves, for example, fall from the tree and decay on the ground, providing nutrients to the soil that help the tree produce new leaves. When humans burn the leaves, the natural cycle is disrupted. The same is true, the Environmental Action Coalition explained, with paper in that “the throwing away and burning of paper disrupts the cycle that nature has planned for trees.” In its descriptions, the lesson goes as far as to add “factory,” “solid waste,” and “incinerator” to the list of “natural” life cycle stages for paper, firmly entrenching the paradoxical idea that commodity capitalism and resource conservation are natural partners. Lesson plans like this left consumers with the idea they were contributing to a closed-loop production system, and that the activity might be as benign as refraining from the purchase altogether.

As recycling gained popularity in the 1970s, the collection of recyclable items remained, in the eyes of individual consumers, separate from the production markets that made use of the materials. The ultimate destination of the materials never became a concern for consumers. Indeed, oftentimes the industry survived market disruptions by sending recyclable materials they collected to the very landfills they were meant to avoid. More importantly, the connection of recycling to ecological sustainability relied upon the naturalization of capitalist production processes by these same industrial and environmental interests. On both a national and local level, recycling advocates asserted that industrial production was a part of the natural ecology of the planet and that returning discarded materials to this cycle helped achieve conservation goals. The reality, however, has been the development of a system focused more on the bottom line and less on ecological sustainability.

In this way, supported by education campaigns from environmental groups on one side and from industry on the other, Americans came to perceive recycling as analogous to an ecological process and separate from the global flows of capital and commodities that produced the very piles of waste that recycling was intended to overcome. As the global population continues to consume resources at an unsustainable pace, the Chinese ban is a meaningful reminder
that recycling has been and remains materially tied to global capitalism—often in ways that are antithetical to the connotations the activity holds for most American consumers.

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An Ode to Madison’s Lake Monster
ADDIE HOPES

This essay was published in the UW-Madison Edge Effects online journal on May 3, 2016.

Addie Hopes is a Literary Studies PhD student in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin Madison. Her current research focuses narratives of toxicity, extinction, and multispecies communities in contemporary American fiction. Her writing has also appeared in Blood Orange Review and Word Riot.

Lake Mendota in Madison, WI. Photo by Ivan Babanovski, 2015.
I was five years old the first time I heard my father tell his sea monster story. By now I have heard it a hundred times, and it never loses its thrill. If you ask him to, he'll describe the scales on the creature's arching neck and the serpentine intelligence in its eyes. He'll explain the way its enormous face hovered for just a moment above him, watching, with a vividness that will set your heart racing. “Did he really see his serpent?” someone will always ask. I don't know, and I never cared. When you come from a family of storytellers, you know that “facts” are not the only path to truth. You know that the stories we tell are their own way of knowing.

I admit that my father's sea serpent changed my approach to swimming that summer. Our deep farm pond no longer seemed like a place nature had carved out for my cousins and me, a place obviously intended for us to play in, despite the annoying accidents of fish and itchy weeds along the edge. It seemed suddenly and strangely thick with weird kinds of life. The bullfrogs croaked out messages I couldn't understand; turtles sized me up as they sun-bathed; the thin dark snakes slithered off with their own secret purposes; the algae that coated my shoulders after a swim felt newly alive. It was, in Sigmund Freud's terms, uncanny: both familiar and entirely unfamiliar, both home and un-home. My backyard pond vibrated with mysterious riches that rivaled those of a dark, expansive sea. I had the unshakeable sensation that they, too, were watching me, and finding me as incomprehensible and unavoidable as I found them. That summer, my cousins and I still swam in the cool green water, but I never lost the shock, the delight, or the wonder of the realization that “our” pond was longer (and had never been) only ours.

I often think of my father’s monster and the ecological education his storytelling began. It planted in me a fascination with deep waters, and it introduced me to a terrible, beautiful paradox of human and nonhuman coexistence. We share a planetary house with crowds of human and nonhuman others; most of these others we'll never know, none of them we'll completely understand, and yet each of us is always intimately affecting every other. We're entangled in what Timothy Morton evocatively calls the “mesh” of “strange strangers.” Such curiosities tend to send our human minds whirling; strangeness seems to cry out for explanation. After all, science and philosophy, Aristotle tells us, begin in wonder. If only we would allow ourselves to linger there a bit longer—to allow wonder and weirdness to offer their own kind of knowledge. Environmental feminists have argued for years that the desire to understand such strangers entirely is also the desire to master them. Again and again, stories of sea serpents and their ilk offer me an uncanny shiver of wonder and humility. I do not own the pond alone. I should tread carefully.

* * *
Whenever I move to a new city, I orient myself by researching restaurants, cat sitters, and the neighborhood water monsters. I have always found a monster.

When I first moved to Madison, Wisconsin, however, I worried I’d be disappointed. Due to the long-time success of University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for Limnology, Lake Mendota is widely known as one of the most “studied lakes in the world.” Would strange stories shrivel under such intense scientific scrutiny? Would those who studied the lake and its lifeforms claim for themselves the one “real” way to truth? Would there be room for stories?

As it turns out, the Center for Limnology has not had much to say about Lake Mendota’s monster. Yet the important work done at the Center for Limnology is not antithetical to wonder. Take a moment to look at the photographs of the invasive spiny water fleas they’ve recently discovered in the lake, or read a brief article on how local farming practices contribute to toxic algae blooms. You’ll find no lack of weirdness to wonder at. If fact, you may even find an invitation to do so. The more we know about the lake, it seems, the more vibrant with strangers it becomes. And there is plenty of room for a sea serpent.

The earliest stories of monstrous creatures inhabiting Lake Mendota come from the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) people. Ho-Chunk stories tell of a band of wak ‘tcexi (variously translated as “water spirits” or “water panthers”) who make their home in an underwater den near Governor’s Island, inciting unexpected upsets like dangerous whirlpools and upturned canoes. According to Charles E. Brown’s 1927 collection of Lake Mendota Indian Legends the troublemaking wak ‘tcexi control the lakes, while their counterparts the Thunderbirds control the air. Water spirits cannot be controlled by human forces, although they can sometimes be appeased with offerings of tobacco. Humans rarely see the wak ‘tcexi, and when they do, it is only in glimpses. Yet a human can know them through their effects—churning lakes, sudden whirlpools, flipped and sunken canoes—as well as through the legends told about them and the ways their presence affects everyday life. As religious and ecological systems of knowledge, tales of the wak ‘tcexi offer both a worldview and suggestions for how humans might live entangled with unpredictable and very strange strangers.

Brown cautions readers against confusing the Ho-Chunk’s water spirits with the “sea serpent” stories Anglo-Americans will later tell. While the tales are certainly not the same and are undoubtedly inflected by time, place, and culture, how-
ever, the similarities invite speculation. If we allow ourselves to move past the skeptic's questions—is it real, can we prove it—we may very well find that all of these stories reshape the way we know the lakes and their denizens, and the ways we understand our relationships and responsibilities to them.

The written record of “sea serpent” sightings on Madison’s Lake Mendota and Lake Monona begins in the late nineteenth century. These first encounters present a rather combative monster, although the frightened humans tend to throw the first punch. Billy Dunn first claimed to have seen and battled an enormous serpent in Lake Mendota, frightening it away from the boat with an oar and a hatchet. After Dunn’s, a rash of sightings began. By June 12, 1897, sightings had become commonplace enough that the Wisconsin State Journal published an article entitled “Sea Serpent Appears Early This Year: Monona sea serpent has made its appearance about two months earlier than usual this season.” According to the Journal, Eugene Heath and his companions, Mr. Schott and Schott’s two sons, spotted a creature while fishing at night on Lake Monona. It was “roughly 20 feet long” and shaped like the “bottom of a boat.” After Heath fired two shots into the fleeing serpent, “it turned around and came back” toward them, terrifying all on board. The author vacillates between gentle teasing and faithful reporting of the tale as Heath and Schott tell it. After noting that the same creature is probably to blame for the recent disappearance of a local dog who had been “swallowed” while swimming, the author quotes Schott’s shaken insistence that “the thing . . . is not a joke or a creature of their combined imaginations.” Whether what they saw was “really” a giant log, an abnormally large sturgeon, or a figment of moonlight and fancy, their story tells its own reality. What happens when a familiar place is suddenly made strange? When the lake no longer appears a place made solely for humans to fish, drink, dump, and swim?

If one sees oneself as separate from a place (rather than entangled with it) and if one expects to learn that place entirely, then the impulse to lash out against the unexpected stranger makes a certain kind of sense. As white settlers had only recently driven out Ho-Chunk and Ojibwa inhabitants to claim the land as their own, the frightened men’s desire to control their relatively new environment by force follows a clear logic. This is not, however, the only option. Violence against what at first seems strange need not be the way our stories help us know one another.
After these early encounters, Madison’s monster proves to be more trickster than terrorizer. Folklorist and State Historical Museum curator Charles E. Brown wrote a lovely 1942 pamphlet entitled *Sea Serpents*, which chronicles (among other things) twentieth-century sightings of Madison’s lake monster. Like the journalist above, Brown slips between faithfully retelling the reported sightings and offering tongue-in-cheek commentary.

The stories begin in 1917, with a UW student who finds a “very large object” resembling a fish scale on the beach at Picnic Point; the student diligently takes the strange object to an unnamed professor who, “being from New England and therefore familiar with the species,” confidently proclaims it to be the scale of a sea serpent. Brown goes on to list other 1917 sightings, including a fisherman who vividly describes witnessing a “large snake-like head, with large jaws and blazing eyes, emerge from the deep water” off Picnic Point. Certainly the most bizarre story belongs to a young woman (a co-ed, Brown calls her) who meets Lake Mendota’s monster while napping on a dock with her boyfriend. Twice she awoke to the sensation of something tickling her foot; the second time, she caught the culprit. A “snake or dragon” with a “friendly, humorous look in its big eyes” had peeked its enormous head out of the lake to “caress the soles of her feet” with its tongue. Brown’s pamphlet describes the lake monster as “a rather good natured animal, playing such pranks as overturning a few canoes with his body or tail,” chasing boats, and scaring swimmers on local beaches.

Unlike the violent tales of man-versus-monster we saw above, these stories come to know the “sea serpent” primarily through domestication—that is, they make its strangeness seem familiar. No longer a terrifying creature, it now resembles a big-eyed puppy or a friendly (albeit fire-eyed) cartoon dragon. While uninterested in violence, these stories do exert their own control, containing the monster by making it a caricature of itself. They do not yet linger in the weirdness or the wonder of existing entangled with such strangers.
By the 1940s, when Brown is writing *Sea Serpents*, the Mendota and Monona lake monster has already faded from the public’s view. In the final line of his pamphlet, Brown quips that “people use the lake more” now that the monster seems to have disappeared. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Madison’s lake monster appears rarely, and then most often in articles intended to entertain. The inaugural issue of the satirical magazine *The Onion* chose our monster for its very first headline: "Mendota Monster Mauls Madison." Such light-hearted fun is not, of course, the wrong way to tell a sea serpent story. But there are others at our disposal.

I propose this essay as a humble ode to the monsters of Lakes Mendota and Monona—to the wak ’tcexi and the sea serpent in all its forms. As the summer days stretch out in front us and the cool lakes beckon us to their waters, let the lurking creature invite us to wonder. The lake is already strange with fish and frogs and plankton, and stranger still with toxic loads, agricultural runoff, and invasive spiny water fleas. Let this monster story remind us that the waters make a weird entangled crowd. Let’s tread lightly.

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Taste of Homes: Food and Familiarity

AMANDA MCMILLAN LEQUIEU

Amanda Lequieu is PhD student in the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s joint departments of Sociology and Community and Environmental Sociology. In her research, she considers questions of place, rurality, community, and home. Her qualitative fieldwork has taken her from historical archives, to kitchen tables in dairyland Wisconsin, to red-dirt roads in post-war northern Uganda. When she wrote this piece in 2014, she was researching potential dissertation topics, teaching, and squirreling away garden produce for the long Wisconsin winter.
In 2008, I had just moved to France for my first job after college, and I approached the world with a doe-eyed wonder that, so I’ve been told, was darling and naïve to onlookers. But my birthday was in a week, so I took my darling naïveté and my high school-level language skills to the supermarché, determined to make the most authentic New York-style cheesecake to ward off my ever-encroaching homesickness.
For a country which delights in producing every consistency of cheese product from multiple lactating animals, finding a sticky, smooth chunk of Philadelphia cream cheese proved nigh impossible. I found fromage blanc and sheep emental, four kinds of chèvre, and several more variations of cave-aged bleu. I then painfully read every label in the “processed cheese” aisle and stuttered an attempted question to yet another confused store staffer about the “gateau au fromage” of my dreams. I held in my hand a tiny jar of ricotta. Close enough.

My stubbornness to find this specific iteration of a dairy product flummoxed my French neighbors. It is complicated, I explained in broken French, as I beat ricotta cheese and egg yolk into submission. When the sublime texture of real New York cheesecake with hints of lemon and vanilla slides across my tongue, I’m in a smoke-filled diner on Main Street, or my mother’s farmhouse kitchen, or at a classy restaurant in the city. Maybe with the help of birthday cheesecake this alien land of marshes and mistral winds would be a little more home and a little less strange. My roommates—that odd collection of Welsh, Czech, and Spanish expatriates—sat in the kitchen with me in quiet comradery. Over the next year, I watched them as they, too, chopped, peeled, salted, and whisked their way home in that very kitchen.
My roommates chopped, peeled, salted and whisked their way to home.

We may prepare food—but food certainly makes us.

The more transient we become, the more important “local” food is to us. Douglas Cazaux Sackman poetically examines this irony in a chapter on “Food” in an environmental history textbook. The frenetic exchange of money, people, technology, and cultures across borders may “actually promote—and indeed require—the construction of local identities.”

1
“Local” isn’t simply a question of scale. We know this, at a gut level. We know that in our recipes, we revise knowledge and tradition again and again, negotiating our nourished identity with new places and the passage of time. We immigrants, migrants, refugees, strangers, newcomers, we who are not really local in an era of mobility belong to several places at once.

Local is a familiar spread, as captured in this *Time World photo series*. Local is traditional Wisconsin Sunday picnics imported from Norway in 1877. Local is a steamed pork bun brought to Wisconsin by my mother-in-law from my husband’s favorite Chinese bakery in the Bay Area. Local is my Taiwanese friend disappearing into her kitchen for two days to prepare a lavish Chinese New Years’ feast to eat with her parents over Skype.

Yet, food embodies a paradox: food is made of change. In a culture of change and displacement, we cry for authenticity as our food systems span the globe. But how authentic is our food anymore? Can food be preserved in some original form as we the cooks change ourselves? Sackman quipped that “food and plants travel; people and culture travel; food in motion makes and remakes place—transports it. It at once *makes* the local, regional, national, and global; and it busts boundaries” (p. 543, emphasis added).
My twenty-second birthday cheesecake was one of many moment of crisis of a transitory life. Later that year, I chased down cranberry “compôte” to serve with a turkey leg for Thanksgiving; I discovered the joy of pizza with lardons instead of bacon, chèvre instead of mozzarella; I learned that kir is a magical mixture of wine and currant liquor, and realized that I never really knew what currants were. I created a new version of myself—neither authentically American nor entirely French.

Doreen Fernandez, a scholar of the Philippines, agrees. She argues that even when the very ingredients and farming techniques used by people in local environments remain unchanged over time, even indigenous food practices are not static cultural preservation. Foods reflect how fluid and negotiable cultural food traditions really are; they enhance, adapt, and subsume outside culinary influences, natural disasters, new ingredients, and revolutionary farming techniques. From pop-up restaurants to farmers’ markets, these little negotiations are woven into Filipino food, and thus into Filipino bodies, memories, and environments. Little changes in food craft, little changes in food-makers.

Through little adaptations to new places over time, we negotiate then and now. Still, though perhaps less frantically, I cling to traditions that make me who I am. With every meal, I hope that familiar tastes recreate me into someone who fits a little better in the worlds in-between here and home. I cast backward glances, contemplating when and where was home, even as I make space for myself in a new place. Perhaps we have the power to do so by stomping around supermarchés in pursuit of the perfect soft cheese.

Featured Image: The author preparing cheesecake.
• *Whisking Their Way Home – Amanda McMillan Lequieu* by Amanda McMillan Lequieu

• *Amanda McMillan Lequieu – Gathering* by Amanda McMillan Lequieu

• *Tomatoes* by Amanda McMillan Lequieu
Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language — so the argument runs — must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have

This is the classic essay that “criticizes the ‘ugly and inaccurate’ written English of [Orwell’s] time and examines the connection between political orthodoxies and the debasement of language.” (Wikipedia) It was originally published in 1946, in the journal Horizon.
said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.

These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad — I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen — but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer. They are a little below the average, but are fairly representative examples. I number them so that I can refer back to them when necessary:

[1] I am not, indeed, sure whether it is not true to say that the Milton who once seemed not unlike a seventeenth-century Shelley had not become, out of an experience ever more bitter in each year, more alien [sic] to the founder of that Jesuit sect which nothing could induce him to tolerate.

Professor Harold Laski (Essay in *Freedom of Expression*)

[2] Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic put up with for tolerate, or put at a loss for bewilder.

Professor Lancelot Hogben (*Interglossia*)

[3] On the one side we have the free personality: by definition it is not neurotic, for it has neither conflict nor dream. Its desires, such as they are, are transparent, for they are just what institutional approval keeps in the forefront of consciousness; another institutional pattern would alter their number and intensity; there is little in them that is natural, irreducible, or culturally dangerous. But on the other side, the social bond itself is nothing but the mutual reflection of these self-secure integrities. Recall the definition of love. Is not this the very picture of a small academic? Where is there a place in this hall of mirrors for either personality or fraternity?

Essay on psychology in Politics (New York)

[4] All the ‘best people’ from the gentlemen’s clubs, and all the frantic fascist captains, united in common hatred of Socialism and bestial horror at the rising tide of the mass revolutionary movement, have turned to acts of provocation, to foul incendiarism, to medieval legends of poisoned wells, to legalize their own destruction of proletarian organizations, and rouse the agitated petty-bourgeoisie to chauvinistic fervor on behalf of the fight against the revolutionary way out of the crisis.
If a new spirit is to be infused into this old country, there is one thorny and contentious reform which must be tackled, and that is the humanization and galvanization of the B.B.C. Timidity here will bespeak canker and atrophy of the soul. The heart of Britain may be sound and of strong beat, for instance, but the British lion's roar at present is like that of Bottom in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream—as gentle as any sucking dove. A virile new Britain cannot continue indefinitely to be traduced in the eyes or rather ears, of the world by the effete languors of Langham Place, brazenly masquerading as 'standard English'. When the Voice of Britain is heard at nine o'clock, better far and infinitely less ludicrous to hear aitches honestly dropped than the present priggish, inflated, inhibited, school-ma'amish arch braying of blameless bashful mewing maidens!

Letter in Tribune

Each of these passages has faults of its own, but, quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house. I list below, with notes and examples, various of the tricks by means of which the work of prose-construction is habitually dodged.

DYING METAPHORS

A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically 'dead' (e.g. iron resolution) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness. But in between these two classes there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. Examples are: Ring the changes on, take up the cudgel for, toe the line, ride
roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, no axe to grind, grist to the mill, fishing in troubled waters, on the order of the day, Achilles’ heel, swan song, hotbed. Many of these are used without knowledge of their meaning (what is a ‘rift’, for instance?), and incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying. Some metaphors now current have been twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact. For example, toe the line is sometimes written as tow the line. Another example is the hammer and the anvil, now always used with the implication that the anvil gets the worst of it. In real life it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer, never the other way about: a writer who stopped to think what he was saying would avoid perverting the original phrase.

**OPERATORS OR VERBAL FALSE LIMBS**

These save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Characteristic phrases are render inoperative, militate against, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of, etc., etc. The keynote is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as break, stop, spoil, mend, kill, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verb such as prove, serve, form, play, render. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (by examination of instead of by examining). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the -ize and de- formations, and the banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the not un- formation. Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as with respect to, having regard to, the fact that, by dint of, in view of, in the interests of, on the hypothesis that; and the ends of sentences are saved by anticlimax by such resounding commonplaces as greatly to be desired, cannot be left out of account, a development to be expected in the near future, deserving of serious consideration, brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and so on and so forth.

**PRETENTIOUS DICTION**

Words like phenomenon, element, individual (as noun), objective, categorical, effective, virtual, basic, primary, promote, constitute, exhibit, exploit, utilize, elim-
inate, liquidate, are used to dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements. Adjectives like epoch-making, epic, historic, unforgettable, triumphant, age-old, inevitable, inexorable, veritable, are used to dignify the sordid process of international politics, while writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic colour, its characteristic words being: realm, throne, chariot, mailed fist, trident, sword, shield, buckler, banner, jackboot, clarion. Foreign words and expressions such as cul de sac, ancien régime, deus ex machina, mutatis mutandis, status quo, gleichschaltung, weltanschauung, are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Except for the useful abbreviations i.e., e.g. and etc., there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in the English language. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political, and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like expedite, ameliorate, predict, extraneous, deracinated, clandestine, subaqueous, and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon numbers. The jargon peculiar to Marxist writing (hyena, hangman, cannibal, petty bourgeois, these gentry, lackey, flunkey, mad dog, White Guard, etc.) consists largely of words translated from Russian, German, or French; but the normal way of coining a new word is to use Latin or Greek root with the appropriate affix and, where necessary, the size formation. It is often easier to make up words of this kind (deregionalize, impermissible, extramarital, non-fragmentary and so forth) than to think up the English words that will cover one's meaning. The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness.

MEANINGLESS WORDS

In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. Words like romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality, as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly ever expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of Mr. X's work is its living quality', while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness', the reader accepts this as a simple difference opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words dead and living, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way. Many political words are similarly abused. The word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'. The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled.
with one another. In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. Statements like Marshal Petain was a true patriot, The Soviet press is the freest in the world, The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution, are almost always made with intent to deceive. Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality.

Now that I have made this catalogue of swindles and perversions, let me give another example of the kind of writing that they lead to. This time it must of its nature be an imaginary one. I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here it is in modern English:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

This is a parody, but not a very gross one. Exhibit [3] above, for instance, contains several patches of the same kind of English. It will be seen that I have not made a full translation. The beginning and ending of the sentence follow the original meaning fairly closely, but in the middle the concrete illustrations — race, battle, bread — dissolve into the vague phrases 'success or failure in competitive activities'. This had to be so, because no modern writer of the kind I am discussing — no one capable of using phrases like 'objective considerations of contemporary phenomena' — would ever tabulate his thoughts in that precise and detailed way. The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness. Now analyze these two sentences a little more closely. The first contains forty-nine words but only sixty syllables, and all its words are those of everyday life. The second contains thirty-eight words of ninety syllables: eighteen of those words are from
Latin roots, and one from Greek. The first sentence contains six vivid images, and only one phrase ('time and chance') that could be called vague. The second contains not a single fresh, arresting phrase, and in spite of its ninety syllables it gives only a shortened version of the meaning contained in the first. Yet without a doubt it is the second kind of sentence that is gaining ground in modern English. I do not want to exaggerate. This kind of writing is not yet universal, and outcrops of simplicity will occur here and there in the worst-written page. Still, if you or I were told to write a few lines on the uncertainty of human fortunes, we should probably come much nearer to my imaginary sentence than to the one from Ecclesiastes.

As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy. It is easier — even quicker, once you have the habit — to say In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that than to say I think. If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don’t have to hunt about for the words; you also don’t have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious. When you are composing in a hurry — when you are dictating to a stenographer, for instance, or making a public speech — it is natural to fall into a pretentious, Latinized style. Tags like a consideration which we should do well to bear in mind or a conclusion to which all of us would readily assent will save many a sentence from coming down with a bump. By using stale metaphors, similes, and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself. This is the significance of mixed metaphors. The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash — as in The Fascist octopus has sung its swan song, the jackboot is thrown into the melting pot — it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming; in other words he is not really thinking. Look again at the examples I gave at the beginning of this essay. Professor Laski [1] uses five negatives in fifty three words. One of these is superfluous, making nonsense of the whole passage, and in addition there is the slip — alien for akin — making further nonsense, and several avoidable pieces of clumsiness which increase the general vagueness. Professor Hogben [2] plays ducks and drakes with a battery which is able to write prescriptions, and, while disapproving of the everyday phrase put up with, is unwilling to look egregious up in the dictionary and see what it means; [3], if one takes an uncharitable attitude towards it, is simply meaningless: probably one could work out its intended meaning by reading the whole of the article in which it occurs. In [4], the writer knows more or less what he wants to say, but an accumulation of stale phrases chokes him like tea leaves.
blocking a sink. In [5], words and meaning have almost parted company. People who write in this manner usually have a general emotional meaning — they dislike one thing and want to express solidarity with another — but they are not interested in the detail of what they are saying. A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. The will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent — and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a ‘party line’. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White papers and the speeches of undersecretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, homemade turn of speech. When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases — bestial, atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder — one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker’s spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved, as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus
political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, ‘I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so’. Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.

The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics’. All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find — this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify — that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship.

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient. Phrases like a not unjustifiable assumption, leaves much to be desired, would serve no good purpose, a consideration which we should do well to bear in mind, are a continuous temptation, a packet of aspirins always at one’s elbow. Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against. By this morning’s post I have received a pamphlet dealing with conditions in Germany. The author tells me that he ‘felt impelled’ to write it. I open it at random, and here is almost the first sentence I see: ‘[The Allies] have an opportunity
not only of achieving a radical transformation of Germany’s social and political structure in such a way as to avoid a nationalistic reaction in Germany itself, but at the same time of laying the foundations of a co-operative and unified Europe.

You see, he ‘feels impelled’ to write — feels, presumably, that he has something new to say — and yet his words, like cavalry horses answering the bugle, group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern. This invasion of one’s mind by ready-made phrases (lay the foundations, achieve a radical transformation) can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one’s brain.

I said earlier that the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of a language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority. Two recent examples were explore every avenue and leave no stone unturned, which were killed by the jeers of a few journalists. There is a long list of flyblown metaphors which could similarly be got rid of if enough people would interest themselves in the job; and it should also be possible to laugh the not unformation out of existence, to reduce the amount of Latin and Greek in the average sentence, to drive out foreign phrases and strained scientific words, and, in general, to make pretentiousness unfashionable. But all these are minor points. The defence of the English language implies more than this, and perhaps it is best to start by saying what it does not imply.

To begin with it has nothing to do with archaism, with the salvaging of obsolete words and turns of speech, or with the setting up of a ‘standard English’ which must never be departed from. On the contrary, it is especially concerned with the scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn its usefulness. It has nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one’s meaning clear, or with the avoidance of Americanisms, or with having what is called a ‘good prose style’. On the other hand, it is not concerned with fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial. Nor does it even imply in every case preferring the Saxon word to the Latin one, though it does imply using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one’s meaning. What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualising you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and
unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning. Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures and sensations. Afterward one can choose — not simply accept — the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impressions one's words are likely to make on another person. This last effort of the mind cuts out all stale or mixed images, all prefabricated phrases, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally. But one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

These rules sound elementary, and so they are, but they demand a deep change of attitude in anyone who has grown used to writing in the style now fashionable. One could keep all of them and still write bad English, but one could not write the kind of stuff that I quoted in those five specimens at the beginning of this article.

I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless
phrase — some jackboot, Achilles’ heel, hotbed, melting pot, acid test, veritable inferno, or other lump of verbal refuse — into the dustbin where it belongs.
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The terms language and vulnerability come together in many ways. There is the vulnerability of infants, who quickly perceive they are nonverbal beings in a verbal world and for whom acquiring language becomes the central focus of effort. There is the vulnerability of the dislocated—travelers, migrants, immigrants, refugees, deportees. As a geographic fact, the multiplicity of languages on the planet challenges those who move and those who receive them. As a social fact, that multiplicity endlessly generates dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment: state-based disenfranchisements of minority languages; gatekeeping that limits access to languages of power; war scenarios in which invader and invaded cannot communicate or must rely on the strategic, suspect power of bilinguals. Imperial states often seek to homogenize themselves linguistically, creating their own linguistic vulnerabilities, as when English-only passions in the United States turned into language panic after 9/11. There is the riskiness of speech itself, the dangers of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time or using the wrong language at the wrong time, the harms of lies, the wounding powers of insult and epithet, the deadly verbal scripts of interrogation and torture. Vulnerability itself generates vulnerability when it becomes an alibi for interventions or imposes silence.

I spoke of these topics at the MLA roundtable The Politics of Language in Vulnerable Times. But not long after, I had an experience that brought me back around to the form of linguistic vulnerability that springs most readily to people’s minds: the steady disappearance of human languages at a pace unprecedented in the history of the planet. The subject comes up often, and when it does (including in my own work), it gets immediately swathed in numbing statistics—there are six thousand languages, and half will be gone by the end of the century; a language dies every two weeks. This discourse, derived mainly from United Nations
pronouncements,\(^1\) produces what Jennifer Wenzel brilliantly calls a “quarantine of the imagination” on the subject of language loss (“Reading”; see also Wenzel, *Bulletproof*). Stock phrases exhaust the subject in a sentence or two and elide the radically uneven nature of the process, the way it is lived by those who are living it, the question of what actually is lost and to whom. Languages disappear only through being displaced by more powerful languages, which by one means or another (mainly by schooling) succeed in interrupting the steady passing down of languages from older to younger speakers. Instead of speaking of language death, loss, or murder, linguists often avoid the elegiac and speak of language shift—but this is another imaginative quarantine. For, of course, the shift always involves loss, both to the last, long generations who live it and—as they know—to the world that loses the lessons that the language had to teach. Declaring the world’s languages to be the patrimony of all humanity, as the United Nations has done, likewise veils the unevennesses of the process and the stakes, even as it calls for attention. For all languages belong to their speakers in a way they do not belong to everyone else. Here I briefly attempt to break through the imaginative quarantine on language loss, or rather to describe the work of an artist who is devoting his creative powers to doing so, in the knowledge that lessons in losing will be sorely needed by the generations of human beings who are going to live out the unpredictable unfolding of ecological breakdown.

It was the opening day of New York University’s Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics biennial Encuentro in June 2014, held at Concordia University. I almost didn’t make Tomson Highway’s keynote. The map of Montreal crinkled in my lap as I barked street names at my driving companion and begged pedestrians for directions to a parking garage. I’d been reaching out for Highway’s work for three decades. This would be my first, maybe only chance to hear him live. We were lucky—the session started late. Highway began with lengthy, elaborate greetings in French, then Cree, then English. “I am a full-blooded Cree Indian,” he announced to his audience of Latin Americans, Americans, and Canadians. “My mother tongue, the language I grew up in, the language I most often dream in, is one of the most beautiful languages that has ever existed on earth, one of the most ancient in this hemisphere, and it is going to disappear.”

Not everyone thinks that Cree, an Algonquian language now spoken by around a hundred thousand people across the Canadian north, is going to disappear, but Highway, a playwright, novelist, concert pianist, composer, librettist, perfor-


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mance artist, and humorist, does.\(^2\) He has made it a challenge of his life and work to live his place in that losing fully and consciously and convey its force and depth to others.\(^3\) One of his prized tools is laughter. Chuckles, playfulness, and silly jokes punctuated his speech, intercepting nostalgia, sentimentality, and rage (though not grief). Cree, he said, is “the world’s funniest language”; it arose from “the laughter of a cosmic clown.” In his Encuentro keynote, he sought to break the imaginative quarantine on language loss through the powers of the fully fluent, accomplished native speaker who is able, as he put it, to “dig his way through the warp and weave” of the doomed language still so fully alive in and for himself. In the course of conveying the social and imaginative stakes in the disappearance of Cree, he performed a response to another question: By what science of dwelling can a fluent native speaker inhabit a vulnerable language in love, joy, and plenitude, knowing that its life is finite as her or his own?\(^4\) How is such a losing to be lived?

Highway began with geography, a gigantic, resplendent satellite image of the Canadian north on a twenty-foot screen, without which, none of us would understand anything he was going to say. This is a world of “mind-boggling vastness . . . that none of you knows anything about.” Nunavut, sweeping across the screen, is the size of all of western Europe, including Scandinavia, with a popu-

2. Current census data determine the Cree population as a whole at about two hundred thousand.

3. The life story of Highway is one no subsequent generation will ever be able to tell. He was born in 1951 into a family of hunters on the north edge of Manitoba. One of twelve children (of whom six survived to adulthood), he spent his early years in the vast expanses of lakes and pines, following caribou herds by canoe in summer and trappers by dogsled in winter, speaking only Cree and Dene, the language of fellow inhabitants of the region. The first European language he heard, he says, was not English or French but Latin. The Catholic church had long been entrenched in the region, and the local Cree-speaking priest persuaded Highway’s parents to send their two youngest sons, Tomson and his brother Rene, to a residential school for aboriginal children. Their contact with English began there and eventually led them to high school in Winnipeg, where Tomson trained as a classical pianist and Rene as a dancer. After completing university and seven years as a social worker among Canadian native people, Highway began his career as a writer in the 1980s. His works, many published in both Cree and English, include the plays The Rez Sisters (1996), Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (1999), and Rose (2000); the autobiographical novel Kiss of the Fur Queen (1998); and a one-woman musical, The (Post) Mistress (2011).

4. I take the beautiful term “science of dwelling” from a lecture by Elizabeth Povinelli (“Geontologies”) and from her brilliant study over many decades of the life-building work of a small Australian aboriginal group aimed not at preserving authenticity but at providing their young with viable meaningful ways of living the aftermath of colonialism (Economies).
lation of 35,000. Imagine France, with only a thousand people (chuckles, scattered applause). Growing up in his part of the world, on the border of Manitoba and Nunavut, meant having fifty lakes, not a few meters of beach, all to yourself. The Cree language he learned growing up in the 1950s was embedded in the geography, ecology, and isolation of this region; its cosmologies were constructed in and on that place, reproduced there through generations of native speakers alongside Dene, an even more ancient language of the region. Many people learned both. Nobody around him spoke French or English.

Jorge Luis Borges in his brief text “The Witness” imagines the death of “the last man who has seen the face of Woden.” Highway wanted his audience not just to imagine the last person on earth who dreams in Cree but also to imagine Cree, to attend to its gifts, its rhythm and design. “Pay attention,” he said, “this won’t come your way again.” He conjugated verbs—to breathe, to suffer, to stink or go sour, subjunctives included. He offered the word for skirt, coded as “dress cut in half.” One, two, three skirts. With hilarity, he described the ritual of the Hail Mary contest: a whole village on its knees in the main street, rosaries rattling in hands. With a starting pistol the priest kicks off the competition to see who can say the rosary the fastest, in Cree. Highway performed it, awarded himself the prize (more laughter and applause). He gave us a sentence that, in a room full of Cree speakers, always triggers instant hilarity. In English it means (merely), “Who just came in the door?” We laughed, imagining how this could indeed always be funny.

Then he got down to the serious business of semantic design. Speakers of European languages do not and cannot know, he said, what it is like to be formed by a language that has no grammatical gender. Or what it is like to then discover that the languages of power around you all divide the world into two, and only two, genders, one subordinated to the other. European languages are “obsessed with gender,” a trait connected for him with Judeo-Christianity’s “monotheistic, phallic superstructure,” which has no room for a female divine or for a capacious multiplicity of genders that does not pit one against the other.

In Cree, as in other Amerindian languages, the key grammatical distinction is between things that are animate, endowed with soul or spirit, and things that are not. In Cree, Highway explained, the former are marked by the pre-

5. Nunavut, formerly known as the Northwest Territories, was created as an autonomous self-governing region of Canada in 1999.

6. Highway explicitly connects a rigid gender binary with the history of brutal, often sadistic, murders of aboriginal women in Canadian cities. As I write these words, in August 2014, newspaper headlines are reporting another such murder, of fifteen-year-old Teresa Fontaine, in Winnipeg.
fix aná-, the latter by the prefix animá-. As with grammatical gender, the distinction sometimes seems arbitrary but often is not. For example, the processing of raw materials into usable products involves a shift from having spirit to not having it. The word for cow is marked as animate; steak is cow inanimate. The word for tree carries the marker for animacy; chair is the same word, but marked for inanimacy or absence of spirit. So a chair is a tree that has had its soul or spirit removed. Likewise, the word for rock carries the animacy or spirit marker; cement or sidewalk is the same word but with the inanimacy marker. Processed or manufactured objects, in other words, are coded as inanimate or despiritualized versions of their animate raw materials, as something like the after-lives of the things they were made from (those are my words, not Highway’s). The distinction does not carry a negative valence but rather marks a transformation from one form of energy to another. Dead or deanimated things remain among us in different form. The live body, of course, is animate, but individual body parts—leg, hand, head—are marked as without spirit or animacy. There are three exceptions, however: the vagina, the womb, and the anus, all coded as having life and spirit of their own. The first two are capacious spaces of life, the third the birthplace of the trickster and laughter, enabling Cree, said highway, to conceive of “a female god who laughs and laughs and laughs.”

“Don’t let these ideas upset you,” he said. Cree is a disappearing language, and this is “the last gasp,” “the Goddess’s farewell tour . . . a chance to say farewell to an idea that might have worked at one time in history.” At the same time, he demanded an afterlife: “The time has come to listen to other people’s sacred stories. . . . We need to allow our languages to lead us back to the garden and make the serpent speak to the man and not the woman.” We ought to see to it, in other words, that Cree passes on some of its transformative semantic powers: the power to “bend the straight line of the phallic into the circle of the ionic,” which has space for everything; the power to give nature back its soul; the chance to ditch the story of expulsion from the garden and of entitlement to domination of the nonhuman world. What we might want to call exit routes from Western humanism (again, my words, not Highway’s).

Highway’s garden is already in flames. As oxygen-depleting forest fires, driven by insect plagues and drought, increasingly devour the north and move down toward southern cities like Montreal, the long last gasps of Cree will merge into what are increasingly likely to be the long last gasps of carbon-based life on the planet. If, as now seems inevitable, the unfolding “environmental catastrophe of capitalism” (Povinelli, “Geontologies”) makes living loss into a core experience, unevenly distributed, of every remaining generation of living creatures, the matter of how to live the losing becomes a central social and imaginative challenge to human existence. Developing that sad new science of dwelling, clear-eyed, in
the remains of the garden, is going to call for the powers and wisdom of the cosmic clown, the goddess who laughs and laughs.

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STUDENT AWARD-WINNING ESSAY: NARRATIVE
Fallen Through the Cracks

JULIA FRAMSTAD

There was a span of three weeks when I thought my ex-boyfriend was dead. He had been missing. Not legally, but he was missing. I knew he was unreliable, but up until this point it had never seemed quite as dangerous. It quickly went from being a case where I thought, “Wow, he’s late,” to one where I realized, “He hasn’t been home in three days.” When his roommate and I went to the police, they told us he did not count as a missing person; he was an adult with no job and no family, and he was not enrolled in school. The police officer kindly explained to us they had no reason to look for him. My ex-boyfriend was just another number at this point, a number I’m sure the police officer had seen many times before.

My hometown had a high population of drug addicts, many of whom were young, unemployed, and could go missing without causing a riot. But to me this didn’t seem right. How could we not look for someone who had vanished? It didn’t make sense. There was nothing to be done. Weeks went by, and then suddenly he existed again. It was out of nowhere; one day he just came home. No recollection of the four weeks prior, just suddenly he was there again. Not much was known about what filled in the blanks of the weeks that he ceased to exist—a lot of crack cocaine, but not many details.

If you ever love a drug addict, know this: there is no right way to feel. They become two people. One of them—the good one, the one not on drugs—you love. A part of you will always see them as how they once were before everything went downhill. The other one—the one hooked on drugs—becomes someone you can barely recognize. But they’re one person—your best friend and this stranger, intertwined. It’s normal to feel angry because you didn’t ask for this, but then you feel guilty for being angry because they are sick. There is no moving on for them. They’re never going to wake up one day and see the light—but maybe, just maybe, they’ll hit rock bottom. You hope for the worst so that something might possibly change. But then his best friend dies from a heroin overdose, and he doesn’t blink an eye. You realize he’s in too deep. There is no longer anything you can do. The only thing to do now is move on with your life and try to make things better for you. Even if there will always be a part of your heart holding out for them, wishing them to fight their way through. And possibly the saddest part of all is that when it’s over and it’s gone, you almost wish that you could have all that bad stuff back so that you could have the good.

Most drug addicts don’t wake up one morning and decide today is the day to mess up their life. They don’t get into drugs because they were just thinking,
“Why not?” When people don’t hold real value to their life, it doesn’t seem like a huge deal for them to overdose or wind up in a ditch. They’re so wrapped up in their world of intoxication they can’t see how what they do kills the people who love them.

When you’re caring for someone with a life-threatening drug dependence, especially at a young age, your feelings no longer matter. You hear my friends cry about their boyfriends taking too long to text them back—little do they know yours is on a drug binge and has been nonexistent for weeks. All the little things that used to bug you no longer mean anything, because the stakes are higher. You wouldn’t want to say something to set him off or upset him because you never want to be the reason he runs back to the drugs.

He wasn’t always this way. We met my freshman year of high school, and at the time he was just a guy. He was an extremely smart guy – far smarter than me – and he had so much potential. People change, things happen to you, they change you, and then you’re never the same again.

It started small for him. He used to smoke marijuana with some friends. He thought of it as harmless. He had terrible anxiety, and he believed the weed was the only way for him to stay calm. His parents didn’t exactly share the same viewpoint. During his senior year of high school, his parents kicked him out. Suddenly he was seventeen, living on a different friend’s couch every week. He was able to graduate, start college at the nearby university, and work a full-time labor job. That’s when the universe worked against him. He got into a car accident. His car now totaled, he had to drop out of school. His collar bone was broken, his back messed up. He could no longer perform the labor of his job, so he lost it. He was in pain, but now lacking health insurance after his family cut him off, he had to turn to desperate measures. Going to the streets, he was able to get some cheap opiates to make the pain go away. When it came to paying his rent, it seemed the only way to get by was to sell drugs. That was his pathway into addiction. Suddenly he relied on the drugs not just for fixing his shoulder but for staying alive.

Loving someone who loves drugs more is a difficult thing to do because unless you’re a drug lover yourself, you simply can’t understand. I’ve never done drugs, so I’ve never understood the appeal. You spend money on something with the purpose of hurting yourself. You get caught with it, you get arrested. It all seems so risky and unnecessary; yet for others it’s what gets them through the day. I will more than likely never understand addiction. Or why my ex-boyfriend does what he does. A lot of people like to act like they get it, like they know what it’s like and how all they have to do is stop. Yet I think this is where the beauty lies in ignorance. You’ll never understand addiction until you yourself need a pill to
make life seem bearable. I wouldn’t wish for anyone to understand addiction. Because the only way to understand it is to have it.

INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

The first unit of this English 100 class asked students to reflect and write about their personal experiences of coming to know something—instances when something finally “clicked” for them, or “ah-ha” moments. The final writing project of the unit asked students to revise and remediate one of their short assignments into a blog post, which challenged them to think more deeply about making sense for others as well as for themselves.

Julia harnesses the skills of reflective, narrative, and descriptive writing she practiced throughout the unit in order to make sense of a relationship that had a significant impact on her life. Grappling with the memories, emotions, and newfound understanding of addiction (and love and grief) through the construction of narrative proved an uncomfortable but ultimately a revelatory process—significantly, for Julia’s audience as well as for herself. In her process of revision, Julia had to think about who she was writing for and for what purpose. What does her audience stand to gain by reading about this experience of hers? Might she address readers who have loved someone with an addiction themselves in order to communicate to them that they’re not alone? Or perhaps she could speak to readers who aren’t familiar with drug addiction in order to frame the way they view the disease and those who struggle with it? Could she possibly speak to both? The final essay’s transitions between narrative of past events and reflection from the moment of writing look not only inward but outward, self-consciously constructing a trajectory of “private” contemplation that is accessible to and meaningful for a public audience.

–Angela Zito

WRITER’S MEMO

The assignment was to tell about a time we came to understand something. I grappled with this idea and found myself incredibly uninspired. Yet I found when I let myself write freely and really let my thoughts fall on the paper, the story came out naturally. When I focused less on what I was supposed to be thinking and writing about, I found what I needed to write about. In this process, I made the realization through my writing. I realized something different from the assignment. Instead of something I understand, after writing my paper I concluded I was nowhere near a point of understanding.
At first, I was a little uncomfortable with how vulnerable I had been in the telling of the story, and I experienced the natural inclination to pull back and close off from my writing. Honesty can have a funny way of making you very uncomfortable in your own skin, and in this case, uncomfortable in your own words. Through the peer-review process and feedback from my teacher, I acknowledged just how good honesty can feel. I became more confident in my piece and was able to give the reader a greater insight into my story.

Looking back now, I don't believe there is anything I would change about my writing. There are parts that when I re-read now I cringe at, but I'm starting to learn through writing the importance of being uncomfortable. Vulnerability can be a beautiful thing and without it I would not have found the words that formed this piece.

— Julia Framstad

Student Writing Award: Narrative Essay
The Post-Antibiotic Era: An Imaginative Remediation of “The Spread of Superbugs” from The Economist

JARED GODFREY

It could be a beautiful spring day in Madison, Wisconsin. The sun is shining brightly down on the sidewalks, and the Madison lakes have their normal green tinge. There is a nice cool breeze coming off of Lake Mendota, making the newly budding spring trees sway. Despite the simplicity of this scene, there is something wrong—a hidden danger of sorts.

The year is 2030, and the world is in an era of an extreme plague of superbugs. This semi-apocalyptic period was no surprise. Alexander Fleming, the man who discovered penicillin, said in 1941, “There is the danger, that the ignorant man may easily underdose himself and by exposing his microbes to non-lethal quantities of the drug make them resistant” (“Superbugs”). This underexposure, however, is not the only factor that has led the world to its current state. The convenience of overusing and abusing antibiotics in agriculture is the major reason the world has reverted back to 19th century medical times. Until recently, it was widely thought that those who misuse antibiotics would not be the ones to pay the cost. While this mindset of convenience and even laziness was thought to be easily afforded by America’s rich—we’ve realized that bacteria know no bounds and will replicate anywhere they see fit.

Only 15 years ago, we thought there were three possible paths the world could take to avoid where we are now in this plague of superbugs. The first option was to crack down on doctors’ prescriptions of unnecessary antibiotics for ailments like colds and the flu. The second included severely limiting agricultural use. And the last option, the one we unconsciously and foolishly thought would be best, was to do nothing. Sadly, something terrible happened instead, as we saw the results of overusing antibiotics start to catch up with us in the following years.

The regression of earth’s medical practices back to those of the 19th century went unnoticed for the first few years. Poorer countries saw huge upticks in methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), otherwise known to most as that-scary-microorganism- that-you-only-ever-hear-about. In order to save people infected with MRSA, they needed to go to upscale hospitals, which were
only found in developed countries. The consequence was the downfall of many third world countries, including Liberia and Bangladesh, because they couldn’t afford the resources more developed countries had. Many drug companies in the United States had started to study new antibiotics for bacteria such as MRSA but they terminated this research after they decided it was a money black hole. Soon after the research ceased to exist, the western world saw its own considerable rise in antibiotic resistant bacteria. Beginning in 2011, there were rates of nearly 450,000 new cases of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis each year, and one-third of those people died. The number of new cases started to double each year, until it was out of control. For each patient with resistant tuberculosis, hospitals could treat 200 patients with the less lethal varieties of tuberculosis, but when the numbers grew wildly out of hand, hospitals even in the United States didn’t have the resources to cope. As the cases of tuberculosis rose, and the hospital rate of treatment decreased, the death rate from tuberculosis skyrocketed. This signaled the downfall of the world as it had once been known. Today in 2030, 90 percent of our current population has tuberculosis. Of those 90 percent, 80 percent develop symptoms leading to death. These levels of tuberculosis haven’t been witnessed since the 19th century.

Our family has its own personal story with the microbe. My father thought it was just a cold. He came home from work one day with the slightest tingling in his chest. As the night went on he developed a trivial cough, so he decided to go to bed a little early. The following day his cough had gotten so bad the whole house seemed to shake with each forceful expulsion of air. And each desperate inhale of breath just rattled, making each gasp an attempt at life. The next day he decided to see his doctor. The physician performed myriad tests, one of which came back positive for multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. We were devastated—there was nothing the doctors could do. Over the next few weeks his cough turned bloody, and his appetite waned. Then he started losing weight. By the time he had infected the other people in my family, the bacteria had “consumed” him, and he died. (In the 19th century this disease was known as consumption, caused by the microorganism Mycobacterium tuberculosis.) I was fortunate enough to remain uninfected, but the rest of my family met the same outcome as my father.

Today, Madison in 2030 is missing the lively attitude spring used to bring in May. There is no sound—only silence. There are no birds hanging onto trees, or squirrels tearing across streets. And wildlife hasn’t been the only casualty, as people are walking past me without interacting with each other. No one’s hugging, kissing, shaking hands or even saying hello to each other. Everyone is carrying out their lives as far away from each other as possible. People seem like aliens—strangers to their once normal lives. The entirety of the estranged populous now wears blue surgical masks, and latex gloves. They are covered in an
antimicrobial plastic. No one washes their hands or uses hand sanitizer any-
more, as it simply isn’t enough to eradicate the microbes. The best thing peo-
ple can do for protection is to barricade themselves from the outer world. Each
morning, even I must fulfill the new guidelines of the U.S. government, by don-
nning my own plastic, impermeable bubble. As I look through my tainted plastic
window on the dismal world, I still think it could have been prevented.

Even though this so called “impermeable” bubble around us is not 100 percent
effective, that is not to say it hasn’t saved many lives. New bacterial infections
have come to an almost complete standstill here in the U.S. ever since people
began to wear them. Still, along with this success, we have some less noticed
issues as well. The risk of infection during surgeries has skyrocketed over 20 per-
cent, so only absolutely necessary lifesaving procedures are performed. If a per-
son’s eyes are ruined from cataracts, there are no options for repair. One cannot
walk a block without someone running into them because all they see is a col-
orful dull blur of the world. Even plastic surgery has ceased to exist, which might
seem like a trivial effect, but many people used to rely on it for ease of life after
serious accidents.

Today, everyone walking past me on the street has a story about their family
members, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances that have been sickened by a
resistant bacterial infection. However, all is not lost. Now that people have been
sickened there is a huge movement to reserve the few effective antibiotics left
for the direst of situations. Giving antibiotics to cattle, along with other agricul-
tural uses for the drugs, has completely stopped. We have adapted to smaller
meat portions and higher prices. No one asks for antibiotics anymore. They
know that if they are healthy enough to ask for them, they don’t need them.
Now that there are huge outbreaks of resistant bacteria, drug companies have
suddenly picked their self-centered carcasses off their couches and gone back
into the lab. New drugs are promised within months and then this whole crisis
is promised to be over.

But nothing is absolute—as we’ve seen in the past. And it could have been over
a lot faster, or even never started if we had been less selfish and short-sighted
to begin with. Millions of people did not have to become sickened and fall
victim to the egocentricity of individuals who misused antibiotics. If the masses
around the world had followed the great advice from science’s best and bright-
est minds, our world would not have fallen victim to the merciless bacteria.

Reference

INSTRUCTOR'S MEMO

For their Sequence Three final project, I asked my class to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between genre and argument by remixing or remediating an existing text. Students were asked to take a clear stance on an issue and then choose a genre that would effectively convince a reader of their claims. Jared was interested in rewriting an article from The Economist called “The Spread of Superbugs,” which he felt did not do a good enough job of spreading the message of antibiotic resistance to a general public not already interested in the science behind it. He felt that using some kind of storytelling genre would better illustrate the argument the article was trying to make, and also make that argument more convincing to a larger audience.

At our one-on-one conferences and during peer workshops, Jared showed that he was not afraid to try new things or arrive at the best possible choices through trial and error. After attempting to write a letter to today’s audience from the future, he decided that adding a time travel element unnecessarily cluttered up his objectives, and he chose to write a speculative fiction narrative based on current research instead. Throughout Sequences One and Two, Jared had already demonstrated his strength in narrative writing and his understanding of the different ways that narratives can be used to stimulate desired reader responses through things such as emotional appeals, imagery, sensory details, and actively engaging the imagination. I feel that his final paper very cleverly plays to his strengths while also achieving his rhetorical goal of spreading information about the dangers of antibiotic resistance in a very creative way. It is an enjoyable piece to read, which makes it powerful because it can speak to those who might otherwise turn away from an alarming topic.

—Sunny Chan

WRITER'S MEMO

In the first few weeks of class we focused mainly on the narrative writing form. While I had some experience writing narratives prior to the class, I had never worked as extensively on the editing and revision process as at the beginning of the semester. I learned through this process how much I enjoyed writing in the narrative form, as well as how much I could capture through this method.

By the end of the semester, in Sequence 3, we were given free rein in choosing a form for our final project. We were assigned the task of remediating the content of an article that interested us. After an initial state of being overwhelmed with coming up with an interesting topic as well as an interesting article, I finally
had a revelation. I narrowed down my interests and started looking for articles on antibiotic resistance, as this subject concerns me and I was curious to learn more about the issue. When I came across the article from The Economist, “The Spread of Superbugs,” I knew it was the right choice.

My first thoughts in writing my paper were that my essay had to be more accessible and entertaining for the reader who perhaps had no interest in the topic. I knew, almost right away, that a narrative would be the perfect way to remediate this piece. I focused on two methods to accomplish the remediation. First, I remembered how effective it was to appeal to the reader’s emotions, particularly in some informative narratives I had read. Second, I wanted to include some scientific figures and data about the problems the world faces to round out my paper. With this approach, I set the scene in Madison as I felt I would be able to connect to the most people who would be reading my narrative. Through the descriptions and a bit of science, my objectives were to inform the reader about the dangerous microbes we face not only today, but especially down the road. I think the most valuable thing I learned from writing this piece was that there are many ways to create an effective piece of writing. Sometimes the best way is to start writing and see what approach fits best. As I honed in on using the narrative form to capture my specific ideas, I still had to delete and add ideas and move pieces in the narrative to achieve an organized flow. However, I think the most valuable lesson I learned from writing this piece is that writing takes time. One has to craft and develop ideas before a final form is achieved.

— Jared Godfrey  

Student Writing Award: Narrative Essay  
This essay was previously published in the 9th edition of CCC.
The Chapel

JAKE HORWITZ

On a Sunday night in late October, I was hunched over a small podium in an airport chapel translating between English and Russian so I could talk to my new friend Tatiana. Tatiana was a 70-year-old woman, and at the time I was a 17-year-old boy. We had just met, but we would be talking for the next few hours getting to know each other, laughing, crying, and sharing stories.

The reason I was at an airport at night was because I had been left stranded by changes in my flight from Reagan National Airport to O’Hare. As a 17-year-old and by myself, I was considered an unaccompanied minor. So when the airline went to give out free hotel rooms to those who were on my flight, they could not give one to me. Instead, they told me that I could stay in the airport “chapel” for the night. The chapel was stationed next to the security guards, who would check up on me every few hours.

I do not know many people who are much less religious than myself, so hearing that I would have to spend the night in an airport chapel, alone, with no way to escape, made me want to implode. The thought of being in a religious setting has always made me rather uncomfortable. I grew up and continue to identify as Jewish, but I have always questioned religion. I have always understood the close-knit community aspect of religion that makes it so appealing, but what I fail to grasp is why one must believe in embellished stories and the outdated laws. This was my first time traveling alone, and I was trying to get back to Chicago from D.C. Although I knew at the time that I was very independent, it still frightened me to be alone at a small airport like this overnight. It would be different if I were stranded at O’Hare because it is always busy and flights never stop. But Reagan is different. It is deserted, the lights are off, and every step you take on the linoleum floor echoes for seconds across the vaulted ceilings.

After a couple hours of waiting at my gate, a security guard finally escorted me to my new home for the evening, a ten-by-ten square-foot room, with wooden seats along the perimeter. There was a podium in the center of the room with one Bible sitting atop it. All I could do was stare and hold my breath. When they told me I would be put up in a chapel for the night, I thought that at least I would get some pews and stained glass. In the chapel sat only women, most of who were talking quietly or on their phones. I expected the night to be quiet and rather boring. As I sat there, I listened and thought about the other people who were also stranded here like me. All I saw was a sassy woman (who would be on the phone for three hours straight), this one old lady who never took her eyes off
me, and a cute girl next to me who would not even acknowledge my presence. I wondered where these women were off to, if they were trying to leave D.C. to go home, or if D.C. was home and they were trying to get away for the week. I wondered why they were in D.C., what their jobs were, and who they were. They all seemed tired and annoyed at the whole situation, so I figured it would be best not to disturb anyone. The girl next to me fell asleep while watching Netflix, so I figured I would help myself and watch some muted Bridesmaids. Unfortunately the silent movie was not helping, and I was going crazy; I could not take sitting still any longer. I was getting antsy, so I decided to try and find something to eat.

When I returned to my wooden seat in the chapel, I noticed an older woman I had not seen before. She had pulled the Bible podium close to her seat and was using it to write. I tried to ignore her as I went on my phone, but at one point she tapped me on the shoulder and asked how to pronounce different English words. She introduced herself as Tatiana, and told me she was trying to write thank-you notes to some of her friends. Her accent immediately told me she spoke Russian. From that point on, we began to talk in broken English nonstop for the next couple hours. Tatiana’s flight was also cancelled and she was on her way to see her son in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. She told me that since she cannot speak English very well, no one seems to have the patience to talk to her in the U.S. She explained that because of this, she often feels extremely lonely when out in public. This made me feel sad, but at the same time it made me feel like I was helping someone in need.

I do not want to compare Tatiana to a needy person on the street, although her old Russian clothing might fool the average person. Instead, she was in need of company, and it was a pleasure to be able to do something so simple. My conversation with Tatiana meant a lot more to her than it did to me. This is because I take for granted how easily I can talk to any English-speaking person in the U.S., while she and so many English-learners like her struggle to communicate with impatient Americans. I reached for my phone to pull up Google Translate, which allowed us to talk a lot more meaningfully than before.

Tatiana told me how her parents had been in gulags because her father was an engineer and her mother was a scholar, and at the time, the Soviet Union viewed smart people as a threat. Tatiana went on to tell me how her father managed to escape his labor camp to meet her mother and their daughter, young Tatiana. They left everything they knew and immigrated to America to start a new life.

I was stunned. From looking at this plain old woman, you would never guess all that her family has been through. As she mentioned places that she remembered and longed to see again, I pulled up images on my phone to show her. The sweet woman broke out in tears when she saw her old university in Saint
Petersburg, the town she used to live in, and even her old apartment building. As she cried, I started to tear up too. I thought about what it would be like to not have seen my hometown in over forty years, and out of nowhere, a teenage boy in an airport is able to show me vivid pictures of the buildings I used to walk by every day.

This woman, Tatiana, was deeply religious. She wanted help finding some of her favorite Bible verses, and she asked if I could recite them out loud in English. We spent a long time trying to find Chapter 3 of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Never having read the Bible before, I could not understand what she was saying when she kept repeating Ecclesiastes. I thought Tatiana was still speaking in Russian. But eventually, we located a beautiful poem that I later found was actually ascribed to King Solomon. The poem started like this:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...

Before this night, if I had been told I would have to read aloud Bible verses, I would have laughed and been almost terrified at that possibility. But seeing how much joy it brought Tatiana to hear these poems and share them with someone else was absolutely incredible. This poem struck me because it did not mention God at all, which is what I am used to in Judaism, and what I expected from the Christian Bible. From a Christian perspective, Ecclesiastes 3 is about how God has a plan for everything, and everything will happen when it is supposed to. Near the end of our night, when the tears were gone and the talking slowed, Tatiana thanked me for talking with her and insisted it was destiny or God that brought us together. Just as there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, there is a time to meet new people and have life-changing experiences.

What was really quite touching to me about this encounter was that it was not only meaningful to me, but to Tatiana as well. Tatiana grabbed the Bible and started scribbling in the front cover. Even though I am not religious, I still thought it was not the greatest idea to deface a public Bible. She then handed the Bible and a pen to me, and asked me to sign in. She had written the date and location, the Reagan Airport, and wanted me to sign the Bible so she could remember this night. I laughed and asked if she should really be stealing this Bible from the Airport, but she replied with a giggle and “Oh, they have more.”

From this experience I gained a new outlook on life. This would be what I describe as my “world traveler lens.” Seeing different parts of the world gives me a perspective I find to be extremely valuable. When I meet someone who is not
from America, I do not stereotype them, but ask them to tell me about themselves, about where they are from, and about the difference between living in America and their past home. I also enjoy teaching them about where I am from and what I enjoy. Seeing the world through the eyes of a traveler lets me better understand that we really are the same, and that no matter what country someone is from, we all deserve to be treated like equals. This is exactly what I had the chance to hear from Tatiana. All in one night, I got to hear about the world through the eyes of a Russian, a mother, a deeply religious woman, someone who has experienced great joy and great loss, and someone who speaks a different language from me.

Now although Tatiana and I do not share the same religion, I feel I have gained a lot more respect for other religions and even my own through this encounter. This did not make me more religious as a person, so I believe less that it was fate and more in coincidence, but I see that religion can be a magical thing to some, and as long as it is used for good, who am I to deprive someone or disrespect someone because of what they believe in?

I like to look back at my meeting with Tatiana as a circumstance of great chance and fortune. As our meeting was a sign of God and destiny for Tatiana, it was luck for me. I believe that as we move through our lives, we find ourselves in situations good and bad, and it is what we choose to make of those situations that transform us into the people we become. I try to be an outgoing person, so when Tatiana approached me, I seized the opportunity. It would have been easy for me to ignore her and take a nap, but I have learned that sometimes the harder thing to do will lead to much more pleasure.

INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

This narrative was written for an English 100 course that used the theme of being “in transition.” This broad theme spanned from personal changes to social transformations at large. Our Sequence 1 assignment asked students to give attention to everyday moments of change, as well as reflect upon an event or experience that profoundly altered their views. Jake’s memorable essay saw several stages before reaching its final form. A draft was first workshopped in class in a small group, then discussed with me during an individual conference. The initial draft had all the contents that make this essay distinctive: the focus on small and specific moments, such as Tatiana’s tap on the narrator’s shoulder; the quoted passage from the biblical poem; the series of transformations unfolding across the encounter, including the narrator’s realization of his own ease with the English language, and the overturning of previous assumptions of what religion may offer. But these elements were dampened by weaknesses in orga-
nization and clarity. After significant revisions, Jake delivered a final draft that engages readers right away and moves us adroitly through the narrator's shifting perceptions and discoveries. The reworked structure and language do great service to what the writing wants to share, an unlikely connection forged across generations, cultures, and religious backgrounds.

—Erica Zhang

**WRITER’S MEMO**

I do not think of myself as a person who has a lot of unique moments in life, so when I was tasked with writing a narrative, I was perplexed. It was only after I really put some thought into my experiences, big and small, that I was able to uncover this small but impactful memory.

A lesson I wanted my readers to get out of this story was that one can find meaning in every moment of their life. By writing this piece, I really had to sit down and think about how that moment, in the chapel with Tatiana, shaped and influenced me. Her impact was not immediate; in fact, it was not until writing this short essay that I fully appreciated what she had done for me. The hardest part of writing this narrative was conveying this message, which has a lot of moving parts – word choice, formatting, order of events, and details. These aspects of the piece were critiqued and edited throughout the process, which only made it a stronger essay. Although it was a long process, with multiple revisions and a lot of input from friends, it was quite rewarding. My TA, Erica, suggested I start the piece with a “meet cute,” where I introduce Tatiana and hook the audience right from the start, instead of building up to her reveal. This was a challenge for me as I had never heard of this scene/writing style before, and I did not know how to go about introducing it into my paper. I was, however, able to implement this writing style after a bit of research. With help from Erica and peers, the paper turned out to be a lot more emotionally charged and meaningful than when I had begun.

— Jake Horowitz

*Student Writing Award Honorable Mention: Narrative Essay*
“Hey Driton, do you want to come out tonight?”

“Umm...after I help my parents out with some stuff I'll try to make it.”

To someone who does not know me so well, this may seem like an honest response to a question. However, the select few who actually know me would call it a “Ramadani Special” in the making. Although it sounds like an Italian entrée, it’s actually a term my close friends use to describe the way I manage to slip away from situations that make me uncomfortable. A psychologist would probably diagnose me with some sort of social disorder, but my reason for acting like this is far from that. The truth behind this behavior is a result of the Islamic beliefs that shape my life.

Islam has always been a part of my family history. Four generations leading down to my grandpa have served as Imams, or religious leaders, in the community. My great grandpa even donated an acre of the family backyard to have a mosque built in our hometown Kercove, Macedonia. As for my mom's side of the family, her uncle was the first to translate the Qur'an to Albanian. This was all before my parents migrated to the U.S. in 1980. Macedonia was their homeland, but the living conditions were unbearable there. Political turmoil limited Albanians to peculiar jobs so working the land was the only way to make a living. As a newlywed couple, my parents decided to take the risk of migrating. A unique world filled with different customs and a new language awaited them. Although they left a lot behind, they made sure to preserve the religion and culture in us by sending my brother and me back every year for summer vacations.

“Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Ash- hadu an' la ilaha ill Allah...”

Every morning at about 4:30 AM, this phrase can be heard echoing between the mountains of Kercove. The majority of the community ignores the hazan, or call to prayer, by simply falling back asleep. However, by the early age of seven, hearing the sound of the hazan five times a day during my summer vacations drew me closer to Islam. My grandfather, who still serves as the Imam, influenced me as well. He was so respected among the community that it was not unusual to see a room full of people stand as he entered the doorway. His bold, statue-like face had seen it all—whether it was war, poverty, or losing a close family member. He was the type of leader who would submit to no one. After I realized my seemingly invincible grandfather would bow in obedience five times a day for
prayer, I knew there was something special about the teachings of Islam and I wanted to know more. What I did not know was that practicing Islam would put my patience and self-control through an ultimate test.

The main restriction that affected me in my early childhood was not being able to eat pork. Even in first grade I would find myself asking the lunch lady if that day's lunch had any pork in it. This may seem like a minor restriction, but try watching someone else eat a corn dog with ketchup on it knowing that you can't have any—it's not as easy as it sounds. Even watching fellow second-grader Tyler Slagell perfectly stack his ham Lunchables before he ate them was pretty tough. Not eating pork was manageable, but it was avoiding the food items that had gelatin, a byproduct of pork, that was difficult. Basically almost every unhealthy, delicious-looking snack that elementary students eat has gelatin in it. So whenever I was offered Rice Crispy Treats, Gummy Bears, or Skittles, I responded by saying I was allergic. Although this was not the truth, I knew it would save me a lot of unnecessary explaining. As a kid, avoiding gelatin would have been much easier if it wasn't for hyper friends like Cory Richter who were seemingly always eating Skittles in front of me. Once in a while after we would hang out, I would buy a gelatin free snack and imitate the way he would shove his hand in his pocket for more Skittles. I would purposely eat the candy in a sloppy way so that my lips could get discolored just as his would be. I was a kid and I wanted to be like everyone else.

During a certain month of the year I quickly realized that because of my religion I had to do certain things that were far from the norm. On the days that I did fast as a kid during Ramadan, I found it was easier to wait in the library during lunch instead of watching Ryan Meyer slowly pull items out of his blue lunch box and spread them across the table. My grades would always go up during this month, but the other aspects of my life were stalled. Not eating for over 12 hours left me physically drained so recess and after-school activities were out of the question. As much as I wanted to take part in after-school snowball fights against the 8th graders, I simply did not have the energy. When the other kids were running around town together, all I could think about was how badly I wanted it to be 5:00 PM so I could break my fast. The amount of talking I did at school during this month would decrease as well. Not eating the entire day leaves a pretty unpleasant smell in your mouth and I didn’t want to gross anyone out—especially my seventh grade crush who happened to sit next to me that month. With brown hair and dark eyes, she was just my type at the time. Who knows what could have been if it wasn’t for me ending every conversation awkwardly so I could avoid the embarrassment of my bad breath? I soon figured out that having bad breath would be the smallest of my Islamic problems as I entered high school.

In 2006, just before my freshman year, my family moved to Memphis, Tennessee
to open the Memphis Family Restaurant. The customers made us feel welcome the first week by complimenting the food and service. However, a conversation between a farmer and my mom caused us to second-guess how welcome we really were. As he walked up to pay his bill, I noticed a suspicious expression on his rugged face. He patted his plump belly just before handing over the bill and said, “That’s some good biscuits and gravy you guys got.” My mom replied, “Thank you, Sir” in a heavy foreign accent. After hearing her talk, the farmer looked down at his muddy boots with a smirk and said, “Say, you guys aren’t the same faith as Johnny from Dixon are you? ’Cause when I heard what he was, I never went back there again.” Johnny was an old Muslim-Albanian friend of my dad’s and he also owned a restaurant about 15 miles north of Memphis. My mom quickly recognized the seriousness of the situation, and replied, “No, Sir.”

The challenge in high school was to practice Islam, while at the same time keeping it a secret from everyone. This was tricky at times, especially since drinking alcohol and dating are prohibited. Any one of these rules is enough to hamper one’s social life in America, let alone both of them put together. As it is considered a sin to be in the presence of alcohol, any sort of high school party was off-limits for me. Invitations to these parties never failed to make for awkward situations.

“Ramadani, you going to be at Jake’s party this weekend?”

“…Yeah man, I should be there.”

Although it’s not something to boast about, I learned how to think quickly on my feet. I remember one instance in the locker room after we had just won a state quarterfinal football game. With the music blasted, my friend Sam approached me screaming, “We are going to get messed up tonight!” Not wanting to kill the atmosphere, I turned to him and screamed back, “Hell yeah we are!” That Friday night, like many other nights, ended in me watching TV with my parents and talking about the game.

Not drinking or going to parties gave me a competitive edge in athletics. When the soccer squad was hung over on off days, I always managed to squeeze in an extra training session or two. My main focus was to always improve my game whether it was the first training of the week or the last. Being diligent every day put me in a prime position to reach my full potential. At times, this straight-edge lifestyle would get lonely but my solution for this was finding friends who had similar interests to me and who did not drink. Other than my older brother who is my best friend, this restricted search brought back one result but that was all
I needed. I found that my good friend Collin Clark was in love with soccer just as much as I was and that he did not drink alcohol. At a height of about 5'3" and always wearing his black indoor soccer shoes to school, you wouldn't exactly categorize him in the “popular” group. The same went for me, but this did not bother us one bit. In fact, we were able to establish an identity of our own by combining for over 80% of the soccer team's points for a few years in a row.

Unfortunately, Collin was not able to help me with the no-dating policy in Islam. The main reason behind this policy is that dating can lead to pre-marital sex. This rule isolated me because I had to make sure I never put myself in a long-running situation where this could end up happening. I also had to make sure I never ended up alone with a girl. I crafted many of my Ramadani Specials to avoid from engaging in the forbidden. Senior year, I formed a close friendship with an attractive girl that ended terribly. My miscommunication about Islam led her to the false pretense that I wanted to date her so she eventually stopped seeing her boyfriend. After talking for about a year, she became the first person at Memphis Community High to know about my secret. I apologized and let her know that I was Muslim and that this was why I couldn't see her. Although I was very attracted to her, I never let our relationship get too serious because I knew it was forbidden. On the other hand, she had no religious restrictions to control her feelings for me so it was hard for her in the end. I will always remember this incident because it was the first time that my dishonesty hurt someone else.

To a lot of people it may seem like following Islamic beliefs is more of a hassle than anything else. No Muslim can say they see an immediate benefit from God by praying five times a day. However, every diligent Muslim knows that his or her work will be accounted for at the end of this life. I feel that the more Islamic duties I accomplish, the better I am doing for myself in the long run. The benefit may be ten or twenty years from now or it could be when I am not around anymore. The more I learn about this faith, the more it molds my lifestyle away from the materialistic world. As the Prophet said, “Worldly life is a prison to believers, but it’s a paradise to disbelievers.” I acknowledge the fact that life in this world is difficult, but I also believe that if I stay steadfast in my duties, there could be an eternal reward at the end of it all.

INSTRUCTOR'S MEMO

During the first few weeks of our English 100 class, we focused a lot on the idea of the writer as a “noticer,” as someone who documents, as someone for whom the accuracy of a singular detail truly matters. The essays we discussed and the in-class writing exercises we completed were not only centered on a descriptive and narrative voice, but on a self-awareness of the decisions we make when we
write. What details do we leave out when we describe something? Why do we decide to leave gaps in some stories and not others? What do these decisions say about us? What do they say about the stories we are trying to tell? These questions helped some students in the class consider the knowledge, context and details only they were privy to when writing a narrative/descriptive essay. For others, including the author of this essay, the answers to the questions represented a risk, as they were afforded the opportunity to tell a story or describe something for the first time.

As with many personal essays, “The Ramadani Special” started with a hesitant first draft. Narrative scenes were short on context and details; places and people were left unnamed. In a lot of ways, Toni’s hesitance to divulge information was natural, as his essay, in its final form here, focuses on his past ability to conceal and divert, to be murky about concrete details regarding his religion. Clarity, itself, was a risk, as it often is for writers, and Toni did not shy away. After peer review work and a conference, the essay began to thicken. Not only was he more specific in his use of description, but he also created a system of connections, showing the reader the history and context of his beliefs and how they were both challenged and strengthened.

I like to think about “The Ramadani Special” as both a conversion and a coming-of-age story. Though no one literally converts from one religion to another, the essay chronicles Toni as he goes from being a closeted Muslim to someone who is openly proud of his faith, someone who is willing to share who he was and is to others. Additionally, the reader follows Toni as he matures in his approach to Islam. We see him making decisions. We see the self-censorship. We feel the awkwardness, the subtle sadness of it all. Though one could imagine the essay reverting to sentimentality or abstraction at these moments, it never does. Instead, Toni took what is often a risk for young writers: he trusted the story. He trusted his ability to notice where he was and where he is now. That was enough.

— Josh Kalscheur

**WRITER’S MEMO**

This project helped me learn a lot about myself as well as my writing. After going over the first draft with Professor Kalscheur, I realized that I was subconsciously ambiguous in my approach to writing the paper. It was not because the topic was unfamiliar to me—as it is a narrative of my life—but I believe it was because I was uneasy about being so candid to the world regarding something I had kept subdued for so long. Although it is a passionate topic for me, the first draft was weak in the sense that it did not invite the audience in; it was simply a
poor view of my unique lifestyle. Before beginning the second draft, Professor Kalscheur encouraged me to be proud of my experiences. This small piece of advice caused a huge change in my essay. Not only did the essay become more personalized and enjoyable for me, it became more entertaining for the audience.

The main lesson I learned from this project is that a person should be proud of who they are, even though writing about it may seem uneasy at first. It is important to remember that a good narrative essay can emerge if enough passion is added—no matter how abnormal the topic is. However, for the passion to be there, I believe a writer has to be honest and overt in his or her approach.

— Driton Ramadani

Student Writing Award: Narrative Essay
I don’t think my grandmother will ever be able to scatter my uncle’s ashes. The plan was to go out on a boat and scatter them in the ocean. That’s where he was at his best . . . where he set records for California fishing and where his internal intensity was less intimidating. Because, after all, everything Nathaniel did he had to do it all the way.

I grew up right down the street from my grandparent’s house, which meant by extension, right down the street from my mother’s two younger brothers who were closer in age to me. They were my brothers until I got one of my own, and even then, the four of us, each five years apart, we were a clan.

Nathaniel was the oldest. Ten years my elder; he was the essence of cool. Tobin was next, five years older than me, which meant when I was in kindergarten he was there as a big bad fifth grader. Then there was my place, the only girl in a gang of boys. Finally my kid brother was born, Noah, and there we were. I don’t know if you can have tribes within a family, but we definitely felt like one. Our other cousins didn’t mess with what we had going on.

I can only imagine how out of place I looked running after the boys to shoot squirrels and birds and rabbits with BB guns. I’d run as fast as I could to keep up with them as they hiked down into the canyon. They always seemed to be in the same frame of thinking: something I could never tap into. Even so, Tobin and Nathaniel never really got along, and I’m not entirely sure why; I think that was settled before I was old enough to recognize the difference between rough-housing and fighting. Those boys could only see eye-to-eye when it came to the silent preparation before taking down a squirrel or patiently gutting a fish. As long as Tobin never tried to be better than Nathaniel at anything, they were square.

I remember waking up after a dream maybe two weeks after Nathaniel died. The entire dream consisted of old memories of me saying his name: at the grocery store, at my grandparent’s house, on the school field. It wouldn’t have irked me so much if it hadn’t been calling him Nathaniel. I think I only called him Nathaniel to his face once, and it was the day before he overdosed. Hours actually. Every other moment he was Bub. For a minute I let myself sit in the question, “Was that the reason he died? Because I called him Nathaniel? Because
I stopped calling him Bub?” I shut my eyes and erased the notion. Bub died because he liked oxycodone.

One in twenty of all high school seniors have tried oxycodone. “Hillbilly heroin,” as it’s sometimes coined, which sounds a lot funnier when it’s not being shot into the system of someone you know. Someone you can watch crumble. The hardest part to wrap my head around is that it was prescribed to Bub after what could have been a horrible accident at work. At the time we were just happy he hadn’t broken his back. The tricky thing with oxycodone is that this drug is prescribed to an individual, a tolerance develops, and addiction follows. You could feel him changing. His muscular body turned skinny and weak. His voice got hoarse. His mood swings were the worst; the quiet house would awaken with the sound of fists hitting the walls, things being thrown around inside his room, and finally the stomping of feet up the stairs. Bub would just come looking for a fight. Mostly against Tobin or my grandpa, but sometimes he’d come upstairs fired up to verbally abuse his mom.

I didn’t understand what was happening. My mom had been sure to put some space between them and us during the last move, but within a year we’d go out to my grandparents’ house and you could feel the change in the way the air sat in the house. The quiet whistle of the air being sucked underneath the guest bedroom, out of its broken window. Other doors torn off their hinges. I was fifteen when I started to put things together; always controlled by my mother who wanted to show me how bad things could be so I would never be tempted to go down the same road. I missed my uncle. I never saw him. Tobin was off in college, and I just wanted to be able to see Bub. Not angry, or doped up, or getting picked up in the middle of the night by some druggie. In my eyes they were stealing him even though he would skulk off willingly.

On November 27, 2010 I woke up and had this irking feeling that I wanted to go out to my grandparents place. I had just gotten my license, and I had to beg my mom to let me take my brother on a solo trip out there. I don’t remember a lot about that day except eating Cheerio’s in my grandma’s kitchen; she wasn’t even there. I remember calling to my brother to get his stuff together. I remember walking towards the driveway, following my brother. I remember hearing him say “Bub,” and looking up to see him walking down the steep driveway hill. I remember he looked better; the circles under his eyes were lighter, the scabs on his face looked to be healing, his skin looked less yellow.

I remember he smiled as he grabbed Noah in for a hug, and I hurried to do the same. I remember I called him Nathaniel, and it felt stiff on my tongue. I remember he felt stronger; he felt more alive. He felt like he was coming back. The next morning I woke up in my bed to my mom sitting down beside me. I don’t remember what she said. I don’t remember if she said it bluntly or if she
eased into it; all I remember is that Bub was gone. “No," I told her. ‘No, I just had my arms around him!’ Surely this piece of information was all that was needed to confirm that it was all a mistake; I had just had my arms around him. It was Sunday morning- he was supposed to go to rehab Wednesday. One last binge before he got clean, like he thought that would be okay. One last binge that led to his own father finding him dead one door down from the bedroom he’d had since he was a child.

I made the call to my dad later that day; I was in hysterics. “Bub’s dead. He’s dead, dad.”

“How?” he asked.

How? Like there was any easier question. Because he overdosed, because he loved getting high, because no one could help him, because oxycodone took over his life and changed him into a completely different person. Someone who was impossible to handle on and off oxycodone because when he wasn’t doped up all he was concerned with was getting more. I had just started tenth grade, a point in time where the students were slowly dividing into those who wanted to smoke a joint in-between classes, or in the parking lot before school, and those who had nothing against it, just had no desire to. I had just lost my uncle; I had no desire to.

My brother was almost a middle-schooler, and the thing that Bub’s death changed most about me was how I communicated with my brother about what he had done to himself I was honest. Our uncle hadn’t died because someone forced him to shoot up; he had died because in his mind he didn’t want to live in the world sober but in a warm hazy world that the oxycodone had introduced him to. I told him that if he ever did something stupid like Bub, I’d come find him wherever he was, and he’d rue the day he’d ever picked up so much as a joint. I’d beat him to a pulp. He seemed to get the picture.

Bub was everything that was cool. Lots of friends, a girlfriend, good looks, and a family that cared a lot about him. We paid for the rehab and told him how much it hurt us to see him change. He changed though, and although all of us could see it, we were kind of helpless. I lost my uncle, my mom lost her brother, my grandparents lost their son – we all lost when Nathaniel changed. After witnessing death by overdose, all you can do is make sure no one else you love gets into something nasty. Make sure they know how to say no. If my uncle had known how to say no, he’d have been able to see me graduate, see me turn eighteen, see me off to college. I’d be able to see him. I wouldn’t have to think about how my grandma will never be able to scatter his ashes, never be able to tell us to squish in tighter to fit us all in the family picture. I wouldn’t have to pretend that
I didn’t miss him to look strong in front of my brother. I wouldn’t have to miss him.

INTERVIEW WITH THE INSTRUCTOR

Q: What was the context for this essay?

A: Our theme was “health,” and this particular assignment asked for a “scar narrative.” The idea was to describe a process of healing and actually walk the audience through that healing process. One of the things I think Talen did is take an issue that is very personal and make it into something more universal. Instead of just writing about the loss of her uncle, she was able to connect with a larger audience by using several very small moments that make a larger point about drug use.

Q: What did you enjoy most about the essay, as a reader?

A: Talen’s essay is both poetic and accessible. Her narrative includes little moments that seem almost like simple prose poetry. One of the things I love most of this essay is its specificity: its use of poetic, specific little moments that make her experience seem real to her readers. For instance, her writing includes one moment in which she said that the “air in the house was different” after her uncle passed away. We talked about these moments in writing as “showing, not telling,” which is so common it can sound like cliché advice. Talen’s essay actually accomplishes this kind of showing. There is nothing stiff about the writing. I think her authentic voice helps readers feel connected with her narrative. It felt raw, but not so raw that others could not understand her experience or for them to have difficulty feeling connected to her. Talen does hold back at some moments. Actually though, she holds back in a way that makes the writing more meaningful. In the first paragraph, as one example, she says that “my mother will never be able to scatter his ashes.” Here, she could have been far more melodramatic, or she could have relied on simple emotive language like, “I felt devastated.” Instead, Talen lets the audience develop their own emotional response via her descriptive language, instead of pulling them completely into her own.

Q: How do you remember the project developing?

A: One of the beautiful things that can happen in a small class like English 100 is that you can build trust. You need that as a writer. You need to be able to share ideas and experiences that really matter to you, with others who value and respect you. Not everyone has an experience like Talen’s or should write about traumatic experiences for a class, even if they do. Still, writing about something
that mattered to her was a cathartic experience for Talen. Personal courage like Talen showed, I think, can translate into other, more public kinds of courage: whether that involves writing about inequitable labor practices or anything else a writer might feel less sure how to take on. At the beginning, deciding how to approach a challenging experience or idea forces writers to confront a difficult emotional place. After they find a way to move through that tough space though, their courage translates into a moment of art. For me, courageous writing is a gift; it’s a gift to anyone who reads it. In this case, hopefully, Talen’s essay will encourage anyone who has flirted with dangerous substances to remember how much their lives affect others. Facing those kinds of tough ethical moments through writing requires real courage, and courageous writing like this is so powerful because it inspires others to be brave: in their writing, in the classroom, and throughout their lives.

Q: Do you have any advice for other English 100 students?

A: There’s something about writing from your authentic self that makes the writing better; when you are writing from your heart about what matters to you, the writing will be stronger. It’s challenging to write from that place, but that is the writing that will mean something to your readers. The rule applies not just to narrative; it goes for informative, critical, or any other kind of writing too.

— Heather Swan

INTERVIEW WITH THE WRITER

Talen: For our sequence one project, we were asked to write about a scarring event: something that affected you and left a mark. For me, my scarring event wasn’t that long ago, and it was at a critical time. This paper was actually the first time I was talking about it, and my instructor was crucial to helping me decide what I wanted to include, and how to approach it. So I want to thank my instructor Heather for all her help.

Q: What do you hope your readers will find meaningful?

A: This was the first time I’ve felt fully encompassed by writing. As I started writing this essay, I knew that most of my friends and roommates didn’t know about Nathan; they had missed a special part of my life because I had not talked about it. I wanted to share, but I also wanted others to realize that you don’t ever really know someone else’s story.

From writing this project, I learned how to dissect memory and make sense from vibrant moments. One of the things Heather encouraged us to do was flashbacks: that a story doesn’t always need to be told in chronological order.
My project uses this idea; from the first few sentences, the reader already knows what is going to happen. They just don’t know how it’s going to happen, and they haven’t experienced it yet. To me, that’s what makes a great story. Most people think the end is where everything comes together. I feel like stories build better when writers go back and forth between how they currently think about something and why they think that way. In my narrative, all those little moments from the past are crucial for understanding why Nathan’s loss felt so wrong. Readers need to know what kind of person he was to feel his loss. That’s why I included those little snippets of our experiences together.

**Q: What did you find challenging about writing this essay?**

**A:** In my last two paragraphs, there was so much that I wanted to say but I didn’t know how to say—so I just started writing. At first, I didn’t like what I wrote at all. I wanted to communicate how I felt when I lost my uncle, and how important it was to me that my younger brother never fell into drugs too. At first, it just felt dry. Usually, I write up everything on my computer. If I have a tough part to write, I print it out in big font with larger spaces between lines and make notes to myself, crossing most of it out. What’s left is this thing that doesn’t make sense, but I find key words and ideas that remind me of what I really wanted to say. Then, I go and write it again and sometimes go through the same process. If this doesn’t bring all the pieces together, I go and read a strong book. Sometimes, the way the writer uses an image or phrases a sentence will spark my thinking, and I will think, “That’s how I can say that!”

Normally, when the writing is for my eyes alone, I like to write in pieces. That’s how my journals are. I’ll underline things, and I’ll cross things out, and I’ll draw everywhere. It looks a lot like my editing process. I think the fact that I had to form whole sentences about something challenging, something I didn’t know how to talk about, actually helped. You don’t always know what you have to say. Finding the words for that difficult feeling, that’s what is different about writing for yourself and writing to make your experiences meaningful for others. You can’t just put lines of exclamation points, scribbles, “ughs!” . . . You would understand that kind of emotional work in your own journals, but no one else would understand. Being able to identify what made you feel a certain way in a specific moment, or reflecting on why and how something changed your thinking—writing for others helps you make sense of the things that matter to you.

In the body of the narrative, I had so many experiences I wanted to write about that I knew I couldn’t fit them all. Before I wrote most of my narrative, I made a list of bullet points—just a list of many different snippets of my experiences with Nathan. Then, I asked which ones were most meaningful, which ones revealed the most about our relationship. I narrowed it down to four, then wrote my narrative. For example, I’m proud of that very short snippet about fishing. The little
vignette let me show how he was a big brother, and it showed one more experience that was missing from my life when he was gone. This process helped me understand my own feelings and communicate them to readers. Under each idea on my list, I had a fully intact memory I wanted to share. After I wrote all these memories, I began writing how the loss of each of these affected me. It was a really long process trying to figure out where the scar was.

The writing helped me.

— Talen Mumford

Student Writing Award Honorable Mention: Narrative Essay
The night before Andy comes to live with us, my mother sets the table gracefully, setting down plates of fried pork with rice and pinto beans before seating herself. I sit across from my father, his eyes illuminated by the white candle at the center of the table. Dedicated to his mother, the candle is always burning.

“How was your day?” he asks me.

“Pretty average. How was work?”

“Busy.”

He looks down at his plate. My mother and sister are having a dull conversation with each other, but something is on my father’s mind; he is looking much too intensely at his rice and beans.

“Dad?” He looks up from his plate, slightly raising his chin. I know that look. I already regret asking him.

“Your uncle is coming to stay with us—”

“What!” My “pretty average” day is over in seconds. Why couldn’t it have been his blood pressure medications bothering him? Or Rick at work making him mop up the floors—again? Anything would be better.

“Would you let me finish?” he asks.

“Sure, whatever . . .” My vision blurs as I roll my eyes.

“He is only staying until he can find his own place.”

“You are joking, right? He’s nothing but trouble.”

“We have had our...” he pauses, pain registering on his face, “problems with him.” The words come out slowly from his mouth, his lips cringing in anger.

“Exactly. He is a waste of life. Andy is going to do what he always does: eat our food, lie on the couch, waste our money, watch porn, and peddle heroin. That’s if he’s hasn’t already shot it up his arm.”

My father sits in his chair, still as a stone.
“Are you just going to sit there?” He won’t look me in the eye. I storm off to my room, and cram in every curse word in the book in less than two minutes before I bury my head in my pillow.

I know it’s bad the next morning when I can barely make myself a cup of coffee. No amount of caffeine or Advil is going to help me today. At school, I wade lifelessly down the congested halls, through lectures about integrals and Wuthering Heights. While Mr. Jansen is asking us questions in preparation for the AP Bio test in a couple of weeks, I lean back in my chair, arms folded, tuning out everything.

Is Andy ever going to move out? I think. Is he going to go through withdrawal on the couch? I really do enjoy the couch, its soft leather seats, reclined at the perfect angle. Now it’s going to be saturated in junkie sweat and Orange Fanta. If “Self-Loathing” were a class, I would ace it without trying. Instead I’m scraping by in AP Bio, thinking, Is he ever going to leave?

Mr. Jansen is saying something about a baby panda being born in some zoo or sanctuary. He’s talking about how the baby panda was going to be shipped back to China and reintroduced to the other 2,000 wild pandas to help expand the gene pool.

“You know class, it’s very rare for pandas to be born in captivity,” he says. “Only about 60 percent of male pandas have any sexual desire in captivity. Scientists have even tried ‘Panda Porn’ to try to get the, you know...” his mental gears are trying to churn out the right word. He keeps flicking his wrist in a revolving motion “You know,” he says, “to get the pandas going. And female pandas are only fertile maybe three, four days out of the year.”

At this point I am picturing pandas in a struggling marriage on The Jerry Springer Show. After class is dismissed, I wedge in my earphones and walk out to my car, playing music loud enough for a deaf person to hear.

I drop into the driver’s seat and slam the car door, leaning all the way back and letting out an exasperated groan. After sitting a while in silence, collecting my thoughts, I put the keys in the ignition and whip out of the parking lot. I own a 2002 Impala, but I drive it like a Porsche.

Pandas, I think, are useless. They’re a novelty, eating two times their own weight in bamboo, their paunchy bodies rolling over and crushing their young while they sleep. Because of their stumpy legs, pandas can barely even handle any kind of terrain. They contribute nothing to the ecosystem, nothing! It’s like natural selection went out for a smoke break.
I pull into the driveway of my house. I approach the back door and notice a small mound of Newport butts. Someone has been making themselves at home.

I walk into the house; it’s quieter than usual. Walking through the kitchen to the dining room, I peer into the living room, where my father is sitting in front of the TV, not really watching. He's biting his cheek, tapping his pointer on the arm of the recliner with a slow, steady tempo. I watch his eyes move to the candle on the table, then to Uncle Andy, who is passed out on the couch with a bag of tortilla chips lying on his paunch, a trash can by his head, and a bottle of Orange Fanta held loosely in his hand.

I can't stand to look at him, his sweaty skin reflecting the small amount of light from the TV. I want him gone. I am tired of watching my father being used by his family, aunts and uncles taking advantage of his generosity. They offer words of gratitude as hollow as the countless Corona bottles scattered across Aunt Anna’s floor, or the steel bars that my Uncle Thomas lives behind. Family is important to my father, but where's the line? If Andy was some random junkie off the street, my father wouldn’t take him in; the only thing separating Andy from the rest of them is the ‘Rosado’ on his birth certificate.

That night in bed, I hear my uncle’s painful moans echoing through the heating ducts. I roll over, pulling the sheets with me, rubbing my eyes and dragging the bottom part of my eyelid open. I sit up, my feet hitting the cold floor, I decide to go check on Andy.

Seeing him there, tired, surrounded by food, and helpless, he reminds me of a panda, slowly fading away.

Pandas are dumb, I think. People only want them around because they are cute. I chuckle a little to myself. My father only wants my uncle here because he is family.

Walking back to bed, I keep thinking. Yeah, pandas are struggling, but does that mean humans should just shrug their shoulders and let nature take its course? Pandas may not contribute much to the ecosystem, but maybe the impact they have on those that care about them is worth keeping them around. Regardless of anything else, they are still living creatures in need. Maybe I should follow that same principle with my uncle. Despite what he's done in the past, he is still a person, still my father’s brother, still my uncle.

A group of pandas is called an embarrassment. My family is an embarrassment, but do I love them? Yes, I do, even though I can’t look them in the eye, sometimes. While, together they may have more issues than the Panda population, I can’t bring myself to let the relationships I have with them die.

I don’t blame my father anymore. At the surface, Andy is just an addict, dysfunctional and incompetent, but to my father he's more. My uncle is my father’s best
friend; they share countless memories of growing up in Spanish Harlem. They still watch Family Feud together, just like they used to on the plastic wrapped couches of my grandmother’s apartment on 1st and 101st. My father still laughs at Andy’s dumb jokes. He even drives three towns over to buy Goya Red Kidney beans, a little slice of home for him and Andy, a part of a life he left a thousand miles behind. Who am I to want to take that away from him?

INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

In Sequence 1, I liked to spend a good amount of time working with my students to develop their own voices. Years of learning under a content-retention, teach-to-the-test model of pre-collegiate curricula can make the development of personal writing style a painstaking process for many students; this is especially true for those whose long-term educational goals don’t include a focus on the Liberal Arts. To help this process along, I asked my students to come up with a list of ten subjects they’d enjoy making into a personal essay. After looking each list over, I chose the topic I thought would produce the most original finished product. Even though I stressed that students could write about anything at all and that there were no limits whatsoever, many of the lists I ended up looking over contained mostly safe choices—essays about a favorite sport or pet, say, or a story about adjusting to college life (side note: if you’re a student reading this, please don’t write a piece about how much you miss your family dog; you’d be astonished how often that paper gets handed in).

When I got to a list that included such gems as, “The Campaign of Vermin Supreme,” “Selling Organs On The Black Market,” and “Why Do We Have Eyebrows?” I knew right away who had turned it in. Each idea was so strange and hilarious and so completely Dominic. It was really quite difficult to choose which topic would lead to the most original and exciting piece. After some deliberation, I decided on, “Why Pandas Should Die,” because I thought it would be a challenge for Dominic to make it into a cohesive essay, but that it would still allow room for his signature sarcasm and wit.

When he brought a first draft to me, I was prepared to help him reel in the more wild and hipshot moments of irreverence I’d come to expect from his writing, but was delighted to find an emergent sincerity. As we executed multiple revisions, I deeply admired the courage with which Dom crafted a poignant depiction of his family while retaining the playful sense of humor that livened up the classroom every week of that semester. I know I’ll never forget working with Dominic, or how fun it was to look over that list of topics for the first time. Preserving the fierce originality of Dominic’s writing style while creating a polished final product required a little bit more effort, sure, but the final product
was an embodiment of a quality rare in an undergraduate essay but common in the most exciting literature: it was possessed of a voice completely unique to its author.

— Sean Patrick Mulroy

WRITER’S MEMO

I got an email from my English 100 teacher, Sean Mulroy, stating that we needed to come up with a list of ten or so ideas for a paper. No mention of what kind of paper. I just scrolled through Reddit and picked out a bunch of articles that interested me. One of them was an opinion piece about how much money is poured into keeping Panda populations alive, even though they have little environmental impact. So, on my list of ideas I wrote “Pandas are useless.” I never thought anything of it. I went into class, showed Mulroy my list, he looked, laughed, and told me I had to write a family narrative based around the idea that Pandas are useless. I really put myself in a corner with this one. I put the paper off for a good three days. I had no idea where to even start. Until I thought, who is useless in my family? In my opinion, a lot of them are. I started writing down each family member and the problems I had with them. Eventually, I got it down to a couple. I chose Andy, simply because I had more to say. I threw together a rough draft about when he came to stay with my family. I sent it over to Sean and he asked me to meet him after class to talk about the paper. He loved the idea, but he told me blatantly it wasn’t good because I was emotionally holding back. He said I was being too guarded. I spent a lot of time trying to tap into how I felt and pouring it onto paper. I didn’t focus on structure or imagery or anything like that. I opened myself to being vulnerable. Then, I went back through it, edited, and polished. I worked closely with my instructor in this process.

I learned how to be open and vulnerable when I write. What makes writing interesting is that it’s a little glimpse into you. Might as well make it interesting for your reader. If I had to rewrite this paper, I would want it to be longer, so I can flesh it out more. I always felt it got heavy-handed towards the end. I would also have tried to make the dialogue more organic. That’s not how my family talks, but that’s not exactly school appropriate. The real powerhouse in the whole process was Mulroy for always pushing me and believing in this narrative. I owe him for that.

— Dominic Rosado

Student Writing Award: Narrative Essay
At first it smells too sweet. I suspect some artificial ploy—some cheap candles hidden in corners and on coffee tables—but the scent wafts in again through the open door leading onto the patio. All at once it smells like sunshine and summer and lake water, and all of them filtered in the weathered wood of a waterfront cabin.

I smile, look over at Clark, wondering if he smells it, too. But my smile drops and my brow furrows, mirroring my older brother. As usual, Clark is thinking about something elsewhere, something I won’t be able to grasp, not really. He looks around the old woman’s living room in slow, sweeping motions. I track his gaze with my own, partly out of loyalty, but mostly out of habit. I start to glance around the space, but nervously turn my gaze back down, toward my small Velcro sandals.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold the present fragrance; trying to commit the sweet smell to memory so it won’t disappear on the gentle breeze coming off the lake. But I think the task might be beyond my abilities. Scents are hard memories to hold. It’s a quality that a photo can’t quite anchor. For all the pictures of pond lilies in waiting rooms, you won’t know how tender they smell if you’ve never waded beside them in the creek. There are things that photos can’t keep, and things that photos keep too well.

Like people. I think photos can anchor people too precisely. Photographs of people make me uneasy. I look over to Clark who stares intently at the photo above the mantle. It always seems intrusive to me, being able to look into carefully framed and hung moments in someone’s life, even from a place you’ve never been, filled with people you’ll never know.

It’s the eyes that bother me the most in these old photographs. Their warm tones replaced with the stark black and white that peers out from behind the glass. The emotions, the thoughts, behind those eyes seemingly decipherable—simplified by the variations of grey the subjects now find themselves in. The subjects, in that moment captured, seem raw in the polished photographs. There’s too much of themselves being confessed from within the print. I keep my eyes turned down.

I wonder if the same thing is true of the Polaroids our mother sorts into scrap books. I suspect not. Clark hates his photo being taken. He’ll stare defiantly into the lens; his brown eyes trained intensely on the camera. Watching it watch-
ing him. There would be no pictures taken unknowingly, no piece of him captured without him protesting. Clark seemed to think cameras stole part of you. He thought that cameras stole who you were the very second that a photo was taken, and that the photo took that moment away from you, and kept it.

He eyes the photos that line the walls of this living room, that all exist as spur-of-the-moment snapshots stolen from time, from lives, from circumstance and substance. Moments stolen only to echo back from far-past places, between the steady creak of swaying pine trees beyond the cabin walls. Amid the echoes and the pine trees, the sound of the opening and closing of kitchen cabinets—Mrs. Garettson had muttered something about looking for the good teacups. She seems intent on making an occasion out of the fact that she has children sitting in her living room for the first time in years. The Garettsons never had children, which perhaps is why the five- and ten-year-old in her sitting room drew such happy anxiety.

Clark pushes his unruly hair out of his face and leans back heavily beside me on the pinecone-print sofa. He sighs, looks up to the ceiling, sighs again; restlessness preys on children in the homes of old people. There is simply nothing to do. Clark stands suddenly and stuffs his hands in his pockets, taking a slow stride from the couch and toward the wall. I watch him a moment and stand too, as expected, to follow Clark. But Mrs. Garettson totters out of the kitchen with a delicately balanced tea set, so I sit back down on the sofa and look to Clark who drifts obliviously around the edges of the room.

The old woman’s smile widens as she crosses the sunlit space. With each ray of light flickering on her face, the pictures on the wall steal her image, not precisely but distantly, as if they had anchored her there and now strain to hold a familiarity. I can clearly see the resemblances between the girl in the photographs and the old woman before me, but I still struggle to acknowledge that they could be the same person. My mind wonders if it’s the fault of the photos or of the aging subject that they now look so different. The fault of one destined to be held in time, or the other destined to be pulled along with it.

Clark’s feet pace along the wall as he inspects the pictures that hang along it. He stops at each framed photograph, bringing his eyes inches before the glass, peering intently at the scenes that play out before him. A teacup heavily dosed with cream and sugar is set before me. “Thank you,” I say shyly, the fine porcelain teacup oversized and out of place in the small hands of a child.

“What about you, Clark, one sugar cube or two?” Mrs. Garettson calls to the ten-year-old hovering around the edges of her living room.

“Can I have this photo?” Clark asks, not turning from the wall on which it hangs. My gaze darts over my shoulder to where he stands in front of a large framed
photograph. So plays the light in the room that in the framed glass before my brother I see his reflection more than the photo behind the glass. I look to the woman next to me, as a startled expression flashes across a face that seems unable to comprehend what was just asked of her.

“That photo?” she struggles with the disconnect between it and the half-started cup of tea before her.

“I like it,” explains Clark.

“Well, that’s my photo, Dear,” she offers up apologetically. “Why, I think that one is Tom and I at Coney Island.” She strains to decipher the photo’s details after years of letting it become part of the mundane. “Must have been that summer in fifty-three, I’d say.” There’s a pause with all three of us staring into the black and white print. The captured image so telling, our minds move surely between its precise detail and the hazy moments that must have encompassed this singular one in time. The photo draws us in with its story.

On the wooden rail of a boardwalk sit two teenagers. Teenagers, sure as invincible youth, so long as the photo exits. They laugh, the grey ocean visible a short way behind them. A flock of seagulls mid-take-off on the sand. The roar of the surf and the wail of the seagulls rise from the background. The bite of saltwater heavy in the air that fills his lungs, he looks at her mid-laugh. His smiling eyes gazing from thick-framed glasses. A breeze tangles in their hair, drawing it out in wisps around their faces. The young woman leans forward, her lips parted slightly, speaking some teasing remark to the photographer.

“I like it,” affirms Clark.

A faint smile draws across Mrs. Garettson’s face. “I do, too.”

At the time I didn’t question why Clark wanted the photograph. It had always been one of those unspoken agreements of our relationship that I have wild, unwavering faith in everything he decided. There would be no asking for justification, no prying into motives, and—as he would have had it—only loyalty to his undisclosed causes.

But this changes on a dark December night six years later. Leaning against his door frame, I knock lightly on the open bedroom door. His gaze flickers up to the eleven-year-old sister in his doorway before dropping back down to the cardboard box in his hands. I take his lack of protest as an invitation. Sitting on his bed, Clark struggles with packing tape for a box in the dull light from the writing lamp on his desk.

I silently cross the room and sit in his desk chair. Something draws my attention to what’s on the wall above his desk. I hadn’t noticed them before, their tones
mingling with the dark of the room. Taped to the wall, an old photograph, another, another. There's an arresting quality rising from the mass of black and white images. The photos form a restless crowd, the unfamiliar faces gathered in throngs, stolen from their lives, to be collected here. The scenes flash in rapid succession as my eyes strain, following the images farther and farther into the darkness.


My heart quickens as my eyes race from grey image to grey image, as I search for any connections between the unrelated shots. I've held the belief that photos hold too much of who people are, too much of their lives. And now my brother has them. Clark has all of these people's lives. I lean back in the chair and gaze into the overwhelming collection of histories my brother has compiled on the walls surrounding his desk. “What are these?” I ask quietly, trying to comprehend the sheer number of photographs in the dark. Clark leans on his desk, bringing his face close to the wall, as if the images are as novel to him as they are to me.

“People,” he at last concludes with clarity. Knowing Clark, he means more than what he's saying. He stands back to look at them in full, impressed himself at the accumulation. He runs a hand through his disheveled hair and takes a shy breath. “Well, parts of people. Moments of people, mostly. Stories, I guess.”

With anxiety rising in me due to the sheer number of photographic eyes now trained on us, I find his calm composure distressing. “Why do you have them all taped up here?” I question. Clark shifts slightly, narrowing his gaze, trying to decipher them all, photo by photo in the dark. He pauses as he tries to find solid ground between the photos that all attempt to pull him away to distant grey places.

“I collect them. Because they're so permanent. I like that the photos can exist even after the people in them are...” he starts, justifying it more to himself than to me. But Clark is quick to recognize the confusion of the eleven-year-old watching him from his desk chair. My silent blue eyes are enough to persuade him into simpler terms, “I mean, these photos are proof that these people existed, and... Well, they’re real people, you know.” He declares this obvious truth that might have otherwise slipped away unquestioned, as if it’s the most natural grounds
for hoarding unfamiliar images. He turns, drawn back to the collection of grey photos.

I struggle to keep him from being again snared away from me. “Why have them at all?” I pry.

He looks at me with a suspicious gaze, conflicted about my sudden demand for answers to questions he’s most likely been avoiding. He turns from the desk back to the box he’s been sorting books into. “I like them” he explains quietly. “And it just doesn’t seem right to let them be forgotten like that. But if I can hold onto the photos...Onto the parts of the people in the photos...Try to keep them. To prove—”

As usual, words fail Clark. He means more than what he can manage to say. I let my eyes jump from one whole-hearted and short noticed shot to another. One pulls me in with a vague familiarity. The smell of sunshine and summer and lake water and all of them filtered in the weathered wood of a waterfront cabin. In the black- and-white print, two teenagers sit on the wooden rail of a boardwalk...

The face of the young woman in the picture anchors me back to a cabin, to an old woman’s reluctance to let go of a photo that holds too much of herself. I immediately wonder how Clark came to possess this photograph that I recognize from the walls of Mrs. Garettson’s cabin. Of all of the suspicions I have gathered over the years regarding my brother, art theft defies the fundamental faith I have in Clark. I look between him and the picture. “This one is the Garettsons,” I say.

He turns his gaze directly up to where it hangs on the wall; this photograph, a treasure among his collection. He studies it a moment. “Yeah, Mrs. Garettson gave it to me after Tom died. She said she wanted someone to know who the people in the picture were. I guess she was afraid that after she was gone, no one would care.”

“Doesn’t that seem wrong to you? To have these pictures? To have part of someone’s life like that?” I demand of him, trying unsuccessfully to keep my voice from rising. A perplexed look takes hold of his face. His brown eyes fix on me in the same way they had fixed on the grey images above his desk.

“No. I don’t think that it’s wrong to keep these things. I think it would be wrong to have the chance to look into someone’s life and then not to take that chance. I think these stories matter, even if we don’t understand them, or we think they aren’t ours to understand. They matter.”
INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

Ali wrote her essay, “The Keeper,” in a First-Year Interest Group (FIG) section whose theme was “Art in Totalitarian Europe.” The prompt for this essay was broad, inviting students to reflect on an encounter with art. Each time I read Ali’s work, I’m struck by her ability to convey information about her characters’ perspectives through her use of descriptive detail. We learn the most about the narrator and about her brother’s personalities in small exchanges, such as when Clark fidgets during conversation or when the speaker watches Clark move around a room “partly out of loyalty, but mostly out of habit.” This is a strong example of a writer “showing” rather than “telling” her readers about the larger questions at play in her narrative. Details like these invite readers to reflect on the nature of photography and about sibling relationships, but Ali doesn’t tell us exactly what she believes is happening in each scene. As a result, we have much more space to think about what the story’s central photographs mean for each character on our own.

What stands out to me the most about Ali’s writing process was how open she was to experimentation. She tested new strategies for drawing the reader into the scene in each section of her essay, something we can see in the way that she uses a rapid list of smells in the same sentence to convey the feeling of being bombarded with many different sensations at once.

Ali also recognized that the qualities that make strong initial drafts are different from the qualities that make strong final drafts. As she began to connect her two central scenes to one another, she identified numerous questions that she could use her story to ask, but she also acknowledged that the limited scope of the assignment simply didn’t allow space for her to examine each of these underlying themes. While she recognized that others wouldn’t be able to pick up on all of the ideas that had emerged for her as she reflected on these encounters, Ali knew that putting many of them down on paper would help her to discover what her narrative could teach her about her own interests. During peer review workshops and conferences with me, Ali approached her drafts with the spirit of an archeologist, digging through each separate topic she identified to see which felt the most exciting for her to explore. I found this approach especially striking because many writers struggle with the feeling that they need to commit to a single central message or question before writing their first drafts. Instead of letting her earliest ideas govern her writing process, Ali treated her early work as a kind of exhilarating laboratory space. As we discussed her second draft, Ali noticed an unintended pattern in the language she had used to describe her characters’ outlooks on photography and decided to make this theme the focus of her later revision. Because she consciously approached each
draft as an opportunity to learn more about her own narrative, Ali was able to produce a detailed, thought-provoking essay.

—Naomi Salmon

**WRITER’S MEMO**

Photographs of people have always made me nervous; I could never quite form a disconnect between the physical object of the photograph and the person that was pictured. I felt that staring at photographs was as intrusive as staring at someone sitting next to you. Was it wrong then to look at photographs? To take photographs? To keep photographs? Approaching my narrative project for English 100, I used this personal experience as an anchor to build my narrative around. I worked to use an experience with a single photo, and my perception of this artwork, as it evolved over time, to examine the larger question of photography I was trying to answer. But before I could hope to answer such a global question, I first sought to build a foundation of the small specific details of the story. Here again I used personal experience and memories to make the narrative feel genuine. The setting and senses were pulled from my memories in Northern Wisconsin, and the characters carried continuous mannerisms and actions from their childhood into their early adulthood as the story changed around them. One aspect of the story that changed the most when I was editing the piece was the characters. I wanted the characters to carry the narrative question to the readers, and I wanted this question to feel like it had gravity.

A challenge I faced in writing this piece was finding a balance between elaborating abstract ideas and never straying too far from the underlying story. I resolved this through creating a reverse outline; I wrote a short sentence that described the function of each paragraph so I could look at the story at its bare bones. Through the reverse outline I was able to see the purpose of each paragraph and its relation to the other elements of the piece. Being able to express this abstract idea through persuasive narrative challenged me as I had to build characters and situations that brought this question to life and presented it as a significant matter. I wanted to set the narrative stakes of the story so that the photographs, and the questions that they came tangled with, mattered to the characters. Doing this, I hoped the question would matter to the readers. I hoped to challenge readers if a moral line could, or should, be drawn when looking into others’ lives through the things they own and the insights these hold. I wanted to experiment with this abstract thought through examining the relationships that people have to photographs. In some cases photographs are maintained on principle, other cases rely more on emotion, and in yet other cases images can have an effect on us that we ourselves may not completely
understand. Again I used the characters as ways of showing that there could be tension when ideas about photographs do not completely align. For the narrator and her brother, there’s underlying tension as the narrator believes photos are intrusive, and Clark believes that photos are telling. As I revised from my first to final drafts I was able to hone this conflict of ideas by creating detailed descriptions of photographs and the emotions they elicited in their viewers. I especially took care to describe the differing and contrasting emotions that the same photographs had on the two main characters, one of discomfort the other of possession, which later manifested in a tension that put their relationship in a new context.

In addition to the tension between them, I wanted a bond between the characters. The loyalty Clark wants from his sister and the closeness that the narrator wants from her brother, bind them together in a way that they have to work together in trying to answer that global question. I wanted this exchange to feel genuine and vulnerable, each character asking questions of the other and prying in ways that exposed their true beliefs. I hope this essay prompts the audience to take greater notice of photographs and to search for the stories in the anonymous, examining the details of an event, a life, or a story which we have the chance to look into. I chose to conclude the essay with a quote from Clark that echoes the underlying themes of the narrative and justifies the existence of photos even if the larger questions surrounding them remain unanswered.

—Alexandra Pleasant

*Student Writing Award: Narrative Essay*
STUDENT WRITING AWARD: INFORMATIVE/EXPLANATORY ESSAY
The joy starts as the hot silky water gently hits the ground coffee beans. The dark brown bits swell in slow motion and, like lava, burst as small bubbles form. The aroma molecules gush out; they are the aurora of olfaction, fulfilling like dark chocolate and mysterious like wine. The barista continues tilting the kettle skillfully, distributing water on the ground coffee. Drops of coffee break free of the filter, forming a bigger and bigger pond. The coffee is now lying in its purest form, waiting to be understood. Delicate. Sensitive. Balanced. Passionate. They are all adjectives for this alluring cup of coffee. But there are more. The sensation of taste is deeper and more powerful. It can be clean or complex, smooth or jazzy, nutty like almond, or smoky like tobacco – but it’s not until the coffee glides across your tongue that you can truly realize the flavors on the taster’s wheel. You might not have heard the noun “specialty coffee,” but this is it. This steaming cup of coffee brewed with freshly ground high-quality beans, naked yet leveled in its own way, is specialty coffee. Neatly categorized according to the brew method described, it is given a simple name: pour-over coffee.

From the producer (farmer) to the green coffee buyer, then to the roaster and the barista, and finally into the consumer’s mouth, specialty coffee – a term first used by Erna Knutsen in 1974 to describe beans of high quality that are produced in ideal climates – exists because of the dedication of people involved in each process. Although there are an estimated 450 million cups of coffee consumed daily in the United States, pour-over coffee is far from being recognized in the popular coffee culture in this country compared to espresso-based drinks, such as caffè latte and cappuccino (Nattell, 2002). It is therefore hard to imagine that the capital city of a tiny island in East Asia – my hometown, Taipei, Taiwan – is a "coffee heaven" that integrates specialty coffee into daily life.

Coffee came to Taiwan with the Japanese, who occupied the nation for 50 years starting in 1895, when Japan itself was strongly influenced by Western ideals and aesthetics. In the early 1920s, coffee shops became meeting places for intellectuals to exchange political views. Even after World War II, as Taiwan was detached from Japan and the Nationalists fled to Taiwan from China, intellectuals still gathered in coffee shops to share ideas. Later, the economic boom in the 1970s gave rise to a new middle class, making more people capable of affording coffee. “After Starbucks arrived, Taiwanese became passionate about coffee as a way of life,” says Chou Wen Pei, head of the Taiwan Coffee Association and a founder of Specialty Coffee: The Pour-Over
Taiwan Barista Championship, on the arrival of Starbucks in the 1990s. As in the U.S., Starbucks is extremely popular in Taiwan and is even considered a luxurious chain. However, in the 105-square-mile Taipei City, the figures are stunning: while there were 119 Starbucks in Taipei by the end of 2015, there were more than 2,500 indie coffee shops in this city (“The Survival,” 2010).

I didn’t start exploring specialty coffee until I was in high school, when a specialty coffee shop happened to open right across from my grandparents’ place. It was where I had my very first pour-over coffee. The first cup of pour-over coffee did not feel smooth, though; it tasted much stronger and more “raw” than I expected. I just loved the atmosphere of the shop and was fascinated by the way they made coffee for me there, so I kept visiting. The barista would bring a set of pour-over coffee utensils to my table and let me observe the filter technique as they carefully poured hot water onto the ground coffee beans. It was very stylish. But style wasn’t the main attraction to me. “There must be a reason for people who enjoy this type of coffee,” I thought to myself and decided to find out what that reason was.

Back in Taipei, searching for specialty coffee shops was always one of my most exciting goals. Plus, based on the statistics, it looked like a never-ending adventure ahead. My home in Taipei was close to the National University of Taiwan, the oldest college here with a deep-rooted coffee culture. I’d bike to a coffee shop with good reviews on the Internet, sit down with full expectation, and order an item on the menu that uses the name of the coffee beans’ country, region, processing type, roasting technique, and predicted tastes. For a cup of pour-over coffee, the beans usually came from a single origin, meaning they are solely from a specific coffee producer and are not blended. Generally speaking, beans from Ethiopia are floral, herbal, and citrus; beans from Colombia tend to be sweet, nutty, and chocolatey; beans from Costa Rica have complex sweetness combined with acidity and citrus, floral flavors . . . and so on. In specialty coffee, every single detail involved, from planting coffee trees to that final cup of coffee on your table, can be a factor that influences the flavor.

From a complete beginner to a person who appreciates the making of a good cup of coffee, coffee has surely influenced my lifestyle a lot. Like discovering a new star in the sky to astrologists, finding a fantastic coffee shop I had not visited before, or finding myself able to identify more flavors from coffee were exciting milestones to me. My interest in coffee has also expanded my curiosity, as I would excitedly try any exotic coffee – like Serbian or Nepalese coffee – that I saw in restaurants.

I remember the day I tried a coffee shop in a well-hidden alley in Taipei. The shop owner offered me his newly made pour-over coffee that wasn’t on the menu. The beans were Ethiopian and dry-processed. I took a sip, and the aftertaste that
followed immediately struck my entire sensory system like lightning – how on earth could a cup of coffee taste like grapes? After confirming with the shop owner that the coffee really had the flavor of wine and that my taste buds were functioning normally, I had an instant impulse to reproduce that kind of coffee myself.

With a full set of pour-over coffee utensils in my dorm room, I not only learned how to make pour-over coffee with online tutorials and coffee books, but I became eager to discover specialty coffee shops in Madison when I came to the UW. The history of coffee in America can be traced back to the early 18th century as it first reached the New World, although coffee didn’t popularize in the United States until the Boston Tea Party in 1773. That’s when Americans boycotted tea, and coffee from Brazil and the Caribbean was cheaper and easier to obtain than tea from China and India (Avey, 2013). Vacuum packaging, invented in 1900 by R.W. Hills, changed how coffee is packaged. By the mid-1900s, instant coffee became the new lifestyle in the U.S. and even supplied the military for World War II. By the 1970s, as much as one-third of imported coffee was processed into instant coffee. Then came Starbucks, which was founded in 1971, and four and a half decades later, it has 23,768 locations worldwide and became the icon of the coffee empire of the U.S. (“The History,” 2016). However, although the U.S. is famous for coffee shops that you can spot almost everywhere, it was a real bummer that many of them in Madison served only espresso-based drinks.

As much as I prefer pour-over coffee over espresso-based drinks, it was still eye-opening the first few times I looked at the coffee shops’ menus and struggled to order something, because there are so many types of espresso drinks that don’t exist in coffee shops in my hometown. The espresso culture here was refreshing to me, so I quickly tried all the coffee shops I came across in Madison and many kinds of espresso drinks. I have decided a favorite, which I visited so often that I bet the employees can draw the outline of my face without looking.

Although that coffee shop had a great atmosphere for studying and enjoying a cup of coffee plus dessert, to me pour-over is still the soul of coffee-making. Fortunately, my pour-over coffee drought ended recently after a friend recommended a coffee shop little-known to students but not far from campus. It sits on the corner of University and Highland Avenues and, to my surprise, its founder was the World Barista Champion in 2011. So with high expectations and excitement, I came to 5th Element Coffee. It did not let me down. Their pour-over coffee used beans from the founder’s coffee farm in El Salvador and was wonderfully complex. It had a delightful smoky flavor that gave me an impression of a marvelous feast. After months of searching, I finally found a place that can satisfy my craving for specialty coffee. I have a feeling that the owner and the apprentices of 5th Element Coffee and I will see each other a lot. “There are some people who order pour-over coffee, but cappuccino is definitely more

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popular,” the apprentice at 5th Element Coffee told me. I watched him weigh the El Salvador beans and put them into the automatic grinder. He wet the paper filter with hot water, then dumped the ground coffee beans on it. He slowly poured water on the coffee, which “bloomed,” creating a blossoming effect called pre-infusion. After 20 seconds, he added the second pour, circling hot water around the ground coffee to fully release the flavors of the beans. Coffee dripped through the paper filter and was collected in the container underneath. He shook the final product gently to mix the brownish liquid that glowed beautifully, poured it into a coffee mug, and handed it to me.

I inhaled deeply and took a sip; the coffee was now on my tongue, stimulating every taste bud. I let the aroma and flavors take me on an adventure. The liquid went down my throat, but the aftertaste still floated, building new neural connections in my brain. I exhaled. My whole body softened and sank into the seat. Looking around the coffee shop, I wasn’t sure what kind of coffee others were having in their cups. The only thing I knew was this cup of pour-over coffee was what I had been looking for.

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The theme of my English 100 course is “Community and Agency.” For their Informative Essay, I asked students to consider a global issue and how it plays out at a local level. Sophie’s striking sensory imagery and love for coffee was clear from the very first draft, which made it easy to see that this was a piece worth continuing. She also already had a sense of the global—the history of specialty coffee and the ways that coffee has become a part of various cultures. What became clear in early drafts, however, was that her “local” focus was in fact hyperlocal—centered on a single cup of coffee. We discussed how to make her “local” focus just a bit wider, and the end result is an essay that uses coffee as a lens to understand something about her experience of finding her way in the differing cultures of Taipei and Madison. The strength of her narrative style makes the reader immediately understand why something as seemingly basic as a cup of coffee can, if we spend the time to look carefully at it, say something about our lives.

— Scott Harman

It has been quite a while since I last touched or thought about this piece of writing. However, the one thought that came to me when tracing the memory of writing it was definitely, “I wrote with passion.” Coffee was a topic I cared about and would love to share with people; it was also an area of exploration I still had a lot to learn about. The process of writing the essay went like this: I wrote down the specific things I remembered regarding my first encounters with specialty coffee, forgetting about the structure of the essay in the beginning, and I researched for some additional academic information to support its credibility and educational meaning (since it was an “informative essay”). The structuring of the essay came in during the revision, just to make it easier to read. Fortunately, the topic of specialty coffee was something not very well known by most, so it made for an interesting topic to write about, and I hope it did not bore you.

When I was editing this article for publication, my writing seemed to be coming from an ancient age. It would be hard for me in my first year to imagine that
between my submission of this essay and editing it now, I have read and encountered so many other types of writing and literature, ranging from formal academic papers in science and humanities, to literary giants like Franz Kafka and great cinema artists like Andrei Tarkovsky. So when looking back at my article on coffee, I was like, “Wow, I’m amazed at just how passionate my tone is in this essay!” I have no doubt that the moment I set my fingers on my laptop keyboard, all I wanted was to tell how coffee had influenced me for the rest of my life.

In this class we were given a lot of freedom to choose what we wanted to write about, and, to me, an important notion was to be “unique” in writing and to bring in my own very subjective point of view—not subjective on the facts, but on my relationship to the topic. As Andrei Tarkovsky noted in Sculpting in Time, authors should interpret their subjects personally and stay true to their visions. I believe that perspectives come from our own memory and our current state of interpretations. If I were to write on the same topic now, it would be vastly different from the one you are reading here. The feeling of passion might be different, but that’s why we write. Words are the traces we leave behind. Words are our expression of memory.

—Sophie Chung

Student Writing Award: Informative Essay
The Decemberists

LIBBY DEGREGORIO

In the past decade, The Decemberists have released seven albums and three EPs. Through listening to them and imagining myself within their lyrics, I’ve been a man who marries a magical bird, a sailor viciously avenging my mother’s death, a woman who falls in love with a shape-shifting boreal forest dweller, and a botanist during the siege of Stalingrad. I’ve died at birth; I’ve lost my true love; and I’ve murdered my three children. The Decemberists, from Portland, Oregon, are an indie folk-rock band, and their songs don’t just contain inventive and complex lyrics; they are stories that you become. With an imaginative and witty songwriter, Colin Meloy, the band enjoys “challenging [them]selves, toying with structure, and having a sense of humor” (Fricke “Unlikely Pop Triumph” 34). The Decemberists, who claim that their official drink is Orangina and that they love the video game Bioshock, are known for their folklore lyrics and eclectic music that produce imaginative nonfiction stories only a select few minds could manufacture. They have been making music since the early 2000s, and with every album, The Decemberists have maintained a story-telling song structure, even as their musical style and sound has evolved. Unfortunately, however, the stories told through the lyrics have increasingly lost the eloquence and detail they once contained, as the band’s fan base grew and caused them to move toward the lowest common denominator.

Growing up in Helena, Montana, Colin Meloy, the frontman of The Decemberists, was a solitary, imaginative kid who “was always attracted to fairy-tale motifs and stories” (qtd. in Fricke “Decemberists” 72). It was this love for fantastical writing that fueled the formation of The Decemberists. In 1999, Meloy was playing in an indie-rock band, Tarkio, and planning on becoming a novelist (72). However, the “write what you know, creative non-fiction” approach to writing he was taught at the University of Montana led Meloy to do the opposite of writing fantasy novels. He began writing songs. And instead of writing this realist, kind of stoic non-fiction, he explained in an interview with NPR that he chose to write about things outside of his experience; he began telling stories entirely outside of his setting in history. As he puts it:

from a young age I’ve always had a predilection for a kind of verbal acrobatics. I’ve always had a real love for alliterative poetry and songwriting, and music and writing that really uses the whole breadth of the English language in all of its many amazing sounds, and how those sounds play off each other. (qtd. in Moss 52)
For example, after his band Tarkio broke up, and Meloy's future as a career musician was in limbo, he sat down in his dining-room, imagining what it would be like to have traveling Chinese trapeze artists as parents. He wrote a tale about how his trapeze artist mother smuggled bombs for the Resistance, how his father was an Axis spy, how his sister grew tobacco in South Carolina, and how he was born in a brothel, raised by prostitutes who lost him to a blind brigadier in a game of high-stakes canasta (52). The story was never intended to be played out; it was just a way to make himself laugh in a time of stress. However, his larkish tale would become the storyline for the song “My Mother Was a Chinese Trapeze Artist,” which appeared on the The Decemberists’ 2001 debut album, 5 Songs, and became the start of Meloy’s clever wordplay and narrative lyrics for which The Decemberists are known.

After the abject failure of Tarkio, Colin Meloy was reluctant, yet eager, to start another band, so he left Helena for Portland, Oregon. Here, he met his new band mates Jenny Conlee, a keyboard and accordionist, and Nate Query, a bassist, through mutual friends. He immediately asked them to start playing with him. Nate Query specifically remembers thinking that “they totally hit it off. The band was great. The music was great. And it just went from there” (Paris). Their first project was scoring a silent film, which Meloy admits “probably sounded like shit and was performed pretty sloppily. But it really soldered something between the three of [them]” (Paris). They became The Decemberists. They started booking gigs, and really developed a camaraderie out of pure enjoyment for what they were doing; the sound was different, and they were all interested in experimenting. Not only was their camaraderie useful to the development of the band, but they all brought different influences that contributed to its overall sound and visage. Colin Meloy drew from Fleetwood Mac, The Smiths, The Pogues, Robyn Hitchcock and R.E.M, contributing to The Decemberists’ “indie” sound. In addition, Nate Query grew up with Americana and bluegrass, bringing folk roots to the Decemberists. Jenny Conlee appreciated classical music and listened to heavy rock, which gave The Decemberists a more heavy-orchestral touch. There is a keen balance of power in the music, and every band member is aware of the end goal. The songs of the Decemberists are “Colin’s songs. While [Jenny Conlee, Nate Query, and Chris Funk] are just the hands that make them happen” (Fricke,“Decemberists” 72).

The first album, 5 songs, made over three days, was a crystal-clear, simple and folk-informed album. It was made just to get a demo out there, to see if anyone would listen. It was by no means a bad release; however, listening to it is most useful as a way to truly appreciate the greatness of the band’s other albums. A year later in 2002, The Decemberists released their first full length album, Castaways and Cutouts, which was heavy acoustic folkrock, with baroque instrumentation, but still much like its predecessor, 5 Songs. Shortly after Castaways
and Cutouts, the Decemberists released Her Majesty, The Decemberists (2003), which veered toward the theatrical style of Meloy’s work and was more bold. By their next album Picaresque (2005), there was an expansion in indie music. Lead by bands like Arcade Fire and Sufjan Stevens, indie music became expected to contain orchestral sounds. Picaresque was recorded in a church and the first of the Decemberists’ albums to incorporate orchestral sounds. It was the least stagy, most serious, and most accomplished effort by The Decemberists yet. The sound was dynamic and impassioned, and was exactly what people wanted to hear. The Decemberists fan base grew exponentially. Then, a year later, with The Crane Wife (2006), The Decemberists hit their peak. They still incorporated the desired orchestral sounds, but brought in more Progressive-rock roots. The Crane Wife “rock[ed] harder than anything The Decemberists have done previously, a watershed moment for a band as much noted for its idiosyncrasies as its songs” (Deusner).

By The Hazards of Love (2009), they drew from Anne Briggs, and they became this quasi, fake metal band that presented this dark, rock opera with an overriding narrative. Although clever and witty, The Hazards of Love was the start of The Decemberists downfall. Meloy expressed that “doing The Hazards of Love took a lot out of [him], and [he] was definitely curious what would come out now that [he’s] got that out of [his] system” (Deusner). Therefore, their latest album, The King is Dead (2011), was a good, roomy and rustic country-folk record influenced by Emmylou Harris, early Wilco, Neil Young, and R.E.M. However it was standard, it was populist, and it was more disposed to mass appeal. This contradicts what Meloy was trying to do when he first began writing music and is a perfect example of how the band lost what made them unique.

Just after The King is Dead was released, Meloy revealed with a tinge of sarcasm, “I don’t even like [The Decemberists] anymore. I used to. I liked our first couple of records, but... I don’t know” (Meloy). Looking back to “My Mother Was a Chinese Trapeze Artist,” the lyrics of The King is Dead illustrate how the album was forced, and just made palatable to fans. With Castaways and Cutouts, the central narrative of the album reveals the tales of life’s castaways, including Spanish gypsies, Turkish prostitutes, and Chinese traveling trapeze artists. In The King is Dead there is no discernible narrative; the concept is linear and there is no connection between songs. For example, start with the opening song “Don’t Carry It All,” a straightforward testament to civility and social justice, then skip ahead a couple songs and listen to “January Hymn” where Meloy sings simply about time passing and snow. There is no elaborate tale or narrative, just witty lyrics that communicate a plain idea. Overall, the album was smooth and well produced, and reached number one on the Billboard charts, but it wasn’t what they once produced, which was disappointing to many fans. So, unfortunately, there is no clear future for The Decemberists, and ultimately, the fan base they accu-
mulated with their recent albums wasn’t what Meloy desired. It made him more uncomfortable than excited. He expressed that “[he] [doesn’t] know if [he] can go back to the long-form songs, it would feel redundant. But to continue making records like The King Is Dead, which is going back to a more comfortable way of writing — that’s not a good thing either” (Fricke, "Unlikely Pop Triumph" 34).

However, until then, there is a new way Colin Meloy fans can still get lost in his words. Last year, he published his first novel, Wildwood (2011), a tale of high adventure, witty statements, and flawless illustrations. This novel will be the first of three, and will eventually be adapted into a small animated film. The series is intended for nine to twelve year-olds; however, there is no doubt that the majority of those reading it will be solemn fans like myself, just wanting to be a part of another one of Meloy’s stories.

Works Cited


INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

For the second sequence in English 100 our class wrote and read reviews. We discussed their structure, how they incorporated research and analysis and how they sought balance while also taking a particular argumentative stance. The first short writing assignment asked students to review a local restaurant while
the second asked them to evaluate a common word or phrase from their vocabulary. The hope was that by the time they started working on the major essay, they would be comfortable in this type of writing.

Among five essay prompts, Libby chose to write a critical review on a musician, in her case, Colin Meloy, the lyricist and primary songwriter of The Decemberists. Some of the writing process was rather straight-forward. Libby found information on Meloy’s and the band’s history while also incorporating the opinions of music reviewers from major music publications. The more difficult tasks came when Libby had to take the role of a music reviewer. Part of this process meant listening and re-listening to songs and albums and trying to make sense of when and how Meloy changed in his approach to song-writing and lyrics.

It was clear from talking to Libby in class and at conferences that she had strong personal opinions on Meloy’s and the band’s change in sound and lyrics. We discussed the importance of not letting the essay become a simple fan response, that it would be better to think of the essay as her way of making sense of Meloy as a musician and person. In short, who was this guy and what was he doing to The Decemberists? The most obvious way to look more closely at Meloy was to analyze his lyrics and his interview statements, which became launching points for analysis and development in Libby’s essay. To help in the process, I encouraged her to approach his interviews and lyrics in much the same way she’d approach a text in a literature class. Though this aspect of her paper is a strength now, it took several drafts to strike the right balance of personal reflection and impartial analysis.

There’s so much I admire about this essay. For one, I don’t think readers have to love or listen to The Decemberists, to understand and enjoy this critical review. Any reader, no matter their musical taste, should be fascinated by how this essay looks at how art and imagination changes, and how artists, even the ones we love, can produce less than awe-inspiring work. These ideas are explored through a voice which is natural but not casual, analytical but not monotonous, confident but not preachy. Finally, I admire this essay because after I read it, I continue to be curious about The Decemberists, about Meloy, about inspiration. I want to know what happens next.

—Josh Kalscheur

WRITER’S MEMO

In this piece, I have given a researched overview of the history of the band The Decemberists and how they have changed over time. This is my review of the
band as a whole, and more specifically at times, the singer/songwriter, Colin Meloy.

At first, this project was difficult and I didn’t know exactly how to approach it. The Decemberists have done a lot in the past decade, and there were many different stances I could take on how the band and music has changed. Eventually, I realized what exactly disappointed me with their latest album: the fact that they produced it just to please fans. I then developed a researched history that set up for that belief.

My earlier narrative helped me learn how to “show, not tell.” One of my goals in writing was to introduce the band to potential new fans, making them feel as if they had actually heard the albums and could relate to the Decemberists fan experience. Of course, the disappointment most die-hard fans feel is part of that experience. I hoped that other serious fans would feel comforted that others felt the same way they probably do. None of our disappointment means that we dislike the band’s new albums. I love running to the metal-opera tones of “Hazards of Love.” It’s just that the newer ones leave us missing the narrative creativity of the earlier albums. If readers can understand and feel this kind of devoted disappointment, then I accomplished what I wanted to do. That’s what I’ll take away from the course, in the end. “Show, don’t tell.” Write less like you’re speaking to a friend who already understands you and more like you are making someone new understand you with nothing but the piece itself.

Overall, I think I communicate my concerns, hopes, and predictions for their future well. I really enjoyed writing the paper. And thanks to having to do so much research about The Decemberists, I can tell you almost anything about the band, and can whole-heartedly admit that I am in love with Colin Meloy.

— Libby DeGregorio

*Student Writing Award: Explanatory Essay*
An Accessible Campus

BROCK GILSDORF

With 21,796 faculty and staff and 43,193 students all on a campus that spans 936 acres, accessibility is a challenge for the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW Facts). In addition to hosting students, staff, and faculty who travel around campus on a regular basis, the University is an important part of the Madison and state communities, which bring many visitors to this campus. This can be seen dramatically on a Saturday in fall when 80,000 people pile into Camp Randall for a football game. The topography, brute size, and the number of people in the same area, can make getting around UW-Madison a difficult task. While there are groups and individuals who are trying to improve accessibility on campus, some problems cannot be fixed with a simple solution. This essay surveys some of the work toward improvements as well as the continued challenges of campus accessibility.

One of the landmarks of UW-Madison is Bascom Hill. It can be a beautiful sight after a peaceful snowfall or in autumn when the trees are changing colors. But having classes or meetings at the top of Bascom Hill can be challenging because of how steep the hill is, and it can be even more difficult during the winter. One winter day after a snowfall, I was at the bottom of Bascom Hill near the bridge to the Humanities Building, when I noticed a slick patch of ice had developed near the Law School, a third of the way up. That is where I saw eight people fall victim to the same patch of ice. Thankfully, it looked like no one got injured.

Many students dread walking up Bascom Hill for class. Some might just be too lazy to put in the effort of the steep incline, but some have a tough time due to a disability. Cathy Trueba, the director of the McBurney Disability Resource Center at UW- Madison, says students with physical disabilities find Bascom Hill to be the most challenging part of campus, especially in winter. Bascom Hill is not the only difficult place to travel on campus, though. According to Trueba the hilly topography over towards Observatory Drive is generally very difficult, too. Areas like this create one kind of problem that does not have a simple answer, although some transportation solutions are available on request. Short of leveling out Bascom Hill and rebuilding that whole area of campus (or installing a ski resort-style chair lift!) the physical challenges will persist.

Leslie Stilson, an accommodation specialist at the McBurney Disability Resource Center, identifies a different part of campus that is difficult to get around. Stilson has a visual disability and uses a cane to get a feel for what's around her. The
McBurney Center is located across from Gordon’s Dining and Event Center, kitty corner to the Witte and Sellery residence halls, and is in the same building complex as the Student Activity Center, Walgreens, and Lucky Apartments. This location means there is a lot of foot traffic in the area. Stilson says that the narrow sidewalks of West Johnson Street, in addition to the heavy foot traffic, make it difficult for her to get around. She echoes Trueba, saying winter travel is the most difficult due to the challenge of finding the curb cut outs, not just because it is slippery. Curb cuts are the slanted areas that provide a gradual transition from the road to a sidewalk. After a snowfall, the snowplows come through and push snow into all the curb cuts or where you would step off the sidewalk and onto a bus. Even though the sidewalks may be clear, finding the curb cut outs is difficult in these conditions.

On the brighter side, according to Stilson, as the campus adds new buildings, they tend to be more accessible than the older buildings. This can be credited to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that was passed in 1990. As a consequence most new buildings, Stilson says, have “easier-to-access entrances without steps or hazards, more access to elevators, and accessible room numbers to the side of the doorway that include braille.” Even with the influence of the ADA though, Stilson still finds the new Union South building to be the most difficult place for her. This is because “it is very open on the first floor, does not have available walls to travel along, and has many obstacles like poles, seating areas and line indicators outside of the venders’ spaces” (Stilson). Even when adhering to the federal laws, there can still be design choices with the construction of a building that make it less accessible.

Which areas or features on campus are the most difficult depend on who you are and the extent of your abilities or limitations. Personally, for me just the size of the campus is the most difficult and that is due to the time it takes to walk from one end to the other.

In my conversation with Trueba, she pointed out something interesting: just because something is accessible, does not mean it is easy. She encourages people to spend a day only traveling the accessible routes (flat sidewalks, elevators, ramps, etc.) to and from classes and appointments and then see how much time it adds to their day.

One department that helps with providing an accessible campus is “Facilities Planning & Management.” I had the chance to communicate with facilities access specialist Vorakiat “Top” Tantivivat on the work that this department does. He informed me that they have assessed over 800 exterior handrail locations, and they are in the process of improving and repairing those in need. During winter, Physical Plant crews work mainly on clearing snow from sidewalks, steps, and entrances. They like to lay a mixture of sand for traction and salt to
help areas where melting and freezing occur. The department website reveals that keeping roadways cleared is a number one priority (Grounds Management). I asked why that is the priority on a campus where most people get around on foot, and he pointed out that roadways are vital for emergency and service vehicles, which may be needed at any time. Tantivivat reports that he is particularly proud of being able to help provide accessibility on campus “whether small or big scale because it will make a difference to someone.” People like Tantivivat are among the ones who put forth the great effort of trying to ensure an accessible campus for all.

The McBurney Disability Resource Center provides mainly classroom accommodations, but there are several things that they do to make UW-Madison more physically accessible (Services). For example, the McBurney Center provides two-week wheelchair loans to students. This can be important, for example, for a student who just had foot surgery and needs to keep the foot elevated, or for a student who sprained an ankle badly and can’t put any weight on it. The McBurney Center can also provide elevator access in Van Hise Hall. In Van Hise, students cannot generally use the elevator to get to floors 2 through 4. However, some students need to be able to use the elevator to get to their classes because stairs are not accessible for them due to a variety of reasons.

Besides helping students with mobility disabilities, the McBurney Center also has an adaptive technology lab where they are able to convert textbooks to audio or provide closed captioning to videos. While such services might not always be considered when talking about providing an accessible campus, it is critical to have academic materials accessible to students in the formats that they need for their learning. At a campus the size of UW-Madison, accessibility is an ongoing challenge. The University has a variety of departments that are trying to do their part in providing an accessible campus, but there is still plenty of work to be done. Stilson says that UW-Madison falls “somewhere in the middle regarding accessibility.” She sees the progress that is being made, but still thinks that light needs to be shined on the issue of accessibility because some unusual decisions are still being made, as can be seen in the construction choices for Union South.

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“Grounds Management.” Facilities Stewardship for the University of Wisconsin-


INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

For the Sequence 2 project, I asked students to choose an issue relevant to the UW-Madison campus community, research a variety of perspectives on that issue, and then synthesize these perspectives into a cohesive conversation, providing readers with the “big picture.” The sequence included two short assignments to prepare them for this larger writing task. First, to help students hone in on a campus issue, I asked them to choose a spot or event on campus, simply observe the goings-on around them, and then write about their observations. From this short assignment, students generated potential research questions based on the most surprising or interesting things that they observed. For the second short assignment, students produced an annotated bibliography to help them consider the connections that could be made across their researched perspectives.

Early on, Brock identified campus accessibility as the issue he wanted to explore based on his work as a student employee at the McBurney Disability Resource Center. Conversations he had with McBurney co-workers led him to wonder whether students were aware of accessibility issues on campus and what accessibility resources were available to them. For his first short assignment, he observed one of the most basic campus events: he watched students walk to class. He chose his observation point strategically—Bascom Hill on a wintry day—and considered the difficulty of this task for so many members of the campus community. As evidenced in his final Sequence 2 writing project, these observations helped him frame his overall conversation. Peer and instructor workshops helped Brock to specify and clarify his thesis and draw out and connect interesting threads from each of his sources. The success of Brock’s Sequence 2 project demonstrates the importance of choosing a topic that matters, both to the writer and to the writer’s audience.

—Elisa Findlay
When first hearing about the prompt of writing portfolio 2, I wanted to make sure that I picked a topic that would allow me to shed light on an area of campus or the surrounding community that might go unnoticed by most people. While many people comment on the difficulty of climbing Bascom Hill, accessibility on campus is way more challenging than just that one hill. My idea for this writing project came to mind during an early Monday morning right after winter break. I work at the McBurney Disability Resource Center, and I was in the file room with Leslie Stilson and Cathy Trueba. They were discussing the difficulty of getting around campus with the snow. That’s when it clicked for me that not everyone is aware of the struggles some people face in getting around campus. I initially wanted to discuss only winter accessibility but then I decided that looking at accessibility as a whole would allow me to present a better overall vision. Hearing feedback during the peer review process helped me see other student’s issues with accessibility were not just during winter. To keep my piece balanced, I wanted to show two areas on campus that are difficult to get around, but then also show what the University is doing to try and help improve accessibility. In talking to my peers and teacher about this, I was encouraged to add some humor—realizing there are just some problems that the University cannot fix. (A chair lift is not likely to be added to Bascom Hill.)

If I went through the revision process again, I would let my essay sit for a longer time before coming back to edit it. This would allow me to have a sharper eye for detail. Throughout this writing process, the biggest thing I learned about myself as a writer is that it is important to have many people read over my work and give feedback on it. Going forward in my writing career, I will not hesitate to hone my writing skills by reaching out for help from peers, professors, or the writing workshops on campus.

— Brock Gilsdorf

*Student Essay Award: Informative/Synthesis Essay*

*This essay was previously published in the 9th edition of CCC.*
Walleye War

JACOB GRABOSKI

The police force continuously increased as they attempted to subdue the growing tensions between the protesters and the Indians on the banks of Trout Lake. Thousands of protesters gathered on the Trout Lake boat landing to form a barricade against the Ojibwe Indians. A rally, held by an anti-treaty group “Stop Treaty Abuse, Wisconsin” (STA/W), had brought in many protesters from all over Wisconsin in a unified effort to take over the boat landing and essentially stop the Ojibwe Indians from harvesting walleye. Tom Maulson, an avid Ojibwe hunter and fisherman living on the Lac du Flambeau reservation, recalls that Trout Lake was the most dangerous night in all of the years of spearing (Nesper, Walleye 138). Maulson explains, “They could have killed us all, and they was [sic] saying that that is what they wanted to do” (139). Rocks were thrown as racial epithets flew from the mouths of the angry crowds who were barely held back by mere snow fences and the brute force of police officers. The Ojibwe fisherman, fearing their lives, armed themselves with anything they could find and waited for the anger to subside. That Friday night, 109 protesters were arrested as the police forced the mobs back. Fourteen Flambeau spearers took 175 walleyes and 27 muskies, but the war was just beginning (Nesper, Walleye 139).

The night at Trout Lake was a product of years of tensions and political debates between the Ojibwe tribe of Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, and non-Indians of Wisconsin. Patty Loew, professor in the Department of Life Sciences Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explains the origins of the political debate: “The contemporary struggles had their roots in four treaties signed in 1836, 1837, 1842, and 1854 in which the Ojibwe ceded millions of acres in the Great Lakes region” (162). Loew locates the tensions between non-Indian and Ojibwe tribe members in treaties signed nearly 200 years ago. “Ojibwe Treaty Rights: 15 Years Later”, an article published by the Wisconsin Historical Society further affirms Leow’s statement,

In 1837 and 1842, the Ojibwe had signed treaties forfeiting their land titles while retaining their right to hunt and fish on that ceded territory — a guarantee known as “reserved rights.” Another treaty, signed in 1854, created reservations for the Ojibwe but did not cancel the rights guaranteed in earlier treaties. Despite this protection, the state consistently denied the Ojibwe these lawfully protected reserved rights. (“Ojibwe Treaty Rights: 15 Years Later”)
Simply stated, the Ojibwe bands of Wisconsin were hunting and spearing in the lands they ceded to the United States of America and the non-Indians believed they had no rights to those lands. Many elements contributed to the controversy of whether or not Ojibwe bands had different rights for hunting and fishing over non-Indians, and these elements were explored greatly in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Wisconsin Indian reservations are most commonly perceived as low-income areas. Larry Nesper, an ethnographer who studied the Ojibwe Tribe, found that “over fourteen hundred [Ojibwe] band members live on the reservation, 41 percent of them below the poverty line” (Walleye 14). This finding supports the Ojibwe claim that they rely on spearghising to survive on the low-income reservations. Although the non-Indians of Wisconsin recognize the poverty of the Ojibwe, many feel the fish more than make up for their lack of income. On April 24th, 1986, 54 spearers took 1,192 walleye (Nesper, Walleye 83). The ability to sell these fish for money created an unequal economic advantage for Ojibwe tribe members over the non-Indian sports fisherman because the Ojibwe could take whatever they needed for sustenance and sell the rest for surplus. Also, the Ojibwe bands had unlimited rights to walleye when compared to sports fisherman who had bag limits. Dennis Anderson, author in The Minnesota Star Tribune, clarifies the bag limit dilemma asserting that “[i]n recent years, the six Wisconsin Ojibwe bands have set harvest quotas between 41,000 and 45,000 walleye on 200 to 230 lakes. Bag limits for sport anglers are then adjusted down from the state limit of five walleye to three or two.” In essence, the Ojibwe control the amount of fish that sports fishermen are able to catch each season.

Some non-Indians even considered the Ojibwe spear fishing actions a form of rape. Even the Lac Du Flambeau Department of Natural Resources (DNR) used the word “rape” to describe the Ojibwes’ taking of vulnerable spawning females. However, Nesper critiques the DNR statement by showing that in 1990, 84.6 percent of the walleye speared during spawning were males (Walleye 104). Regardless of the gender of the fish, most non-Indian protesters felt that the spawning fish should be respected simply because mating is a biological instinct. Tom Hook, a non-Indian who took part in a boat landing protest on Big Arbor Vitae Lake in 1990 states, “If the fish are spawning and should be left alone, they should be left alone by everyone” (qtd. in Loew 170). The Ojibwe, however, had legal rights to these fish and they would spear as many as they desired.

The northern third of Wisconsin had an economic boom in the tourist industry in the 1900s. The north woods were the perfect getaway to a land of trees and lakes filled with bountiful trophy fish. These fish bring many jobs to the people of the Lac du Flambeau area through fish hatcheries, taverns, resorts, and much more. Non-Indians prided themselves on tourism and believed that spearfishing and tourism simply could not coexist. Technically, the Ojibwe tribe is allotted...
100 percent of “safe harvest.” The term “safe harvest” represents the amount of fish that can be taken before the population of fish is in danger. In 1996, The Minnesota Star Tribune announced, “The Wisconsin Ojibwe bands...intend to spear all of the safe allowable walleye harvest” (Anderson). More likely than not, the Ojibwe bands were attempting to threaten the state of Wisconsin in order to reduce protestor violence and to demonstrate their rights to fishing and hunting to the non-Indians. DNR Secretary George Meyer boldly responded to this threat: “This [threat] is absolutely unacceptable. Under both the spirit and the letter of the federal court decision, the resource was to be shared.” Meyer is referring to the Voight decision in the Wisconsin Supreme Court which demanded that the Ojibwe treaties be followed by state officials and that the tribes should work to negotiate a proper harvesting of resources. Meyer was calling for collaboration and sharing between the groups, whereas, according to him, the Ojibwe were intentionally attempting to preclude non-Indian fishers from catching walleye.

Spearing is also culturally embedded in the Ojibwe bands of Wisconsin. Even in modern society where Native Americans have access to the dominating society in which they live, many hold close the traditions and values of their people. Ancient Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) language provides insight into why the Ojibwe tribe values spearing fishing. The name for the lands of Lac du Flambeau in Anishinaabe language is Waswaaganing; “Waswa,” means spearing with torch, “ganing,” means the locator, the place where it happens. Waswaaganing literally means the place where they fish with a torch (Nesper, Walleye 159). Spearing during the nighttime with a torch is a tradition of the Ojibwe and occurs in similar methods today only they use halogen lights on their boats. Ojibwe spearfishing is also a spiritual process. An article published by the University of Chicago Press discusses the relationship between the Ojibwe natives and the spirits of the animals they kill:

Before these subsistence activities became symbols of local Indian ethnic identity they were the basis of what is referred to as “traditional law” in some of the trials that would take place in the 1980s and 90s. At the root of this law were cosmological ideas about the reciprocal moral obligations entailed in the relationships between communities of human beings and animals and the reproductive consequences thereof, as well as the idea that the source of an individual’s power, identity, and morality lay in a personal relationship with a spiritual source. ("Negotiating Jurisprudence in Tribal Court and Emergence of a Tribal State")

Many tribes, not just the Ojibwe, share this animistic belief. They believe that all life contains a spirit and those spirits shape their ways of living. Spearing a fish, to the Ojibwe, not only feeds their families and friends, but the spirit of the
fish that has died will feed their ancestors’ spirits. Nesper confirms, “Ignoring resources...was tantamount to refusing to exchange with spirits, who would then offer no beneficence of any kind” (Walleye 38). The non-Indians’ attempts to disrupt this process of hunting and fishing would anger the Ojibwe ancestors and the fish would not reproduce. Non-Indians countered this argument, claiming most Ojibwe tribe members had converted to Christianity and could therefore not believe in a world of spirits and hungry ancestors. Many non-Indians also observed that the treaty was signed a few hundred years ago when the Ojibwe tribe had been pure. Now the Ojibwe bands were not full blooded natives of the land and therefore they do not deserve the same rights as those who were true Ojibwe members in the 1800s.

During the years of the late 1980s, many Ojibwe members were arrested for spearing outside of the reservation even though those rights were given to them in the treaties of the 1800s. The DNR proposed to negotiate with bands to compensate for the lost spearing time but non-Indians did not want to pay for the negotiation process. Loew mentions in her scholarly works the perspective of a protester: "I’m paying taxes to support them every week—to support this [spearfishing], to send them welfare checks, to give them all different kinds of aid...If we’re supporting them in those ways, why can’t they learn to live like the white man does?” (172). The non-Indians made it clear that the state of Wisconsin should not compensate the Ojibwe tribe through the taxpayer’s money.

Although the Supreme Court of Wisconsin decision that Ojibwe bands had the right to hunt and fish on ceded lands, the debate continues today. The tensions climaxed in the 1980s and 90s, but they still remain prevalent in modern society. The hostile walleye war has assisted in the rebirth of the Ojibwe traditions and ethnic identity. Today the Ojibwe proudly exercise the rights that were given to them when they gave up their land to the United States of America. The State of Wisconsin and non-Indian protesters continue to search for negotiations and ways to strategically control the natural resources that profit the capitalist society.

Works Cited


Nesper, Larry. “Negotiating Jurisprudence in Tribal Court and Emergence of a
Writing Project 2 in my English 100 class asked students to write a literature review in which they would summarize, synthesize, and evaluate an ongoing conversation. Coming up with a conversation to research can be one of the most challenging aspects of such an assignment. Choose too broad of a topic, and you could wind up with generalizations and large gaps in the conversation. Choose too narrow, and your claims might become too one-sided and circuitous. Most writing prompts you’ll receive in college will be too open-ended to offer much help on picking a topic. My main advice for finding a topic, then, is to think about what interests you as a person and as a student (what are you thinking of majoring in and why? What interests you about a particular career? What concerns are pressing for you as an individual?). The English 100 literature review provides an opportunity to think deeply about something that matters to you, your future profession, or your home state (to offer a few general directions you might look for a topic).

Jake’s literature review is an excellent example of how choosing a topic your invested in can lead to a compelling, well-researched account of an issue. He narrowed his broader interest in history and politics by focusing on the fishing rights of the Ojibwe in Wisconsin. He had been learning about the Ojibwe in an anthropology course that semester, and he found himself interested in the conversation surrounding their rights. This interest shows. In his literature review, Jake successfully presents and evaluates the specific grounds on which the Ojibwe’s rights have been staged (legal, economic, and spiritual), effectively integrating historical and current perspectives in his review. Another strength of Jake’s paper is that he uses concrete examples to support his claims, with clear topic sentences that foreground the shape of the conversation he’s researching. Throughout the review, Jake demonstrates a deep understanding about the stakes of his topic for readers – he persuasively illustrates why it matters that we think about the Ojibwe’s rights in Wisconsin specifically and the motivations behind our treatment of people more generally.

— Catherine DeRose
Choosing a topic for the explanatory essay in my English 100 class was the most difficult part in the writing process. Initially I wanted to compose an essay on a highly debated issue in the medical community since that is where my interest lies. However, I decided to avoid writing about a medical debate since this would only appeal to readers with a passion for medicine and would be uninteresting for all other readers. Choosing a topic that interested all readers was vital to writing a good paper and I made sure to take a lot of time to find a topic worth pursuing. It wasn’t until about three days before our first draft was due that I found the topic I was looking for. I chose to write on the Ojibwe tribes of Wisconsin and their treaty rights to hunting and fishing since I believed most people would be interested in learning about a vital part of Wisconsin history that is often overlooked.

I used many sources, both scholarly and popular, to start piecing together my essay and creating a conversation between the authors. I was especially intrigued by the ethnography The Walleye War, by Larry Nesper, in which he interacts with the Ojibwe tribes of Wisconsin for many years and researches their culture. His personal insight and research proved to be very useful in finding factual information about both the perspectives of the Ojibwe tribes, the non-Indians, and the Wisconsin state government. Other sources came from the 1996 Minnesota Star Tribune, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and other online articles using the UW-Madison library database. My essay was revised by two fellow students and my English 100 instructor before I was able to produce the final product.

The goal of this paper was to accurately present the arguments of the Ojibwe tribes of Wisconsin, the non-Indians, and the Wisconsin government. I felt myself side overwhelming with the Ojibwe tribes but I hope I have created a paper in which the readers can form their own opinions on this topic. I also tried to present both a historical aspect to this conversation while also showing the overall arguments that are still prevalent in modern society.

— Jacob Graboski

*Student Writing Award: Explanatory Essay*
You open your eyes to concrete walls, three roommates, a couple square feet of space, and a toilet about a foot from your bed. You sit up, only to slam your head on the body of your bunkmate, resulting in a large red mark. You slowly stand up because you really have to go to the bathroom and 3:45 a.m. is the only time the guards are too tired to stare at you while you go. This hypothetical situation might seem terrifying, but it is like the common experience of millions of prisoners every day in the U.S. While most Americans are unaware of and desensitized from the consequences of being in prison, incarcerated Americans have to deal with overcrowding, lack of privacy, and isolation on a daily basis. How did this become the norm? How have so many Americans become so unjustifiably desensitized? How is this situation affecting different groups of people in the United States? To begin with, how did we decide that the punishment for crime should be incarceration?

Today, the concept of incarceration is normal. Most people would not think twice when a person is sentenced to time in jail or prison. However, this was not always the case. In The Historical Origin of the Prison System in America, Harry Elmer Barnes chronicles the evolution of criminal justice in the United States. Starting with the Colonial period, Barnes attributes the origin of the modern penal system to two institutions: jails and prisons, which he considers one institution, and workhouses. During the Colonial period, jails and prisons were locations meant only to hold prisoners until a punishment was decided after their trial, creating the practice of placing criminals in separate spaces from the majority of society. Workhouses were designed to repress people of lower class, especially poor people, and were not meant to punish criminals. However, the practice of forcing labor on lower class citizens originated with workhouses. For a long time, these two institutions existed in isolation from each other, containing the group they were constructed to manage.

American Quakers are credited with combining the practices of each institution. According to Barnes, “they originated both the idea of imprisonment as the typical mode of punishing crime, and the doctrine that this imprisonment should not be in idleness but at hard labor” (36). Without knowing it, Quakers trans-
formed the perception and implementation of prison systems in the United States. They took the premise of prisons, isolation of criminals as punishment, and the premise of workhouses, making active use of unproductive members of society, to produce the modern practices of imprisonment and incarceration (Barnes, 36). However, the Quakers had no means of predicting how these principles and practices would become the platform for a dehumanized perspective on criminals.

When prisons were established on the belief that criminals should be isolated based on deviance, the perception of criminality and punishment shifted. Instead of a societal responsibility, there was an invisible solution. Criminals were put out of sight, barricading issues of criminal justice and punishment from the daily concerns of the majority of Americans. This enabled a dependency on criminal justice policies that absolved the larger society of responsibility or of being conscious of actively pursuing social reform for people who had committed crimes. As this dependency grew and became more institutionalized, criminals became viewed as mere shells strictly defined by crime instead of complex human beings with backgrounds and identities that could contextualize their criminal activity (Meares, 8).

According to Christina Meares, some of the invisible dynamics that could contextualize the experiences of incarcerated individuals include, “homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, illiteracy and dependency on welfare.” She continues, “These are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages” (8). When people perceive criminals, not only are such dynamics generally unacknowledged, but the multifaceted ways they impact each person depending on their identities are ignored as well. As a consequence, society’s dependence on prisons to reform members of society has ignored the dynamics that were enabling and reinforcing crime among certain groups of people (Meares, 8). An unfair practice of criminal justice was established. Prisons were expected to change and reform criminals, even while society remained silent about the contexts maintaining and reinforcing criminal behavior. The silence surrounding these dynamics, which allowed individuals to be strictly defined by their crime, along with the concentration of criminals into prisons became the foundation for a dehumanized perception of the incarcerated population. And this perception of criminals fed the rise of mass incarceration, the extreme rates of imprisonment, and the manifestation of a dehumanized and racialized perception of criminals that ignores the contexts of institutional issues of poverty and race (Stevenson, 15).

While the perception of criminals has evolved since the Colonial period, mass incarceration emerged relatively recently. During the 1980s, the dynamics that society surrounded with silence, most noticeably drug use, became the defining
factors that would directly lead to the rise in incarceration. Although crime was decreasing at the beginning of that decade, President Reagan started his “War on Drugs” against the use of crack cocaine (Alexander, 3). In the introduction to her book The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander describes how this war was not necessarily founded on an actual widespread drug problem. She writes, “[T]here is no truth to the notion that the War on Drugs was launched in response to crack cocaine. President Ronald Reagan officially announced the current drug war in 1982, before crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods” (3).

Subsequently, the Reagan administration even hired staff to produce a media campaign demonizing crack cocaine, which succeeded almost immediately in gaining support from both the public and the government. Unsurprisingly, many of the images used in this campaign displayed men of color wearing stereotypical inner city clothing, implying they were the villains of the crack cocaine story. Since the public had been conditioned for nearly the entire history of the United States to depend on prisons to act as social reformers, Reagan’s so-called War on Drugs could then easily and swiftly mass incarcerate the poor people of color in the United States (Alexander, 3).

The current debate surrounding mass incarceration is dominated by discussions of how this issue impacts men of color or poor white men. But it is important to see that American patriarchal society has empowered another destructive force within the emergence of mass incarceration, namely, ignoring how this phenomenon has affected women. In Bryan Stevenson’s book Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, the twelfth chapter, entitled “Mother, Mother,” grapples with the mass incarceration of women in the United States. Stevenson writes, “In the United States, the number of women sent to prison increased 646 percent between 1980 and 2010, a rate 1.5 times higher than the rate of men” (235-36). Stevenson credits two key components in the high rate for the mass incarceration of women: the criminalization of infant mortality and the enactment of the “Three Strikes” law, which increased sentences to life in prison for a crime when an offender had committed two or more serious crimes in the past (236). While the attitude towards criminals generally is defined purely by their crime, the attitude toward gender for female prisoners also shows that these prisoners are being subjected to strict and decontextualized definitions using the crime of the prisoner. Rather than just being criminals, drug users, thieves, or murderers, the attitude is that women prisoners are also sluts, horrible mothers, abusive mothers, and undeserving of help from society.

Stevenson notes, “[W]e’ve created a new class of ‘untouchables’ in American society, made up of our most vulnerable mothers and their children” (237). Rather than consider the circumstances that may have put these women in the position of committing crimes, society defined these women as despicable and
Once again, society is depending on prisons to deal with the larger social issues that remain out of sight, reinforcing a dehumanized and decontextualized perception of female prisoners. While defining these women as "untouchable" because of one set of actions is entirely unjustified, this perception has been particularly destructive for women of color, especially African American women.

The intersectionality of African American women's identities and experiences reveal how they are subjected to the worst consequences of mass incarceration. Intersectionality, the inseparable nature of one's multiple identities and how those identities simultaneously filter one's experience, acknowledges historical influences on stereotypes and discrimination that construct these women's experiences. In Disappearing Acts: The Mass Incarceration of African American Women, Christina Meares described her research on white and black women's experiences in the Georgia prisons, which aimed to quantitatively assess intersectionality as it pertains to African American women. According to Meares "The sentence inequality of black women is the result of the cumulative effects of being members of a disadvantaged race, class and gender" (2). The mass incarceration of African American women cannot be credited or understood through just one of the identities they can claim, but must be understood through a careful examination of how their identities intersect to craft their experiences. These intersecting "disadvantaged" identities reveal the unique devastating consequences of mass incarceration for African American women.

African American women experience potentially the worst consequences of mass incarceration, directly and indirectly. While the culture of incarceration in the United States has conditioned society to define prisoners strictly by their crimes, mass incarceration has embedded stereotypes and perceptions of African American women that reinforce institutions of oppression and domination. In "Black Women's Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons," Breea Willingham describes how black women use writing to try to escape experiences of sexual abuse, silenced self-identity, and ostracism. Willingham quotes the writing of black female prisoners that describe sexual abuse from prison guards, a lack of support from family and friends, and a sense of isolation that extends beyond the physical prison. All three of these kinds of experiences reinforce the stereotypes that contextualized how these women arrived in prison. They support the misperception of black women as sexual objects and as less significant than other women (Willingham, 63). While examining why these black women use writing to escape their experiences, Willingham highlights the larger issue that is a relatively unique consequence for African American women: silence. She writes, "...what is different about the incarcerated black woman's story is that it allows some of these
women to express themselves and define their existence—to tell us that they still matter despite their absence” (64).

African American women’s relative absence from mainstream society in combination with their almost non-existent social power eliminates any potential for this group to be defined by its members. Rather, the conditioned perception of incarceration, the stereotypes of African American women, and the combination of these two socially embedded perceptions allows the dominant members of society the power to define African American women. This reinforces systemic oppression and domination of African American women, resulting in a group that exists in society without the capacity to present their own definition of their identity. The inability to construct a definition of oneself because of the intersecting membership between two disadvantaged groups is an unprecedented and unjustified consequence that uniquely impacts African American women due to mass incarceration. This complex understanding of the issue lacks the magnification received largely by African American men in mass media, further silencing African American women and distancing them from control over how they are perceived. While these issues cannot be solved merely by media attention, extending the conversation of this issue to its impact on African American women could create more opportunities for collaboration between groups to fight against discrimination and oppression. However, the mass incarceration of African American women requires a critical examination of the history of this group in the United States in order to attempt to dismantle oppressive institutional structures.

Works Cited


INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

As the final major writing assignment for our English 100 class, part of a First-Year Interest Group whose theme was the Immigrant Experience in Education, students were asked to write an argumentative paper addressing an issue of social or cultural importance to a marginalized group. As an extra wrinkle, students were required to choose a group to which they did not belong, so that the task of advocating for the issue necessitated cultural empathy, or imagining the lived experience of people with whom one might have very little in common. The class, a diverse cohort of students who had spent the semester discussing issues of discrimination and appropriation in all of their FIG classes, including English 100, worked together to develop the theme and requirements of the final paper, which included a companion presentation/multimedia project.

Ruthie’s essay, “Understanding Mass Incarceration of African American Women,” is an excellent example of a writer framing, analyzing and making a forceful argument about an issue concerning a very specific social group. One of the most powerful moments in the piece comes in its very first paragraph. “You open your eyes to concrete walls,” she writes, immediately placing the reader within the lived experience of an incarcerated person through vivid, concrete imagery and the deft use of second-person point of view. Throughout the process of drafting and revising, Ruthie took note of the fact that she had learned to be unafraid to use such techniques, normally associated with more “creative” or narrative forms of writing, in an argumentative, academic piece of writing. Doing so here allows the author to ease the reader into the more analytical, idea-driven parts of the paper by touching on an often-overlooked truth: abstract issues have a significant impact on real human lives.

Ruthie structures this paper in a simple and powerful way. She begins by tracing the history of the more problematic trends in the American prison system, then advances her argument by narrowing her focus, first to the ways in which mass incarceration disproportionately harms African-Americans, then to the fact that black women in particular, because of the intersectionality of their race, class and gender, “experience the worst consequences of mass incarceration, directly and indirectly.”
Perhaps the most impressive thing about Ruthie’s essay is that she was able to use sources and data that did not directly pertain to her topic to make a highly persuasive argument. Early in the process, she expressed frustration with the fact that though many of the sources she was reading dealt with issues of mass incarceration, racism and dehumanization, hardly any spoke to the world of the marginalized group she had chosen to write about, incarcerated African American women. She discovered that she wasn’t researching poorly or in the wrong places. The sad fact was that hardly any scholar before her had addressed the incarceration of black women in a substantive way. Instead of taking the easy way out and broadening her topic, Ruthie decided that she would fill the missing research space—with her own paper. In the essay’s second half, she quite effectively uses the concept of intersectionality to tie the broader issues to those of her group. The result, I believe, is a powerful example of what can happen when a writer-researcher trusts her own voice in telling the story she intends to tell.

— Walter B. Thompson

**WRITER’S MEMO**

From the outset of my final assignment of my English 100 course, I was pretty excited about the endeavor because the professor gave the class some freedom in terms of the subject. There were only two real requirements when it came to the topic: it had to be about a marginalized group in American society and you could not be a member of that group. I chose to focus on the impact of mass incarceration of African American women because the discourse surrounding mass incarceration almost solely focuses on African American men. I already knew I was very passionate about criminal justice and wanted to use that passion as my momentum for working through this assignment.

Since I chose a subject that I knew was so interesting to me, the actual project of researching and writing was incredibly fluid. The larger challenge occurred in outlining how I wanted to present my research. As the details and context for my subject was so vast, I found it very difficult to eliminate information and narrow my focus. However, a meeting with two of my peers during an English 100 class proved very useful in this dilemma. During our discussion of my paper, we talked through distinguishing between information that is important because it isn’t well known and information that is important to the argument I was making in the paper. Although my excitement about my subject definitely made the writing process easier, my excitement at times overwhelmed my ability to outline the paper and differentiate the key points that supported my argument from the points that I felt were important.
This final assignment for English 100 was one of my first major research papers as an undergraduate. As such, the experience taught a few important lessons about researching and writing. First, if you have the option, pick a topic that fascinates you. I have found that if I am hungry to learn about something, the excitement and passion about a topic can fuel the process of a project. Second, research projects need and take time. DO NOT try to do this stuff overnight. Not only does that hurt your assignment, but it hurts your ability to absorb the information and grow from what you learn. Third, use your peers to help you. Peer reviews can seem tedious at first, but hearing another point of view about your work can help you see it in a different light to change the work for the better; also, the ability to give and receive construct criticism is a priceless skill. Doing this assignment also reaffirmed something I have learned a lot throughout my life: the more you put into something, the more you get out of it. Throwing yourself into your work can really change your work ethic as well as your perspective, so try to take advantage of these opportunities for growth.

— Ruthie Sherman

Student Writing Award: Informative Essay
They were salty and must have been cooked with generous amounts of garlic. Crunchy at first, they broke down until they formed a grainy paste on my tongue. I was surprised, but pleasantly so. In fact, the deliciousness factor had far exceeded what I thought I would experience, and I immediately grabbed a tortilla chip and loaded it with more chapulines, which is Spanish for grasshoppers. Wait, Spanish for what? I know, I know. I apologize if I just completely alienated you. It’s not every day you get a detailed description of grasshopper flavor sprung upon you without warning, but I swear I have a point.

I have been researching the human practice of insect consumption, scientifically known as entomophagy, by myriads of other societies. I learned that our country is one of the few that views eating insects as distasteful. When I think about the violent disgust that is the general “Western” reaction, I can’t help but feel a little ashamed. Before I wrote this, I knew I needed some first-hand experience. It seemed wrong to write about entomophagy if I had never tried it myself. Unfortunately, I knew the only bugs I had eaten were probably those that crawled into my snoring maw while I slept. So, you can imagine my delight when I discovered that grasshoppers were offered in a restaurant that I visited while on vacation in Mexico.

Not only did I try them, I enjoyed them. I peered inside the brightly painted bowl of chapulines. I had expected them to be larger, with heavily armored outer carapaces, sharp, hooked feet, and black beady eyes. Instead, an indistinct brown mass sat before me, which I had quickly sampled before a change of mind could deter me. Looking closer, I saw that what I had assumed to be chopped up hunks of grasshopper were actually whole beings. The tiny fellows were fried brown to a crisp, except for their bellies, which were a lighter cream color. Their spindly legs were either curled up beneath them, or were missing somewhere in the bowl. I sifted through my new little friends searching for the chili pepper that the waiter had warned me about. That night as I flossed, I found a minute limb wedged in my teeth and gave myself a brief nod of approval in the mirror. I could have cringed, shrieked, had an emotional breakdown, or maybe
even fainted. All of these reactions would have been more typical of the “Western” attitude.

By Western I refer to North Americans and most Europeans. Though this term is not all-inclusive, it is the general mindset of fear and trepidation towards insects. Insects are not viewed as cute; they are perceived as creepy. They are pests. Even the idea of one touching you sends shivers up your spine. Throughout our lives we are taught to view insects as dangerous and unpredictable. In the media, aliens and monsters are often depicted with insect-like characteristics. Just think of _Men In Black_, when Will Smith saves the world from an extra-terrestrial that is referred to as the “Bug” and appears to be a giant cockroach. Furthermore, we are far more likely to see an organization advocating the protection of tigers and less likely to find one raising funds for the preservation of a certain insect species, which are just as—if not more—critical to the balance of the ecosystem. Any organizations pertaining to insects are pest-control or disease prevention centered. Since insects already have a bad stigma, the thought of eating them triggers an extremely negative reaction. Insects are associated with ‘the other’, or unfamiliar outside influences. If “you are what you eat”, then consuming insects, "...is in a sense to become contaminated, subhuman, truly ‘other’” (Looy, Dunkel and Wood). They are known as “survival food” because the only circumstance in which most could conceive themselves eating bugs would be in a life-or-death situation. In fact, the idea of entomophagy is so rejected in our society that even my Microsoft Word denies it the right of being a real word, marring it with red squiggles every time I type it into a document. To me, these squiggles represent the close-mindedness of the Western perspective on this matter.

I don’t condemn my own society for this flaw, however. It is simply the way our culture is. That being said, I refer to it as a fault because it not only blocks us from certain culinary possibilities, but also inflicts harm onto other cultures. For many years, westernization has influenced all other countries, imprinting ideas and actions upon other peoples. Emphasizing this view, entomologist Florence S. Dunkel pointed out that "It took a decade for sushi to invade America, but the Colonel [KFC] polysaturated Japan in only a few years" (Menzel and D’Aluisio 179). When it comes to eating insects, we have not absorbed the practices of other cultures but rejected them. In a village called Sanambele in Africa, locals open up about their traditional grasshopper-eating practices only after foreign visitors reassure them that they have tried grasshoppers before (Looy, Dunkel and Wood). In Australia, Aborigines have long since eaten a wide variety of bugs, like termites, moths, witchetty grubs, beetle and wasp larvae, and ant brood but “their practice of entomophagy has decreased over the past 200 years through western influence” (Itterbeeck and van Huis). Bessie Liddle is an Australian Aboriginal woman who explained that, “People could live on grubs, along
with honey ants and goannas [lizards]. Then the white man showed up. People don’t dig anymore” (Menzel and D’Aluisio 18). Perhaps this behavior comes from negative Western reactions in the past, and that is why others are reluctant to share and continue that part of their own culture.

In truth, entomophagy spans the length of human history. Even our ancient cousins, primates, rely on insects as an important nutritional intake. Smaller primates, such as tarsiers, rely more than 50 percent on insects in their diet. Even the great apes, like chimpanzees, spend up to 60 percent of total foraging time digging up termites (Raubenheimer and Rothman). Turning to our ancestors, evidence of insect consumption is abundant all throughout the archaeological record. Analyses of fecal remains show evidence of frequent reliance on locusts as a protein source in the past five thousand years. In the complex cities of ancient Mesoamerica, people collected the eggs of water bugs, referred to as “Mexican caviar” by Spanish conquistadors (Itterbeeck and van Huis). In the Valley of Mexico alone, 91 species were a part of the diet in prehistoric times, providing essential sources of protein, vitamins and minerals. In fact, bugs were placed in the same rank as other meats, making it luxury food to be consumed by nobility (Acuña, Caso and Aliphat). Archaeologists have studied many ways of life, and have concluded that foraging for and consuming insects is an “ancient habit” (Itterbeeck and van Huis).

Today, though not as prominent as it once was, entomophagy still flourishes in countless cultures. Across the globe, 1,681 species of insects are consumed, though that number could be argued to be more than 2,000. In the lead, the South Americans consume 679 species across 23 countries (Raubenheimer and Rothman). From passing tradition down through the generations, the descendants of the Mesoamericans are savoring creatures such as stinkbugs even today (Acuña, Caso and Aliphat). Throughout Mexico, chapulines, ant larvae, beetles, and agave worms are all popular foods. Moving south to Venezuela, one can find tarantulas. Tarantulas on a dinner plate, that is. Bugs are often assumed to be either crunchy or “slimy yet satisfying” in the words of Simba, but tarantulas are neither. Once you pluck off their hairs and legs and crack them open, these monstrous spiders have substantial meat on their abdomen muscles. Moving further down the continent to Peru, we hit a hot spot for insect-eating enthusiasts. The Incans find some of their favorite snacks, tayno kuro worms, within the stems of the arawanku plant. Paired with corn, the worms help make up a balanced meal. Bright orange and black caterpillars, called waykjuiro, are harvested from inside tree-trunks and are often cooked with oil, and red or green chiles. Segmented, rubbery creepy crawlies called chanchu chanchu are found in local rivers and often eaten alive. Chiro worms, or beetle larvae, are prepared wanna-style by wrapping the worms in a banana leaf, adding a pinch of salt, and steaming the package by the fire (Menzel and D’Aluisio 150-174).
Deep in the middle of Australia, Aborigines search the vast, red earth for witchetty bushes. Inside the roots live the witchetty grubs, which when cooked taste like “nut-flavored scrambled eggs and mild mozzarella,” and are often made into soup (Menzel and D’Aluisio). Honeypot ants are also a delicious treat. Found in the roots of a dead mulga tree, the ants ingest sap and store it in their pea-sized, pouch-like abdomens, creating a sweet snack for any human willing to try it out. Staying south of the equator, we get a view of the booming mopane caterpillar business in Botswana. People camp out in the open twice a year just to collect thousands of these caterpillars, dry them out in the sun, and sell them to the markets. These caterpillars are famous for having “three times the protein content of beef by unit weight” and the ability to “be stored for many months” (Menzel and D’Aluisio 127). The children of the Northern Province, in South Africa, like to debate which insect is the tastiest: mopane caterpillars, locusts, termites, or grasshoppers. Eleven-year-old Tshaveheni, who’s name in English translates to ‘Be-Afraid-Of-Me’, favors locusts the most, while nine-year-old Thivhashavhi (‘I’m-Not-Afraid-Of-You’) thinks that termites are the most scrumptious. The children go up to five times a week to collect insects to eat (Menzel and D’Aluisio 136).

In Asia, 349 kinds of bugs are munched on across 29 countries (Raubenheimer and Rothman). The people of the Arunachal Pradesh state in Northern India collectively consume 81 different species of bugs, not including the silk worms commonly sold at the markets. (Chakravorty, Ghosh and Meyer-Rochow). In Chang Mai, Thailand, one can collect giant winged red ants, two hours of hunting resulting in one liquor-bottle full. These ants are delicious in a stir-fry, and add a bacon-like flavor. Like the Venezuelans, Cambodians also like to enjoy themselves a nice skewer of tarantulas from time to time. Children from Bali, Indonesia, are still taught to catch dragonflies. A strip of palmwood is first coated in the white sap of the jackfruit tree, which then ensnares the wings of dragonflies. In Irian Jaya, sago-palm trees are cut down to make flour. The stump is resourcefully left behind for sago-grubs to invade, and to later be harvested. In China, scorpions can be found for sale in the markets of Guangzhou, both for consumption and medicinal purposes. Though traditionally scorpions are cooked, they can also be munched on while in a comatose state induced by being soaked in rice wine (Menzel and D’Aluisio 38-104).

Evidence of entomophagy is both extensive and diverse all across the globe. It is clear that in the negative sentiment towards this practice, we are the minority. Phil Ross, a ‘bug chef’ from San Francisco, is of the opinion that Western peoples can overcome their fears and allow entomophagy to become, though perhaps not the norm, something not to fear. He states that, “transgression of one taboo leads to all kinds of other possibilities” (Gordinier). I agree with him. After tasting my first bite of grasshopper, I felt like I had overcome a barrier. Now I can maybe
even see some tarantula in my future. I want to try all these amazing dishes, to share these experiences with those who are eager to share not only food at a table but also their culture and their history. Who are we to reject such sincerity? Right now, Western expansion is harming other cultures. Our viewpoints are expressed so strongly that it overshadows other cultures’ ways of life. Gene DeFolliart, a former entomologist at the University of Wisconsin, reasoned that while “progress often means abandoning old habits,” in this case “progress will come from keeping them” (Menzel and D’Aluisio). It doesn’t mean we have to enjoy the taste; we all have our preferences. However, it will help keep our minds open to others and combat ethnocentricity. So, what are you waiting for? Spread the word. I’ve bugged you enough.

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INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

Our English 100 class embarked upon the task of writing an informative essay by discussing the sources we would use. At the outset, we eliminated sources that are almost always inappropriate for use in a college-level essay: Wikipedia or Sparknotes, for example. We then considered the principal categories of acceptable sources, closely examining their quality and the varying contexts in which their use might be effective. A newspaper article, for instance, could be cited as evidence of public opinion, but would not have the scientific authority of a source from a peer-reviewed journal.

For their paper, I asked my students to write an informative essay about the foodstuff of their choice. Most undertook a historical, nutritional, or cultural analysis. Emily’s essay looks at a food choice from a global-cultural perspective. This was a particularly challenging choice.

The historical and health perspectives were simpler to structure. The students writing historical papers tended to take a chronological approach, while students considering the nutritional value of foods weighed the pros and cons. Emily’s task was more complex. She was initially overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information she had gathered. It was important to her not to focus on one dish, but to present the wealth and variety of a field she was just discovering. After her first draft, we met and talked about how she could create a structure that was both engaging and clear. In her subsequent re-drafts, she worked hard to refine her ordering and presentation of the material.

In the end, it was her sources that determined the structure. Part of the assignment was to employ different sorts of sources. Emily highly successfully blended pop culture references with analysis from ethnographic journals. She went further; she was one of the few students who chose to incorporate first person research. The class had discussed the value a primary source contributes because of its immediacy, but also how it may be less authoritative at the level of overview. By foregrounding her essay in her own experiment in entomophagy, Emily was extremely effective at drawing the reader in, before presenting a well-researched and supported global perspective on entomophagy. In this way, Emily enabled the reader to share the same sense of widening knowledge that she herself had experienced as a researcher.

— Rowan Buchanan
Upon looking back, the most challenging aspect of writing this essay was the selection of a topic. Our instructions had been simple: to chose a type of food and write a research paper on it. It had sounded an easy enough task at the time, but being the food lover I am I was faced with a daunting list of my favorite snacks. I wondered how on earth I was supposed to make a final decision. In the end, I took an entirely different route to where my initial thought process had been leading me. I decided to write about something unfamiliar to me, and I aimed to select something the reader would not expect. The answer came to me relatively quickly after that. Bugs, after all, are not something that most of my society would think to eat for dinner.

— Emily Jorgensen

Student Writing Award: Informative/Synthesis Essay
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Recognizing PTSD’s Effects on Health Care Professionals

SARAH LUTZ

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an “anxiety disorder that occurs as a result of experiencing, witnessing, or being confronted with an emotionally traumatic event. A traumatic event is defined as a situation so extreme, so severe and so powerful that it threatens to overwhelm a person's ability to cope” (Adriaenssens, 2016, p. 1411).

When PTSD is discussed, it is almost always accompanied by a veteran's horrific story from war or the mental struggles one is facing after being involved in a personal and traumatic event. Seldom do people associate the risk of developing PTSD with normal, everyday jobs such as being a doctor or a nurse, yet individuals in these professions experience PTSD as well. A study conducted in 2007 by the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine found that “24 percent of ICU nurses and 14 percent of general nurses tested positive for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder” (Yu, 2016). Even so, PTSD within the healthcare profession is rarely talked about. PTSD is a serious consequence of having a high stress job that encounters trauma and suffering daily, and it can take on many forms. Yet the reasons why many health care professionals suffer from this condition and the toll this is having on their mental health and job satisfaction is rarely acknowledged.

Health care professionals, specifically nurses, are routinely confronted with stressful conditions and traumatic events. According to a review of research by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, “nursing has long been considered one of the most stressful professions” (Yu, 2016). Additionally, according to Jef Adriaenssens, a researcher on stress and healthcare at Leiden University, “almost one out of three nurses met sub-clinical levels of anxiety, depression and somatic complaints and 8.5% met clinical levels of PTSD” (1411). This is due to obvious reasons such as long work hours, high patient demand, and, potentially, understaffing in some hospitals. Another aspect of the profession that causes high amounts of stress is the types of traumatic events nurses are routinely faced with.

All nurses, at some point, have to deal with potentially traumatizing situations. Specifically, emergency room nurses — who, according to Adriaenssens, have the highest incidence of PTSD symptoms compared to other nursing specialties — are especially vulnerable to post-traumatic stress reactions. This can be attrib-
uted to repeated exposure to work-related traumatic events, such as witnessing the survivors of horrific accidents or “death or serious injury of a child/adolescent” which was “perceived as the most traumatizing event.” Emergency room nurses are “routinely confronted with severe injuries, death, suicide and suffering” due mainly to the fact that they are often the first to respond to situations and are often confronted with the worst injuries and the most hectic work environments (Adriaenssens, 2012, p. 1411). By working in such conditions and witnessing horrific injuries at such a rapid pace, emergency room nurses are prone to experiencing symptoms associated with PTSD brought on merely by witnessing the results of tragic events.

High rates of PTSD among military veterans occur for more obvious reasons. They are under extreme amounts of stress and are especially prone to experiencing trauma firsthand. However, PTSD in health care professionals is usually a little different. More often than not, doctors and nurses are witnessing the results of horrific and tragic events instead of having the event happen directly to them. “The natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other – the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” is known as secondary traumatic stress. In simpler terms, secondary traumatic stress occurs when PTSD symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, flashbacks, or nightmares, occur in caregivers as a response to seeing individuals who have been involved in traumatic events (Collins and Long, 2003, p. 418). Individuals, such as doctors and nurses, can become so empathetic to the suffering of others that they begin to experience classic PTSD symptoms, almost as if the traumatic event happened directly to them.

While secondary traumatic stress is the most common form of PTSD in health care providers, vicarious trauma can also occur. Vicarious traumatization is “the cumulative effect of working with survivors of traumatic life events. Anyone who engages empathetically with victims or survivors is vulnerable” (Collins and Long, 2003, p. 417). Vicarious traumatization is extremely similar to secondary traumatic stress because empathizing with the victim can cause the care provider to experience symptoms of PTSD, as if the event happened to them directly. Vicarious traumatization is different from secondary traumatic stress because of the way individuals cope after. After a potentially disruptive event occurs, the beliefs and assumptions of an individual are challenged and they begin to perceive their world differently, a phenomenon known as post-traumatic growth. The metaphor of an earthquake has been utilized to illustrate posttraumatic growth: “The traumatic experience needs to be seismic, such as an earthquake, to severely shake an individual’s comprehension of the world. These shaken assumptions may be the person’s understanding of the meaning of life; belief that things that happen are fair...” (Beck, 2016). After caring for an
individual who has been through a particularly traumatic event, the health care provider begins to make new assumptions about the world and reassess their beliefs as a way of coping with the extreme amounts of trauma and stress. “Post-traumatic growth is viewed as a positive illusion that is an adaptive function to help a person cope with trauma. A positive illusion is a positively distorted belief a person creates when faced with a traumatic experience” (Beck, 2016).

As an example, vicarious posttraumatic growth can be observed in labor and delivery nurses. The Association of Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses sent out a survey to members who were labor and delivery nurses and asked them to describe any positive changes in their ways of thinking about the world or their beliefs as a result of caring for women who had undergone very traumatic births. The study concluded that labor and delivery nurses who took care of women during traumatic births “reported a moderate amount of vicarious posttraumatic growth...Appreciation of Life was the dimension of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory that reflected the highest growth, followed by Relating to Others, Personal Strength, Spiritual Change, and New Possibilities” (Beck, 2016). After experiencing a traumatic birth, these labor and delivery nurses were beginning to alter their ideas about life as a way of coping with the stress they endured.

Even though these nurses were altering their ideas about life in seemingly positive ways, there is little evidence that vicarious posttraumatic growth is actually a healthy and long-term, effective way to cope. One explanation is that posttraumatic growth really isn’t growth at all. Anthony Mancini, an associate professor of psychology at Pace University, explains posttraumatic growth as a “motivated positive illusion, whose purpose is to protect us from the possibility that we may have been damaged.” He further goes on to explain an experimental study that found “when an event threatens our sense of self, we are more likely to believe that the event made us better in some way” (Mancini, 2016). Posttraumatic growth can be viewed as a positive way to temporarily cope with an especially disturbing event, however, it often proves to only act temporarily and rarely actually alters the individuals’ thoughts and perceptions for the long-term.

While posttraumatic growth is a way that nurses cope with the extreme stress they endure, there is very little attention on PTSD within healthcare professionals. Yet, job dissatisfaction and burn-out are becoming prevalent, especially within the nursing profession. According to mental health researchers Collins and Long, burnout can be described as “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations” (Collins and Long, 2003, p. 420). This makes sense when discussing post-traumatic stress disorder. As nurses are exposed to potentially upsetting and very traumatic events over a long period of time, it is going to start taking a toll on them both physically and emotionally. As Laurie Barkin, a registered
nurse, described, “nursing school does not prepare nurses for the experience of witnessing pain and suffering.” She goes on to discuss her story of beginning to experience symptoms such as nightmares, anxiety, and palpitations. She later learned that “my symptoms had a name: vicarious trauma... Unfortunately, appeals that I had made to the director of our consult service to allow staff process time were dismissed” (Barkin, 2014). Laurie Barkin’s symptoms began to control her life, and she eventually resigned from her job after the director of her consult service failed to give staff adequate time to process their emotions in a healthy way. This is a perfect example of how hospitals often dismiss symptoms of post-traumatic stress and vicarious trauma, and this dismissal could be leading to high levels of burnout and nurses being unsatisfied with their jobs.

PTSD is a serious, and often life altering condition, that health care professionals are faced with. The fact that PTSD is rarely acknowledged and discussed during nursing school and beyond is having adverse effects on nurses who find themselves faced with this disorder. With the prevalence of PTSD, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma soaring, new policies and practices must be put in place both in nursing schools and hospitals in order to aid the nurses affected. By acknowledging that PTSD is real in nurses and their feelings are valid, burnout and job dissatisfaction could be addressed, and nurses could find themselves more satisfied in their profession and living happier lives.

Works Cited


Sarah's research paper was submitted for a section of English 100 linked to a First-Year Interest Group for students interested in a possible nursing career. For earlier assignments, students had researched and read what could be termed “professional testimonial” writing about the working life of nurses—narratives from social media sites and from an excellent anthology of personal essays titled, I Wasn’t Strong Like This When I Started Out: True Stories of Becoming a Nurse (L. Gutkind, ed., 2013). These narratives provide vivid and sometimes disconcerting testimony about the singular stresses that nurses may face, especially witnessing the aftermath of traumas suffered by their patients, either before they seek medical care or during treatment. One author (Schwarz) recounts a harrowing anecdote from the early days of his training, his memory of wheeling a patient with an apparently minor complaint down the hall, and looking on helplessly as the man suddenly coughs violently, vomits “a wave of blood,” and dies within moments, sitting in his wheelchair.

From the beginning of the semester, then, we were having conversations about the possibility that some nurses might very well suffer post-traumatic stress disorder as a simple condition of their daily work lives. These early readings also allowed students to critically examine some of the lasting clichés attached to the nursing profession, including expectations that nurses will be exceptionally compassionate and selfless, quietlyshouldering the daily psychological burden of caring for those experiencing severe pain and suffering. Later in the semester we read articles about the national nursing shortage and the challenges that many medical facilities face because of the regular burnout of their nursing staff. Sarah’s choice of research topic for her final research paper was thus an ingenious way of drawing together several important threads of learning generated from our semester of research and writing.

For the final paper assignment, students who are interested in a similar topic work collaboratively in small research groups to gather a range of sources about that topic—including peer-reviewed studies, articles from trade publications (targeted to those in the nursing profession), and news sources for the general public, such as national magazines or public radio. Students are able to pool their resources and learn research techniques from one another through this process. They also discuss the articles they have found in order to identify ways of narrowing down that broad topic to find a research focus appropriate for a short paper. Sarah selected the challenge of synthesizing several peer-reviewed studies, specifically those that explain the intricate breakdown of post-traumatic symptoms for those ministering to patients in the context of trauma. In this essay she is able to integrate those more advanced scholarly studies with insights provided by mainstream journalists and the author of a professional
website. It's not an easy matter to make all these different voices “speak” to one another in an analytical paper. But Sarah draws evidence from all of these sources to offer a compelling critique about the lack of attention to PTSD within the nursing profession. Hopefully by the time she begins her own training in the field, there will be greater awareness about the mental health needs of nurses themselves.

–Julia Garrett

**WRITER’S MEMO**

As a pre-nursing student, I found myself fascinated with researching different aspects of the nursing profession, from the different fields of nursing to the daily duties and responsibilities to the attributes of a good nurse. As I began my critical analysis on the more cliché and positive side to nursing, I began to receive feedback and suggestions from my peers and instructor on delving into the more unspoken side of nursing, the hardships that accompany the demanding job. I decided to follow this suggestion and focus my research on a dimension of nursing that is seldom discussed: PTSD. Nursing is usually not associated with this disorder, and for that reason I at first found it hard to find credible research that covered the topic. In the end I was very glad I stuck with the very specific topic of PTSD, because through my research I gained valuable insight into the profession.

As far as revisions go, I found it most helpful to have as many people as possible read the entire paper, or even just certain sections I was stuck on, and then leave their feedback and revisions. I then would go back and read their revision suggestions multiple times and on different days, which allowed me to formulate additional thoughts and interpret their comments in new ways, ultimately adding to my paper in ways I had not originally thought of. Additionally, with a complex and very specific topic like this, I found it very easy to want to incorporate every small detail I learned about PTSD in healthcare, regardless of whether it was relevant, and lose sight of where the main focus of the paper was going. So I made sure I created a very strict and specific outline and only gathered information relevant to the topics outlined. This helped the paper maintain a nice flow between topics and remain coherent.

Before going through this process and writing this paper, I was not a huge fan of writing critical analysis research papers. After gaining the tools, knowledge, and appreciation for gathering dependable research, utilizing the research in a way that best benefits the argument of the paper, and choosing best how to articu-
late and present the research in a coherent way, I learned how enjoyable it can be to pick a topic you're passionate about and want to share with others.

–Sarah Lutz

Student Writing Award: Critical/Analytical Essay
A Dude Story

MATT PRELL

Rinnnnng rinnng rinnmg. That was the sound of the alarm clock going off to wake me and my roommate for our five o'clock football lift. I clambered out of bed to hit the alarm and greeted Clay.

“Good morning, dude.”

“Good morning.”

“Duuuuuuude, why are we up so early?”

“I hate morning lifts, I'm so tired.”

As seen in the above dialogue, I use the word “dude” frequently throughout my day. I first found myself using the word in elementary school when my neighbor would say, “What's up, dude?” to greet me. “What's up, dude?” is now a common phrase I utter when greeting a friend. In the interjection sense, if something catches me off guard I'll say “Dude, no way!” The final way I use it is in the sarcastic tone. When imitating a stoner, I may use the word in a phrase like “Duuuuuuuuude, that was gnarly.” Recently, the word has become of major interest to me because of my overuse of it. I've been thinking about dude, watching how frequently I use it in everyday life, and have explored its connotative and definitive history. What I've discovered is that “dude” has come a long way to mean what it does today. Over the past hundred years or so, the meaning of the word has evolved in a rags to riches fashion.

Several variations of “dude” have been considered to be the beginning of the word’s use in society. The earliest forms date back to Europe in the 1800s. The word had an opposite meaning to the common use today. One origin theory by W.W. Skeat, an English philologist at Cambridge, suggested that “dude” may have been the abbreviated form of duden-pop, which was German dialect for a blockhead (Knoll 22). Another proposal came from distinguished Celtic scholar, Alfred Nutt, who suggested that the word stemmed from dutte, a word meaning a hypothetical [poor] German (Knoll 23). Before coming to America, variations of “dude” were used as an insult. These hypotheses about the origin of the word would be in line with many current, less flattering meanings of the word. However, it wasn't until these German immigrants came to America that “dude” surfaced as a common word.

German immigrants introduced “dude” into the mainstream in the 1890s in New York. “Dude” is believed to be the Americanized version of the former two Ger-
man words. Showing the current definition's evolution from its early, urban and high fashion heritage, Merriam-Webster still offers one definition of “dude” as “a city dweller unfamiliar with life on the range and a man extremely particular in dress and manner.” The Oxford English Dictionary agrees and states it was, historically, a “name given in ridicule to a man affecting an exaggerated fastidiousness in dress, speech, and deportment, and very particular about what is aesthetically ‘good form'; a dandy.” E. Berry Wall was the epitome of these definitions in the 1890s. William Bryk, writer from The New York Sun newspaper, called Wall “King of the Dudes, beau ideal of masculine fashion... and the first American to wear a dinner jacket, commonly known as a tuxedo.” He was commonly seen in public with “a walrus mustache, gleaming monocle, and high, stiff collars encircled by one of his 5,000 flamboyant neckties.” In the 1890s, his apparel was considered bizarre and inappropriate. On one occasion, he escorted a woman to a ball wearing an ostentatious tuxedo, and the manager ordered him off the floor. He was only allowed to re-enter after he changed his attire. Wall received criticism early on for his unorthodox fashion; he was thought to be flamboyant, irregular, and ridiculous. However, after only a few years of his meticulous dress, others began to follow suit, and by the 1900s wearing a tuxedo was common at special occasions.

These Eastern “dudes” went west to vacation on dude ranches when they needed a break from the city. The OED defines a dude ranch as “a cattle ranch converted to a holiday centre for tourists.” The first ones were started in North Dakota and offered hunting and entertainment to vacationing Easterners. As the years went on, dude ranches offered horseback riding, hiking, camping, and unlimited food to visitors for only ten dollars a week (Rodnitzky 114). Through the adventures at a dude ranch, travelers hoped to have a “Wild West experience.” However, as travelers became more passive over time, the ranches lost their appeal. Instead of going to create their own experience, tourists began expecting the adventure to be brought to them. This shift in expectation caused the dude ranch fad to die out when the ’40s rolled around.

The time period between the 1930s and 1940s brought about a “major dude shift.” “Dude” began being used as a form of address by urban Mexican-American pachuchos and African-American zoot-suiters, known for their clothing consciousness (Kiesling 284). These people were responsible for the reversal of the pejorative sense of the word. Those minority groups took a word associated with negative connotations and began to transform it into a respectable term of recognition. Throughout the 1940s, “dude” gained momentum among certain minority groups to mean “a typical guy.” “Hey dude!” and “Hey man!” fast became synonymous among these groups. At the start of the 1950s, upper class whites interested in African American music and culture also utilized the term
These whites, classified as “hippies,” soon began bringing the word into their culture in everyday use.

By the 1970s, another “dude shift” occurred when hippies introduced “dude” to members of the surfing fad on the west coast, and they adopted the word into their vernacular. The surfing culture is credited with transforming “dude” from meaning “a typical guy” to meaning “a cool guy.” Fast Times At Ridgemont High illustrates how surfers made this shift. The film focuses on the interactions of Jeff Spicoli, an irresponsible, stoned surfer and Mr. Hand, his uptight teacher. Spicoli displayed his coolness through skipping class, arguing with his teacher, smoking weed, and “hitting on chicks.” In one scene, Spicoli crashes the star football player’s car at his high school. The following interaction takes place between Spicoli and the football player’s brother:

Jefferson’s Brother: My brother’s gonna kill us! He’s gonna kill us! He’s gonna kill you and he’s gonna kill me, he’s gonna kill us!

Jeff Spicoli: Hey man, just be glad I had fast reflexes!

Jefferson’s Brother: My brother’s gonna shit!

Jeff Spicoli: Make up your mind, dude, is he gonna shit or is he gonna kill us?

This film demonstrates the pop culture influence on the word. The use of “dude” in a comedic movie caused a spark across the nation. When Fast Times At Ridgemont High aired, people who had never seen a beach before began associating “dude” with positive connotations. The connotations associated with the term were a sense of cool solidarity and rebellion among young men. Therefore, this term became prevalent as these young men navigated mature masculinity, strict heterosexuality, and nonconformity (Kiesling 2).

Once the term became commonly accepted, “dude” began to include both genders. Even though “dude” was most frequent in male-male interactions, self-reporting students in a 2002 language and gender class at the University of Pittsburgh claimed it was not limited to that. The study concludes that “men report that they use dude with women with whom they are close friends, but not with women whom they are intimate” (Kiesling 283). This phenomenon may have been due the fact that “dude” was used in a more relaxed environment. This claim is supported by a 2002 Pittsburgh study. In the study, students also reported that they were “least likely to use the word with parents, bosses, and professors” (Kiesling 284). Similarly, “dude” wouldn’t be used around a girl that needs to be impressed because it wouldn’t achieve its desired effect. Therefore, the Pittsburgh study reinforces the reasoning that dude can be associated with a sense of masculinity. When a guy calls his close girlfriend “dude,” it can be
assumed that their relationship is platonic, so "dude" is appropriate because he views her as a "guy friend."

The 1980s brought about the final shift in the meaning of "dude." Young people began using it as an exclamation of delight. In this sense someone may have said, "Dude! I passed contemporary music history!" By the mid-1980s, it was also being used as an exclamation of disappointment. Someone may have stated, "Dude... these waves are whack today." At the same time of this shift, television networks began incorporating the word into shows targeted at young audiences. When the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles aired on TV, the dialect they used was designed to grab the attention of young children. Terms like "cowabunga," "gnarly," and "dude" were ceaseless throughout episodes. By the 1990s and early 2000s, comedies made for older audiences including The Big Lebowski and Dude, Where’s My Car, also made use of the word. In The Big Lebowski, the lead character, Jeff Lebowski, exemplifies a "chill" attitude even in extreme circumstances, while always insisting that everyone refer to him "The Dude." In Dude, Where’s My Car, after a wild night out, Jesse Montgomery (Ashton Kutcher) and his friend were too hungover to remember where they parked the car. In the moments after waking, they look at one another and ask, "Dude, where’s my car?" These pop culture references to the word helped circulate it around the nation. It didn’t take long before the word infected vocabularies at a rapid rate. The use of "dude" in pop culture shifted the meaning of the word a third time, and without the publicity, there may not have been enough exposure to influence this shift.

In one short century, "dude" went from meaning a fool, to a city dweller, to a companion, and finally to a "cool guy." It is now used as an exclamation as well. With that knowledge, who is to say that "dude" will not undergo a fourth shift in meaning? Is it already upon us and we haven’t realized it yet? That may be the case. "Dude" is expanding its applicability in the population and can be used to fill in the same way a curse word can. Though "dude" is not used for a filler as commonly as curse words, it has the advantage of being less offensive and thus, more common in pop culture. In the future we may see "dude" used as a filler word when absent-minded people cannot think of something better. Considering the word originally meant a block-head and has risen to the popularity it has today, it seems nothing is out of the realm of possibility.

Works Cited


**INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO**

Each semester I have taught English 100 I have taught “Bitch” by Beverly Gross. I think it is a great example of how to build context, how to let one curious moment become an extended exploration of an idea, or in her instance, a word. In conjunction with this essay, I ask the students to write a review of a word they use frequently but haven’t really considered why. For some it’s an expletive and for others it’s an abbreviation or even an invented phrase that to most people would be illogical. Matt’s essay, “A Dude Story” is the product of this particular assignment, as it examines the history and current use of the word “dude.”

Matt’s process with this essay started with a two-page short writing assignment. This initial rough draft was a good way for Matt to explore a few ways the word is used, and how voice inflection can change how meaning is made. This brainstorming draft allowed these ideas to germinate and gave Matt time to consider if there was more he wanted to explore and if there was enough research in which to delve.

After deciding to extend his draft into a full essay, Matt and I discussed how he might look to the Gross essay as a sort of guide. We went through the structure of Gross’ “Bitch,” in particular how she presents definitions and then unpacks their impact in how the word is used by speakers and received by listeners. I thought, at least to start, this would a useful approach for Matt, as it would lead him to research “dude” in various dictionaries and other secondary texts. Based
upon his reaction, I think Matt was surprised by how much he found on the word, as he discovered entire stages and stories connected to the word’s connotations throughout history. It was through these stages that Matt was able to move from structure of Gross’ essay to what he would use for this particular piece.

One of the challenges for Matt during his writing process was trying to incorporate academic analysis while not losing sight of the obvious “lightness” and humor of the topic. Though the discussion of his own use of the word was quite funny, the most humorous moments in this essay often involved the definitions and the research itself. There was no need to force the humor, as the historical analysis itself was, at times, hilarious. Readers who expect research, especially the dictionary, to be staid and lifeless, will be pleasantly surprised by this essay.

Along with the moments of humor, I enjoy that this essay does more than simply restate definitions. Because Matt, similar to the Gross essay, begins with a curious first-person voice, the entire essay takes on a tone of discovery. The reader is learning the stories and stages, it seems, at the same time as the writer. This “discovery” process contributes to the success of the essay. As a reader, I’m more compelled to invest in an essay when I feel a sense of camaraderie with the voice and structural pull of the writing.

— Josh Kalscheur

**WRITER’S MEMO**

Growing up in the 21st century and having a childhood that involved five of my best guy friends sleeping over every weekend, “dude” quickly infected my vocabulary as I attempted to stress my “coolness” with them. Our course gave us the opportunity to research the history of a word we overuse. Upon receiving the paper prompt, my eyes lit up when I saw the opportunity to write the philology of “dude.” For me, this essay presented a chance to learn the origins of a word that played a huge role in my childhood, as well as write something that was fun for readers who share my overuse of the word “dude.”

I approached this essay with a laid back attitude and wrote a historical account. This was a fun topic to write about, and I didn’t need to stress over it. Throughout the beginning processes of the paper, I debated whether I should present the information chronologically or in reverse order. I eventually decided to start with the origins of the word because otherwise the reader would be piecing the information together like a puzzle. The research aspect was grueling, but proved to be highly interesting; researching topics such as “dude ranches” and The Big Lebowski was pretty comedic.
The initial draft of my essay is what I would call a lousy first draft. For this paper, I didn’t use an outline, but took the jumbled ideas in my head and started putting them on paper in any order. Once I got a couple of ideas down, I started reworking them into a reasonable order. This proved to be the easiest way for me to write as the semester went on. One of the aspects I struggled with while writing this paper was matching my word choice to my multiple audiences, and to the theme of the essay. This essay was intended to be informative and specific enough for faculty, but also entertaining for a young audience. Therefore, it was tough finding the right balance of professional and colloquial language.

The peer revision process was critical to improving these areas I was struggling with in my paper. I wrote four drafts of my paper before turning in my final copy, and each draft suggested something I could improve upon. It was a sobering process, and I didn’t always agree with what my peer reviewer suggested. Still, I found that when I first began writing this essay, I found that much of my writing included “clutter.” Peer editing helped me identity words, phrases, and ideas that not necessary. I also used phrases like “this is the reason why” that could easily be abbreviated, and sometimes I had left my references ambiguous—for example, not always explaining what “this” is. Between listening to lots of peers’ advice and finding clutter in my own writing, I am much more confident now that I can find some of these issues on my own.

Upon preparing for publication, I met with my professor for additional editing. My paper, for which I had already written four drafts, was filled with suggested corrections once again. One concept writing this paper has taught me is that no matter how perfect you think the paper is, there is always something that can be improved.

I took a risk writing this paper because I felt strongly about my topic and had fun writing about it. My goal was to fulfill the assignment in a fresh way, making it an easy read for my professor as well as the intended audience. There were some instances in which I listened to the questions raised by my peer reviewers, but chose not to follow their specific recommendations because they might have changed the style to something that didn’t match the theme. In the end, I like to think my risk paid off and I wrote a strong story of an idea.

— Matt Prell

Student Writing Award Honorable Mention: Explanatory Essay
Community Destruction in North Dakota Oil Boomtowns

KATHARINE BERRY

Jonnie Cassens is a truck driver who hoped that her move to a North Dakota oil boomtown would help her recover from her previous life in California. In the documentary “Running on Fumes in North Dakota,” she explains how the lifestyle emerging from North Dakota’s rapid oil boom isn’t as glamorous as it is often portrayed; in fact, it is a dirty and unpleasant life. Jonnie’s move from California has left her isolated and lonely with no one to turn to for support or companionship. She expresses her longing for a female friend to “gossip with” or someone she can “get a pedicure with,” but the oil boom has created a society dominated by men and a fractured community (Christenson). Jonnie may be physically alone, but she is not alone in her feeling that the oil boom has resulted in isolation and loneliness. Life-long residents and brand new residents of boomtowns fear the crime, prostitution, and influx of drugs that oil has drawn to North Dakota, and workers often face brutal conditions (Stewart). The unreliable and temporary nature of the North Dakota oil boom has disrupted the existing communities in this region and created deep divisions, preventing new communities from forming. Ultimately, the oil boom undermines community in all forms.

The cohesive rural communities that existed near oil reserves in North Dakota have disintegrated and been destroyed by the nature of the oil boom in the region (Brown). The rapid population flood has created problems of supply and demand in many aspects, especially in relation to housing. There is a great need for housing in the oil boomtowns but little availability, which drives up rent to prices approaching those in urban San Francisco (Warren). These extreme rent increases have made it difficult for many long-time residents to continue to afford their homes and many families are forced to find new housing outside of the region (Stewart). In New Town, North Dakota, a large trailer park, Prairie Winds, which has been home to several Native American tribes for decades, epitomizes this problem. The trailer parks’ new owner raised rents and evicted the long-term residents in order to provide housing for oil workers (Mufson). The original residents were left without roofs over their heads, and unfortunately this type of community destruction is not uncommon. As the oil boom drives housing prices up, families and loved ones are split up. Due to the limited availability of housing in the region, many people leave the area completely. These drastic rent increases have not only taken residents’ housing but their sense of home as well. To make matters worse, the history of oil booms in the region—which
features promises of great success followed by sudden failures that leave the state in debt—has left many people skeptical, including construction developers. Since the construction industry anticipates that the region’s oil supply will eventually run out, no new housing is being built to ameliorate the housing crisis. Therefore, the high demand for housing will continue and long-term residents will be driven further from their communities.

Additionally, among residents who try to take advantage of the conditions the boom has created, there is a general consensus that the profit is not worth the trouble (Mufson). Some residents have leased out their land and minerals in exchange for a profit from the oil companies; however, the oil companies have caused physical destruction to residents’ property, leaving them disappointed and angry (Stone). In an interview with a North Dakota native published by The Washington Post, Donnie Nelson reflects on the two oil rigs on his property: "'I don’t like what it’s done for our communities and lifestyle,' he said. ‘We had a good life, and now it’s gone forever, or at least for my lifetime'" (Mufsan). He also reports that he would “‘give it all back for the trouble it’s been” (Mufsan). Bert Hauge, another long-time resident, has large trenches on his property and cows with serious health problems as a result of the boom (Stone). These residents are left disapproving and discontented with the oil boom. North Dakotans remain skeptical that the promises of twenty years of success from this boom will become a reality, and instead believe that this boom will follow the limited course of previous booms (Lindholm). This bitterness has turned existing communities into a group of isolated individuals. No matter what their situation, all long-time North Dakotans share one commonality: they miss the time, before the oil boom, when communities “didn’t lock their doors and knew all their neighbors” (Mufson). While long-term residents in North Dakota have felt their communities disintegrate, employers in the oil industry have simultaneously prevented new communities from forming. This has resulted in deep divisions between employers and employees and further divisions among employees themselves. The “suits” (as the oil industry employers are called) have dehumanized workers and created an animal kingdom of men. They have mistreated men by implementing long hours and challenging and dirty work (Gale). Employees of the oil industry are on a schedule of approximately twelve-hour workdays for two weeks straight followed by two weeks of no work, but there is some degree of scheduling uncertainty, and sudden decisions often change schedules at the last minute (Chaudhry). These conditions create the sense of a temporary and easily replaceable environment, implying that the employees are inferior to the “suits.” With uncaring employers, there is a certain degree of animosity that allows workers to be deindividualized and take on the role of “rough and tumble oil worker” (Gale). Most workers are away from their homes and families and remain free of ties to any community in the region; occasionally workers act.
without being held accountable. This misbehavior has resulted in rising crime and drug use, problems that continue to grow (Healy).

There might be potential for workers to bond over their dehumanization, loneliness and desire for success, but because of the limited resources in the region, workers must compete, making the formation of community impossible. The housing scarcity has created massive competition between workers over housing (Chaudhry). Temporary man-camps of workers are now abundant, along with RV neighborhoods and thousands of vehicles that have been transformed into homes (Sulzberger). This competition is a free-for-all, and men who cannot find anything substantial have resorted to anything that will be sufficient for a temporary residence. With the harsh winters, some workers are finding it difficult to even stay alive. The inflation in the region also makes eating at restaurants practically impossible (Chaudhry). In a society with so many workers in the same situation, new communities could practically fall into place, but these workers face such a range of harsh conditions and obtaining basic requirements like housing and food take precedence over forming new communities.

The undermining of community caused by the oil industry in North Dakota isn’t the state or nation’s primary concern, and it is obvious that the economic benefits resulting from the boom are overwhelming. This oil boom could bring energy independence to the United States, which some might argue is sufficient reason to overlook community destruction. However, the oil boom has also brought health risks and environmental disturbances. Do the economic benefits outweigh the environmental, health and community drawbacks of oil boomtowns? Workers begin to wonder if leaving their families and homes for an uncertain amount of time, facing hard and lonely conditions, and performing dangerous work is really worth the extra income they will make. Others may wonder if the extreme yet temporary success of the oil industry in the region should be unthinkingly prioritized, especially given the destruction to the family land of native North Dakotans.

Is the temporary success of these modern boomtowns worth the potential long-term consequences they bring? As long as the boom benefits the nation as a whole, it is unlikely that there will be any changes to the industry, which leaves the residents of these North Dakota boomtowns more lonely and isolated than ever with no definite end in sight. This leaves residents like Jonnie Cassens in her trailer, which has no running water or toilet—and instead of confiding and bonding with a friend, the only relationship she has is with her dog.
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INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

Kate’s essay is a testament to how individual stories can make large-scale geopolitical debates feel real and emotionally relevant. Over the past year, the news cycle has featured stories of the Keystone XL pipeline bill, global warming, and peak oil, but Kate leaves us with the image of a woman living alone in a trailer near the North Dakota oil fields. As Kate notes, this woman is surviving without running water or a toilet, her only significant relationship with her dog. Reading Kate’s paper, I am reminded that arguments—even critical and scholarly ones—are sometimes more effective when conveyed through images as opposed to direct statements.

Kate did a tremendous amount of research for this project. Her sources range from newspaper articles to videos to radio transcripts to full-length books. This research allowed her to situate her argument within the larger historical context of boomtowns while also quoting contemporary residents of North Dakota oil communities. Kate’s research also allowed her to consider her argument from multiple perspectives: if existing communities in North Dakota are undermined by the sudden economic influx of an oil boom, then the people who arrive to work in the oil fields also report feeling dislocated and lonely. In this sense, Kate’s writing helps us understand how there are always multiple perspectives on disaster.

— Sarah Dimick

WRITER’S MEMO

The skills I learned in English 100 have helped me to become a much better writer because I learned the basics of how to compose a good paper, not just how to write to meet the requirements for a specific paper. When told that we would write the last paper of the semester about a contested place, I had no idea what I would write about. In class, we read several pieces from various sources that gave us an idea of what a contested place could look like. I asked my parents for some examples and one of them mentioned hydrolytic fracking in North Dakota. I didn’t know much about the topic but I liked that it was a con-
tested place in the U.S. Determining a topic to write about was one of the hardest parts of the paper for me, but I took the idea and looked at a specific aspect within the place — the communities.

I knew very little about what was happening in the oil boomtowns in North Dakota, and even less about the communities within them. In class, we learned how to: gather information and utilize library resources, integrate quotations, write a thesis, and structure an essay and the paragraphs in it; all of which made writing the paper less intimidating. I met with my teacher periodically throughout the writing process, which in turn helped me stay on top of the paper and do the necessary work to write a great paper.

I have never enjoyed writing and have instead dreaded it, generally finding it to be intimidating and overwhelming. However, after learning skills to write a good paper, meeting consistently with my teacher, and working at a steady pace, I began to enjoy writing and I eventually produced a paper I am truly proud of. Different from many of the papers I had written before, I also enjoyed researching about the community destruction in North Dakota oil boomtowns. I found the topic fascinating, so much so that I wanted to share what I had learned with others, and get involved in some way to help address the problems in the oil boomtowns.

The most challenging part of the paper was identifying what I wanted the paper to be about, and narrowing a broad idea into a specific focus that I could form into a thesis statement. I identified the main points I wanted to use, compared them and looked at what they had in common; then, my teacher helped me narrow down and look at the big picture and I determined the specific focus of the paper. After developing a thesis, the rest of the paper was easy. I realized that sometimes the thesis statement comes later on in the process, and it may change several times before it is right. The process of writing this paper has turned me into a much better writer, and I continue to use the skills I learned in English 100 for all my papers.

— Katharine Berry

Student Writing Award: Critical/Analytical Essay
This essay was previously published in the 9th edition of CCC.
“Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!” …That’s what opponents to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) think when they hear about genetic manipulation of food crops. GMO food crops are highly controversial because people generally think that they will negatively impact the environment and human health even though no data has been produced to support this claim (Daunert, Deo, and Morin 327). As Botelho and Kurtz explain, this attitude is prevalent because the public gets most of its information on GMO crops from the general media and news outlets that focus primarily on reporting on negative events when covering GMOs. Furthermore, the stranglehold large corporations such as Monsanto have over GMO seeds and Monsanto’s use of aggressive sales strategies does not help the situation as they further degrade the public’s confidence in GMO crops. However, GMO crops are no different than plants that have evolved from the primordial soup or the incredibly colored tulips bred in Holland with which we decorate our houses.

Information on GMO crops abounds and much of it is difficult to understand because it is generally written in a sterile scientific style that reads like a foreign language. However, with a basic understanding of some biological concepts, everyone is capable of analyzing the issue objectively. As Campbell, Reece, and Urry explain, plants and in fact all organisms grow by replicating their cells, and DNA is the recipe used, like a soup recipe that lists its ingredients and how to mix them together to make a certain type of soup. To make tomato soup, the recipe may say to add tomatoes, stock, and spices to a pan and simmer. DNA works similarly. It lists everything needed to create and sustain a cell. In DNA, however, the ingredients and instructions for usage are called genes. A cell reads its DNA recipe and uses the genes needed to produce the cell’s intended function. In scientific lingo, this is called gene expression. For example, the cells in a tomato’s skin will express the gene needed to produce a red pigment, thus making the skin red, while the cells in the stem express the gene that produces a green pigment. Both of these examples are specific traits of a tomato plant just as the skin color of a green tomato is a trait. DNA would of course never define
a simmer method such as the one used in cooking. DNA describes more complex processes like enzymes that cause a chemical reaction to produce a certain compound that the plant needs. DNA is similar to a super soup recipe that tells a cook how to produce many different kinds of soups by selecting only certain ingredients and using different cooking techniques to put them all together (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 311).

If a soup recipe is changed, some characteristic of the soup will also change. Say you’re a chef who hates tomatoes and you change the soup recipe to substitute grapes for tomatoes. The resulting soup from this fundamental change will be grape soup. In the same way, DNA can also be changed. A change to a section of DNA is referred to as a gene mutation. Gene mutations can have little effect on cell function or can completely change it (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 344). A mutation in a tomato skin’s gene that causes the cells to produce yellow pigment instead of red does not change the tomato in a deleterious way. On the other hand, a change in the DNA that causes the skin to turn to liquid would be disastrous. The soup would be easier to make as it would not require blending, but harvesting the tomatoes would be a nightmare. Tomato paste would cover everything in sight.

When plants reproduce, they pass on their genes to their progeny as do most living organisms. Half of the genes from the male parent are mixed with half of the genes from a female parent and thus a mixed set are passed down. Scientifically, this is called vertical gene transfer, which is like getting two soup recipes, ripping them in half, and then taping one half to each other recipe. Doing this with a soup recipe could easily result in a soup that is not fit for human consumption. Luckily, nature is much more precise when it does its mixing of DNA. Well, nature is precise most of the time. Sometimes it gets the mixing part wrong and fails to split or mix in equal proportions. When this occurs—an event that scientists call disjunction—people manifest diseases like Down’s syndrome (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 258).

This mixing of genes introduces gene variations across a plant population, and this variation is critical to a plant’s survival. It gives future generations new traits which allow them to adapt to slow changes in their environment and to develop resistance to disease. Variation can also be introduced to plants using what is termed “horizontal gene transfer.” Organisms in this case acquire new genes from unrelated species, and then pass them onto their progeny, reminiscent of our beloved tomatoes receiving a gene from a corn plant that alters a tomato’s taste (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 248). (Although if this were to happen, ketchup might need to be renamed “cornup!”)

As P. Gepts describes in the Crop Science journal, plant breeders take advantage of vertical gene transfer mechanisms to introduce gene variation that will
enhance their crops (1780). For example, people cross-bred plants to produce pink flowering plants where only plants with red or white flowers previously existed, and breeders can even breed tomatoes that taste better (Giovannoni 2). As Gepts explains, breeders manipulate plants’ genes using their reproduction process to move desirable genes from one plant to another. If a tomato farmer has tomatoes that are continually eaten by pests, the farmer may cross a tomato plant with some type of native tomato plant that the pests dislike in the hope that the domesticated plant picks up the gene for the smell. If it does, he or she can produce seeds from this new hybrid organism and sow his or her fields with pest-resistant tomatoes. This process is called domestication, as the farmer is altering plants to better suit his or her needs (Gepts 1780).

As Mendel found, however, when he experimented with peas in 1890, sometimes the gene intended for transfer doesn’t transfer or it transfers in an unexpected manner (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 294). This problem is termed “gene linkage” and occurs when a gene adjacent to the gene that the farmer desires also transfers to the hybrid plant. In one case, during a cross of a domesticated lima bean plant with a wild lima bean plant, an additional gene transferred from the wild plant to the domestic one. This uninvited gene had been bred out of domesticated lima bean plants because it produces a toxic compound. The cross-breeding exercise reintroduced this undesirable gene (Gepts 1787). Another problem plant breeders face is that many traits are not encoded in a single gene of these linked genes may produce unpredictable results. No data exists to show that this problem has occurred, but hard facts don’t seem to be needed by opponents of GMO crops before they promote panic and misinformation over GMO crops.

Mendel and plant breeders in effect genetically manipulate plants in much the same way that scientists do when they create GMO crops (Daunert, Deo, and Morin 1780). However, rather than cross-breeding two plants and then hoping for the best, scientists use sophisticated methods to extract the exact gene they want and then insert it into a plant cell. Sometimes they extract and inject the gene using a syringe and in other cases they use bacteria to insert the gene into the target cell. The cell then develops into a plant, which, just like in traditional plant breeding, can be used to create seeds so that large crops of identical hybrid plants that have the desirable trait can be produced (Campbell, Reece, and Urry 418). One key difference between plant breeding and GMO techniques is that GMO techniques can add genes to a plant while plant breeders cannot. Plant breeders can only remove or change an existing gene. This is because traditional plant breeders can only transfer genes vertically, while GMO scientists can also horizontally transfer genes (Gepts 1781).

Some people may argue that genes could be changed in a plant through plant breeding to achieve the same result that GMO does by adding a gene. However,
doing so would be extremely difficult. For example, if a plant population does not have a resistance to a particular pest, and a plant breeder wants to change a gene to give the plant resistance, he or she will need to find a plant that has the resistant gene and that can be cross-bred with the domesticated plant. Assuming that a plant can even be found that contains the needed gene, getting that gene to transfer to the domestic population and to produce the required resistance trait is extremely problematic and very imprecise (Gepts 1781). Traditional plant breeding has made amazing advances but still remains a very inefficient method (Giovannoni 2).

If genes can transfer so easily between plants, then why can’t genes from GMO crops transfer to plants in the world, possibly causing deleterious results? As John Burke of the Department of Biological Sciences at Vanderbilt University writes, “Even though no conclusive data has been produced which shows genes have escaped from domesticated crops into the wild, they could” (Burke 1637). This is termed “pollen mediated gene flow,” but no cases have ever been recorded of it occurring between crops red using traditional methods or between GMO crops and wild plants (Gepts 1785). So why haven’t genes escaped and run rampant as a result of plant breeding? Many of the same risks which concern people today with GMO crops probably existed in the early days of crop domestication, but due to the slow pace of plant evolution, detrimental effects either went unnoticed or early plant breeders identified harmful effects and made prudent changes. For example, there is evidence that plant breeding introduced soil erosion problems in pre-Hispanic times. One key lesson from the plant domestication process that occurred over hundreds and possibly thousands of years is that we must monitor and assess every agricultural change on a case-by-case basis no matter what technique is used to introduce it.

The risk of allergic reactions, environmental impact, reduced biodiversity, and transfer of antibiotic-resistant genes to humans are regularly cited by opponents of GMO crops. However, Daunert et al. wrote in a 2008 article that “based on our knowledge of biological mechanisms, there is no known situation where this [accidental gene transfer] to occur or that even if it were to occur, it would have detrimental impacts” (Daunert, Deo, and Morin 327). Thus, most concerns over GMOs are unsupported by scientific evidence and are pure speculation.

The potential of GMO crops is boundless. Agriculture has already become far more efficient as a result of GMO techniques. They have reduced the need for chemical insecticides and fertilizers which have a major negative impact on the environment. Crop production costs have been dramatically reduced due to GMO techniques which help poor countries and rich ones alike to feed growing populations. Statisticians estimate that two billion people will be added to the world’s population by 2050, so to avoid straining our food supply, we will need to embrace technologies like GMOs (Daunert, Deo, and Morin 327).
One challenge to achieving GMO’s full potential is that the seed industry is dominated by a few major biotechnology corporations. Monsanto, for example, produces 90 percent of the world’s GMO seeds. However, even though Monsanto continues to see skyrocketing profits and net sales growth of 30 percent since 2007 to over $11 billion per year, they refuse to adjust seed prices to assist poor companies (Marie-Monique 310). In some cases, this has resulted in extreme hardship such as farmer suicides in India because farmers must place themselves into heavy debt to purchase GMO seeds (Heeter). Control of GMO research and production must become more distributed if everyone is to benefit from its potential (Daunert, Deo, and Morin 328). We need to slice up the GMO tomato and make sure that many responsible corporations and organizations all get a piece.

If we refer to genetic modification in a lab as enhanced breeding, then we may be able to calm down the masses that fear killer tomatoes. However, no one can or should dismiss the risks of genetically modifying food crops in a lab; we just need to learn from the evolution of plant-breeding and ensure that no killer tomato genes are given an opportunity to escape from a lab. Through GMOs, we may be able to create a tomato plant plentiful enough to feed an entire town that costs pennies to grow and that is distributed fairly.

Works Cited


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INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

My fall freshman composition class had as its theme food and our relationship to it—emotionally, physically, and culturally. Each sequence confronted this topic from a different angle and examined and challenged how we think about food and how we confront topics related to it through writing, investigation, and research. For the critical project, many of my students chose to discuss various contemporary and often heated topics surrounding food, such as pesticides, the rise of the organic market, eating disorders, and—as is the case with Andrew—genetically modified crops. While several students chose this same topic, Andrew was the only student bold enough to take the unpopular position of supporting genetically modified plants, and in his essay, “Look Out for Killer Tomatoes!: Similarities Between Genetically Engineered and Traditionally Bred Plants,” Andrew defends his stance deftly. He tackles this very controversial topic by first addressing and confronting the mental image of genetically modified food and then breaking down these preconceived notions through logical reasoning, scientific data, and expert rhetoric. What I admire most about this essay is how much of his own voice Andrew is able to retain within the critical sphere and how his sense of humor breaks through in an oftentimes humorless genre. In this vein, Andrew uses the recurring image of “killer tomatoes” throughout this essay, expertly weaving the various facets and avenues his paper takes into a cohesive whole. Another aspect of Andrew's paper that I find impressive is the way he taps into the language of scientists, acquainting us with their terminology and processes. He breaks down the complexities of cross-breeding to make it not only readable but enjoyable to read as well.

— Jacques Rancourt

WRITER’S MEMO

I chose to research genetically modified organisms (GMO) because I feel this technology has the potential to help address hunger in developing countries and that the majority of people distrust GMOs purely because they misunderstand the technology. As I researched the subject I found both of these assumptions to be true, but at the same time I learned that the technology is not completely risk-free. This discovery caused me to rethink how I evaluate an issue and taught me to always research a subject in depth using objective sources before making any judgments.
When writing papers I always try to insert some humor as I feel including it makes the paper more enjoyable to read and thus, is more likely to be read. Furthermore, using humor helps me to enjoy the writing process and I feel as a result improves the quality of my writing. This approach does mean that corny lines sneak into my initial drafts and are removed along the way when I work out that they are really only humorous to me. I hope that my use of the movie “attack of the killer tomatoes” to insert humor enhances my paper and does not distract people from the points which I was trying to make.

— Andrew Cunningham

Student Writing Award: Critical/Analytical Essay
In relation to the subject matter of this essay, the author would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we settle is the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of our nation’s Indigenous peoples. For anyone residing in Madison, Wisconsin, it is important to know that the Ho-Chunk Nation has strong cultural connections to the land. This land acknowledgment does not exist in past tense or only in a historical context, but rather in an act of reconciliation.

He’s hard not to miss. On the basketball court, he wears the number 24 on his chest and makes putting the ball through the net look effortless even with the clock winding down. This uncanny ability to shoot the ball in the most critical moments has earned him the nickname “Klutch Koenig.” But more than that, Bronson Koenig, the starting senior point guard at the University of Wisconsin–Madison during the 2016-2017 season, proudly embraces the name of Native American, belonging to the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, as part of his identity. Even his social media biographies read, “Lightskinned Native American.” During the last four years at UW, Koenig has not only grown in his understanding of the sport, but more importantly, he’s grown in his knowledge of his heritage, using his platform to raise awareness concerning local and national issues regarding the injustices of and atrocities committed against Native Americans, both past and present.

The erasure of the history of Native Americans began in the United States when the land’s original Indigenous peoples were forced to face the “realities of having their lands, cultures, and governmental authorities simultaneously attacked, denied, and reconstructed by colonial societies and states,” a process that peaked during the nineteenth century (Alfred 599). Tribal communities once flourished before settlers invaded Native lands, pushing tribes to secluded reservations and forcing the formation of treaties, most of which have now been violated by the United States government. Such violations seem to be commonly disregarded, and like the majority of Americans, Koenig’s knowledge of Native history has some gaps, primarily because it is rarely taught in schools (Koenig). For this reason, Native American leaders and activists continue to rebuild Indigenous nations “through the assertion of rights to self-government, cultural revitalization, the protection of natural resources, tribal control of education, and the development of reservation economies” (Kiel 9). But most Americans have failed to take notice. Nonetheless, leaders such as Bronson Koenig
continue the tradition of activism to address issues concerning mistreatment and cultural awareness, both on campus and nationwide.

For a large institution, racial diversity on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus is quite lacking. In the fall of 2015, Koenig was just one of 62 students who self-identified as Native American out of an undergraduate population of nearly 30,000 ("Student Enrollment"). Nonetheless, Koenig points to the involvement of students and the surrounding community in protests and rallies against the “nation’s hostile treatment of its original people” beginning more than 40 years ago and helping to shed light upon ongoing issues Native Americans still face in modern society. Awareness about Native American mistreatment has long had its place on campus, and the past and present actions taken to end oppression have inspired activists such as Koenig to step into the spotlight (Koenig). His actions can be linked to a larger narrative pertaining to the many efforts taken to combat Native American repression.

A piece of that narrative has links to Wounded Knee. On December 29, 1890, the last major United States military effort to subdue the Native American populations of North America occurred at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, where nearly 300 Native Americans were killed in what has become known as the Wounded Knee Massacre ("Open Letter"). More than 80 years later, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) led a protest at Wounded Knee, and that same year in November of 1973, Clyde H. Bellecourt, a Native American and Wounded Knee veteran of the protest, as well as a co-founder of AIM came to the UW–Madison campus to lead a student rally. He spoke on behalf of “the continuing struggles of Wounded Knee and Indian People,” and in support of Native American protesters ("Wounded Knee Rally"). During the same academic year, a booth designed to inform students about Wounded Knee and the injustices Indigenous people face was displayed near Memorial Union for Native American Week ("Native American Week"). Both instances indicate the presence of Native American activism and student acknowledgment of the marginalized group in the past. This creates connections to more recent recognition of Native concerns on campus.

Nearly 40 years after the American Indian Movement exposed the campus to issues of underrepresented students, minoritized students at UW-Madison took to Twitter to bring recent racial incidents into the public spotlight. Using the hashtag “#TheRealUW,” students, faculty, staff, and alumni shared stories and expressed disappointment over the 23 hate and bias incidents that were officially reported in just one semester (Schneider). Later, there was an opportunity to showcase personal narratives about racial injustices on campus at the Chazen Museum of Art. The event on April 22, 2016, was titled Unhood Yourself: The Real UW One Day Exhibition. All photographs in the exhibition depict minoritized students holding a whiteboard with racial phrases that have been said to
that individual. Several Native American students recall some of these hurtful phrases, in which the whiteboards read, “You’re Native American? I didn’t think you all still even EXISTED?!” and “I am NOT here for free. I do NOT get [money] from casinos. I am Native American and my culture is not yours to mock” (“#The-RealUW”).

Koenig, too, has experienced the kinds of slurs highlighted in the exhibit. He reports being asked, “Did I wear feathers?” and “Do my parents run a casino?” (Koenig). The most prevailing impression that these photographs and questions give is that racial discrimination is still very apparent on campus despite public acknowledgment of injustices and efforts made by activists to combat prejudice.

Throughout the years, there have been students at UW-Madison who have aimed to improve the visibility of systematic discrimination and Native American issues on campus. According to the Wisconsin Alumni Association (WAA), the student organization Wunk Sheek was founded in 1968 “to contribute productive dialogue among the concerns of Indian Country and the non-Indian world, to promote traditional values, and to share the richness and diversity of pluralistic societal systems” (Saiz). Wunk Sheek remains as an organization on campus with the goal of reducing the differences between the two groups. To do so, the organization holds two large powwows, traditional Native American ceremonies, each year and several other events for American Indian Heritage Month in November to continue “its original mission of outreach and inclusion” (Schlecht). Wunk Sheek is one of several organizations that welcome both Native and non-Native students to help end marginalized behavior on campus.

Alongside student life, UW-Madison has taken an active role to academically recognize the depth of Native American cultures on its campus. In 1972, with the encouragement of former Native American students, the university established a “Native American Studies” program intended to facilitate the recruitment of Native American faculty to develop courses relating to the area of study. Roughly fifteen years later, the program name changed to “American Indian Studies,” and a certificate (similar to a minor) was offered beginning in 1997 (“History”). The certificate remains available at the university in an effort to provide students and staff with resources to develop an academic and cultural interest in American Indians. Koenig himself has taken advantage of the department. He says, “I have sought out as many classes as I could that had to do with Native American issues” because of his curiosity in his own culture and finding who he is as a person (Koenig). The importance of sharing and learning about Native American cultures continues to be significant to the university, and obviously to Koenig as well.

Beyond academics, in August 2012, the Division of University Housing held the
grand opening of Dejope Residence Hall, a five-story complex located near Lake Mendota designed to fit the needs of modern student living for the undergraduate community. Dejope means “four lakes” in the Ho-Chunk language, which references the four lakes in the Madison area that include Lake Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, and Kegonsa (Housing). Because Indigenous people have inhabited the area for over 12,000 years, UW-Madison has more effigy mounds—raised piles of earth used for burial grounds that are sacred to Native Americans—and more Native archaeological sites than any other university in the world (“A History of Madison”). For this reason, the Dejope building stands in recognition of the eleven federally recognized American Indian Nations in Wisconsin (Housing). As long as the building remains standing, it will act as an important reminder for all students, faculty, and the community that Native American culture and history will always hold a place in Madison.

Meanwhile, on the national level, news regarding the controversial oil pipeline from Dakota Access, LLC, motivated action by Wisconsin basketball star Bronson Koenig. The pipeline is planned to stretch over 1,000 miles in length and run near the Standing Rock reservation, home to the Hunkpapa Sioux Tribe, in North Dakota. Final plans for the pipeline were announced in January 2016, and by April, members of tribes worldwide stood in solidarity against its advancement. Protesters claim the nearly four-billion-dollar project would destroy ancient burial grounds and poison the water supply of the reservation and millions of other people (“Dakota Access Pipeline Facts”; Koenig).

As Standing Rock headlines emerged, Koenig felt an urgency to make the 700-mile journey from Wisconsin to North Dakota to join thousands of Indigenous people in the fight of protection. Koenig has taken it upon himself to learn about his heritage through classes and professors while at UW–Madison. In doing so, he uncovered struggles in understanding his own identity. Koenig defines himself as a “light-skinned Native American, [having] a white father and a mother who is Ho-Chunk.” In his article published by The Players’ Tribune in December 2016, Koenig writes that he often feels “like a minority within a minority. Not Native enough. Not white enough. Like a stranger in two lands.” He continues by stating that his struggles of understanding this identity was one of the reasons he felt the need to visit Standing Rock. Koenig recalls feeling a connection and a sense of comfort in “a valley of Native people” (Koenig). This journey to Standing Rock has had more impact than what was originally expected.

Koenig didn’t travel to Standing Rock to be a role model, but that’s exactly what he became. Following one of Koenig’s community basketball clinics, a young Native American participant asked if Koenig grew up with any Native American role models. Koenig responded by stating he didn’t, particularly because “they weren’t celebrated in popular cultures” (Koenig). His intentions of going to Standing Rock were to help, join the protest, and fight with his people. But
Koenig soon realized that "if I could be someone who even one kid from Standing Rock looked up to, I'd be prouder of that than of anything I had ever done—or might ever do—on the basketball court," taking pride in the fact that the kids at Standing Rock were seeing someone succeed, both on and off the court, "who looked a little like they did" (Koenig). It takes a great deal of courage and pride to stand for what one believes in, but Koenig took his platform and showed his Native American community that nothing—not even attending a prestigious university and playing division one basketball—is impossible, taking pride to a whole new level.

The Native American community continues to fight injustices imposed upon by outside entities with action from individuals such as Koenig and institutions such as UW-Madison, which give light to issues and hope to others in a time of such darkness. Local and national issues are now more than ever being addressed publicly with the help of those who are affected the most. The implementation of organizations, programs, and protests speaks volumes about how far the Native American community has come in the face of inequality, but also how far there is yet to go, requiring further influence from individuals and institutions to promote much needed education, understanding, and involvement in activism. In the wise words of Koenig, “We must all protect it...whatever our heritage” (Koenig). Research shows the cruel physical, emotional, and mental attacks Native Americans have faced and may continue to face, but numbers don’t seem to speak as loudly as actions from Native activists, especially those with a platform from an impressive academic and basketball career such as Koenig.

**Works Cited**


“#TheRealUW” Unhood Yourself: The Real UW One Day Exhibition. University of
INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

The objective of our Sequence 3 research project was to identify and explore a “threshold” moment at UW—a moment that transforms one’s thinking and that forever informs one’s perspective—and to relate this moment to a larger national or cultural conversation. Bailey’s exploration of Bronson Koenig’s identity as a Native American student and Native American representation on campus did exactly that. Many students do not know that this university sits on sacred Ho-Chunk land, and Bailey took this acknowledgment of our university’s position to further explore the ugly history of settler colonialism and how UW and its students are attempting to redress these injustices. She very adeptly navigated the discourse surrounding Koenig’s visit to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline by weaving this national concern together with the erasure of Indigenous peoples more broadly in histories of the university.

Though all of the credit is due to Bailey, I worked with her throughout her process of crafting this paper—we talked about proper source citation, about structure and organization, and about how to do justice to such pressing issues that get such little media attention. The paper that she constructed went through many drafts and many reviewers, but in the end, she produced an essay that made a significant contribution to our class’ understanding of Native American representation on campus and that brought together a diverse range of sources into a cohesive whole.

— Jon Isaac

WRITER’S MEMO

The essence of this essay required research that connected articles from the University of Wisconsin – Madison Archives collection, as well as other online sources, to a larger issue in national spotlight. I was required to use the information I collected from the university to discuss and reflect on the variables that made the connection between this campus and a national topic. At the time, I had great interest in athlete activism, and questioned the various ways in which athletes used a larger platform to speak out about different and important issues in the nation.
As I began the process of researching and writing this essay, I started to find that the sole topic of athlete activism was significantly broad, encompassing athletes of all sports and problems of all dimensions. I went to my instructor for guidance, and decided to narrow my subject matter to one I had followed for several months beforehand and developed keen interest in. This is where I turned to Native American activism at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota, where pipeline protests made its way to national headlines, and the connection being a UW-Madison student-athlete’s participation at the reservation. Further research revealed many ties between Native American history, as well as culture, and the UW-Madison campus. I merged the two together, and looking back now, I see that this essay perhaps is not necessarily about using an athlete’s platform to speak about injustice, but rather a personal story with greater depth and ties to this campus and national interests.

The topic may have changed slightly as I progressed, but I nonetheless created an essay that resembles much of my beginning thoughts. As I look back at the process, my only regret is that I didn’t directly interview any Native American individuals associated with the matters discussed throughout the essay. Perhaps this would have provided further insight to injustices that still exist today or offer a foundation for further activism to address the need of more understanding and awareness.

I believe my confidence as a writer grew with this project. I took the comments of my peers and instructor seriously in order to produce a piece of writing I could be completely satisfied with. This was the first essay of my writing career in which I was truly pleased with my work, a result of the fact that I was deeply interested in the Native American aspect of activism, or perhaps using different resources from the archives. I give this essay credit for furthering my interest in written communication and Native American heritage, leading to an academic major change. I may have found an opportunity to combine two interests as a result of an essay I saw through from beginning to end.

— Bailey Curtis

Student Writing Award: Critical Essay
What would you do if you could find out what your medical future has in store for you? Would you want to find out or would you rather wait until the time comes? What if finding out could possibly save your life or could at least enhance the quality of your life? What if you found out something that you did not want to know? What if you learned something detrimental and there was nothing you could do about it? These are questions people think about before undergoing genetic testing. There are no correct answers, but different responses could result in many different outcomes.

Since the early 1900s, scientists have recognized the connection between inherited diseases and chromosomes. But it wasn’t until the 1950s that scientists started to develop tests for genetic conditions like Down syndrome (Trisomy 21), cystic fibrosis, and Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy (Dept. of Health & Human Services 1). Today, more than five hundred laboratories offer genetic testing for over two thousand rare and common conditions (1). By looking at the different perspectives of geneticists, patients, consumers, doctors, and ethicists, the many benefits of genetic testing can be shown as well as the lack of prevalence of negative outcomes associated with genetic testing.

There are two different categories of genetic testing: clinical genetic tests and research genetic tests. Diagnostic tests, pre-symptomatic tests, carrier tests, prenatal tests, newborn screening and pharmacogenomics tests all fall under the category of clinical genetic tests. These tests are ordered by a healthcare professional and are done in certified labs. Research genetic tests are volunteer based for exploratory studies. Both clinical genetic tests and research genetic tests look at DNA strands to find abnormalities that can put a person at greater risk to develop a disease. In the past, only one gene could be tested at a time, but today geneticists can screen thousands of genes simultaneously (Univ. of Iowa 2). Most people choose to have a genetic test performed to find the cause of a disease, to find out if they are a carrier of a disease, or to see if their children will develop the disease. Healthcare providers can use this information to find the best treatment and the most appropriate counseling to prepare a person for their future.

The genetic testing process can be broken down into six steps. As detailed by the University of Iowa, the first step is talking to a genetic counselor or a doc-
tor to learn about insurance coverage and the possibility of insurance discrimination. In the office, the doctor will typically take a blood sample and send it to the lab. The next step is getting the DNA from the sample, which is followed by sequencing the DNA to look for abnormalities. The lab will then take the DNA and put it into a DNA sequencer which will collect data on the patients’ genetic makeup. The fourth and fifth steps include analyzing the DNA and then interpreting what it means. Finally, the lab will give back the results to the genetic counselor or doctor and they will share the information with the patient (3). The information provided from genetic testing can be very useful in planning for the future, but it can also be a burden to those who are not ready to accept what the future holds.

In order to evaluate the benefit of genetic testing relative to the possible burdens it could pose for a patient, it is important to look at the causes and the need for genetic testing. Genetic testing can be most useful for diagnosing prenatal abnormalities, cancer, and Alzheimer’s. Prenatal genetic testing is a way for the parent to find out if the fetus has a genetic condition. Typically, most people who are participating in prenatal genetic testing are looking to see if the fetus has a chance of developing autism, Down syndrome, cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs disease, or sickle cell anemia (Chen 125). This information can help the parents of the fetus to make an informed decision about whether or not to continue the pregnancy and allow for early interventions with affected newborns. Predispositions to cancer can also be predicted using genetic testing, and with the prevalence of cancer in today’s society, early testing and treatment of cancer can save countless lives.

Genetic testing for cancer can have many outcomes. In the article “The Breast Cancer Gene and Me” published in the New York Times on September 25, 2015, Elizabeth Wurtzel shares her experience with genetic testing for breast cancer. Elizabeth Wurtzel is a descendent of the Ashkenazi Jews. Biologically, that means she has a one in forty chance of being breast cancer or BRCA-positive, which is ten times the rate of the rest of the population. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with breast cancer before these tests were available and had to go through eight rounds of chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. All of these treatments might have been avoided if she had been tested for a genetic abnormality earlier because she could have chosen to have a mastectomy with reconstruction to keep the cancer from spreading. Wurtzel’s experience suggests how useful genetic testing can be because it would have clearly benefited her health as well as the quality of her life. She serves as an excellent example for why many who have a history of diseases in family or cultural lines from genetic abnormalities should get preemptive genetic testing.

Another predictive genetic test can be conducted for Alzheimer’s. By looking at the experience Jane Neilson had with predictive testing for Alzheimer’s disease,
the benefits of genetic testing become even clearer. In the article, "A Patient's Perspective on Genetic Counseling and Predictive Testing for Alzheimer's Disease," Neilson offers her opinions on genetic testing and shares her story. Neilson comes from a family with a history of Alzheimer's disease and was concerned with her own susceptibility. This led her to request information about predictive genetic testing. She describes how she thought long and hard about the possible outcomes with her husband, and ultimately agreed to continue with the process because it would be better to know ahead of time if she will be affected by the disease so she could plan accordingly. Unfortunately, Neilson learned at her first appointment that she was not qualified for the specific DNA test because of her family history. In the article, she writes "after all my introspection on the subject, there were no clear answers, only fog. I went through agony and soul searching only to be cheated. No tests were available for me. I was also relieved. I didn't have to go through with it." Neilson continued to describe how she came to terms with temporarily not knowing her medical future, but she's optimistic that a test will be available for her someday. Neilson's case acts as an example of the negative side of genetic testing and its potential burden on a patient for future health problems. Neilson's case also acts as an example of how genetic testing is not always an option for patients, despite a person's interest in finding out their genetic predispositions and medical future.

Besides the patients who directly benefit from genetic testing, the families of people with genetic diseases can benefit as well. If a person has been established as at-risk to a disease, family members can also undergo the process of genetic testing. They can have the same benefit of knowing what their future holds and having a chance to prepare for what is to come. They will then also have the possibility of stopping or slowing the progression of the disease. Stephen Post and Peter Whitehouse write about the possibility of someone experiencing “relief from not carrying the familial variant” in “The Clinical Introduction of Genetic Testing for Alzheimer’s Disease.” A family member finding out they do not carry the variant could provide an even greater benefit to the patient and other family members. That is because it would determine the disease is not genetic and most likely stems from an environmental or lifestyle issue. In turn, this could give researchers and care providers more information on the progression of the specific disease.

The patients and families mentioned here so far all see the value in genetic testing, because of the benefit it promises in terms of planning for their futures and the possibility of controlling the full effects of a known disease before it can get worse. In addition, people without a specific disease concern have shown an interest in knowing about themselves and their genetic DNA makeup, and genetic testing can allow for this. Today, many people feel like they have a right to their DNA information and believe they have ownership of their genetic

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makeup. Now that the means for testing is available, it is more common for people to “seek such testing ‘out of curiosity,’ for the ‘fun factor,’ because they self-identify as early adopters of new technologies or because they want to contribute to genomics research” (Bunnik, Janssens, Schermer). This shift in attitudes towards the adoption of genetic testing shows that testing isn’t only for a patient’s use, but for an interested consumer to use as well. The consumer notion is that genetic testing has psychological, social, and emotional benefits.

Since there has been a tremendous consumer interest in genetic testing as a social and psychological trend, labs have started to offer direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic testing. This at-home genetic test is a way for someone to find out their genetic information without a genetic counselor or a doctor involved. Typically, one who purchases the kit will either take a cotton swab sample from the inside of their cheek or collect their saliva in a test tube and send it to the lab. The consumer will be notified when their results are ready. The problem with this method is that the average consumer will not know how to read their results accurately. A person might, for example, assume they have a life threatening disease when they don’t. Also, at-home genetic testing does not look at environmental factors, lifestyle choices, or family medical history, all of which can play a large role in the probability of developing a disease. One study on DTC genetic testing has this to say: “the present findings suggest that general practitioners should have the ability to clarify for interested individuals the way in which different genetic mutations are characterized by different risk probabilities, and the meaning attributed to these risk probabilities” by showing the “inconsistencies in the extent and quality of information provided by DTC testing” (Sherman 712). What this means is that the DTC at-home genetic tests cannot provide information as accurate as lab performed tests, and thus it is important to contact a professional to go over the results if they are not clear.

In general, professionals who can evaluate genetic results value the life of the patient and want to provide them with the best healthcare possible. Doctors see value in genetic testing because it provides them with a greater understanding of an individual patient, and it can help them direct the patient down the appropriate path given the specific set of circumstances. In a study of 363 doctors, ninety-eight percent said they would refer their patients to a genetic counselor, and ninety-five percent believed that the doctor has the responsibility to counsel patients about genetic testing (Menasha, Schechter, Willned 144). This significant number shows the value healthcare providers see in genetic testing and how they want to support their patients throughout the genetic testing process. More specifically, Stephen Post and Peter Whitehouse argue that more government funding should be given to genetic testing research because it can be so beneficial for the patients (835). With more funding, geneticists would be able to do more research on other diseases which, in turn, could help more people
detect such diseases, slow their progression, and possibly stop the disease completely.

Both patients and healthcare providers see value in genetic testing, but one of the main issues with genetic testing is the ethics surrounding it. In “Ethical Language and Themes in News Coverage of Genetic Testing,” David Craig breaks down the issues of genetic testing into four different categories: (1) whether you want to know your likely medical future, (2) what you would do with the information, (3) the complexity of the choices people face because of developments in genetic testing, and (4) the possibility of discrimination based on genetic information (165-166). It could be argued that whether or not you want to know your likely medical future is not related to ethics as closely as the other three categories. Whether or not a person wants to know what their medical future holds is a personal choice, and genetic testing is very black and white. It is what people choose to do with the information from genetic testing that brings ethics into question and causes genetic testing to enter a grey area.

As an example of the grey area of genetic testing, let’s look at a situation involving a pregnant woman. A pregnant woman can decide whether or not to find out if the fetus she is carrying has Down syndrome before a child is born. Ethics comes into play when a woman finds out that her fetus does have Down syndrome, and is deciding whether or not to terminate the pregnancy based on this new information. Another example of a genetic testing controversy would be undergoing genetic testing for a specific disease that does not have a cure. Knowing that you are a carrier of a disease and not being able to do anything about it except wait for it to worsen seems awful and could put the patient into a state of depression. A third ethical controversy surrounds genetic testing and stem cell research. Because of developments in genetic testing, scientists are able to alter embryonic stem cells, which can lead to the possibility that parents will someday be able to modify their children's physical appearance and create what is called a “designer baby.” This example alone brings in a whole new level of ethics to the idea of genetic testing.

As for the ethics of non-patient choices regarding genetic screening, tests are added to one's medical profile, and this can lead to the risk that genetic discrimination could increase dramatically. The National Human Genome Research Institute says that “Genetic discrimination occurs if people are treated unfairly because of differences in their DNA that increase their chances of getting a certain disease.” This includes a health insurer refusing to give coverage to a woman who has a DNA difference that raises her odds of getting breast cancer. Another example provided by The National Human Genome Research Institute is that employers could use DNA information to decide whether to hire or fire employees. In fact, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 (GINA) was passed to protect Americans from being treated unfairly. This law aims to pre-
vent discrimination from both health insurers and employers. It was put in place to ease concerns about discrimination that might keep some people from getting genetic testing. It also enables people to take part in genetic research studies without fear that the information could later be used against them.

By looking at the many perspectives from geneticists, patients, consumers, doctors, and ethicists, I believe the major benefits of genetic testing outweigh the possible negatives. I’m especially persuaded by the fact that genetic testing is very important for those who have a family history of disease because the detection of predisposed diseases can help slow or prevent disease progression. In a beautiful conclusion to her article, Jane Neilson writes “genetic testing is more than genes. It tests personal beliefs about life, disease and healing. Use your gifts of knowledge, professionalism, and caring with patience.”

Essentially Neilson is saying that there is so much to be considered with genetic testing, and that genetic testing can lead a person to question their own personal beliefs. It also leads people to think about their finances and about how they want to spend the rest of their life. Knowing this information, do you think you would undergo genetic testing? In reality, there is no correct answer to the question, but I know that I would want to know what my medical future has in store for me. It wouldn’t matter whether or not it’s something detrimental. I believe the possibility of knowing ahead of time would only enhance the quality of my life.

Works Cited


INSTRUCTOR’S MEMO

This paper is Maddy’s response to a “contextual analysis” assignment—a longer paper requiring students to unpack a culturally relevant topic from different perspectives. Students contextualized the topic of their choice through the lenses provided by various stakeholders. Maddy wanted to tackle a controversial issue in order to understand more fully why it sparks such fiery debate. While she eventually changed her topic from reproductive health to genetic testing, she maintained her attention on a controversial topic that she wanted to understand better.

I like the way that Maddy uses this paper to weave together an opening background on genetic testing in general with a more substantial consideration of multiple different perspectives on this issue. She writes about genetic testing’s influence on patients and patients’ families, the manner in which it’s approached by the consumer genetic testing market, some doctors’ opinion on this issue, and what ethicists have said about it as well. There is a lot of ground to cover across all these perspectives, and Maddy’s careful organization makes it all clear. One of my favorite parts is when she dives into the ethical considerations of genetic testing and uses the David Craig piece to divide these arguments into different categories that she then connects with specific examples. In so doing, she provides an excellent example of merging outside sources with original content in order to make sense of a very complex issue.

— Matthew Fledderjohann
This paper is a response to a contextual analysis assignment. We were asked to pick a culturally relevant theme and evaluate the topic through at least three different perspectives. Originally, I planned to write about Planned Parenthood and reproductive health. I wanted to work with a topic that was controversial and would challenge me to learn about multiple sides of the debate. After completing some preliminary research, my interests evolved from reproductive rights to learning more about genetic testing.

I had very little knowledge on the subject prior to this project, but I liked that it was a relatively new field of medicine. Before looking into scholarly sources, I spent time reading relevant opinion editorial articles published on the New York Times website. I was able to learn about what genetic testing specifically entails from the perspective of patients and patients’ families, doctors, ethicists, and the consumer genetic testing market. My next step was finding scholarly articles to support the opinions through the specified UW- Madison databases. Although genetic testing is a relatively new science there was a lot of helpful information from a variety of perspectives. After completing my research and crafting a thesis statement that would allow me to incorporate multiple perspectives, I created an outline for the paper and started writing and then rewriting based on the feedback I received from my peers and instructor to create my final piece. I’ve had time to revisit my work on this project and have not identified any significant changes, although I will continue to monitor new research on this very interesting topic.

— Madeline Longo

Student Writing Award: Critical/Analytical Essay
The interaction of students’ learning styles and the model of instruction within institutions of higher education is a subject of great debate. This debate could not be more relevant to addressing student interest in science. Keeping students interested in the disciplines of science is important for developing new technologies and solutions for a wide variety of problems. Introductory science courses are especially important, as they are the gateway for students into the different fields of science. To explain why so many students shy away from the sciences, Richard Feller outlines common institutional failures to motivate and engage students, citing existing teaching methods and their inability to address different student learning styles (286). This inability for these students to connect with the material can discourage the students from remaining interested. Therefore, institutions need to better understand how the nature of classroom experiences influence students’ engagement in scientific learning, if they want to more fully engage students who become disinterested in science.

When looking at methods of teaching, it is important to note that different students learn in different ways. Students have their own conceptions of learning that influence how they approach learning in different situations. Richardson elaborates on these conceptions of learning. He argues that basic conceptions of learning, such as learning as the increase of knowledge or as memorizing facts, result in a surface approach to studying, while more sophisticated conceptions of learning, such as learning as the abstraction of meaning, result in a deep approach (290). These conceptions of learning manifest themselves in several ways in the classroom, affecting the quality of students’ learning experience. A student with a surface approach is more likely to learn in a superficial way that lacks the depth necessary to relate what they learned to the world around them. Students with a deep approach attempt to understand the meaning of the information they are learning and how it relates to things they have learned before (Richardson 301). Having this kind of understanding will generate more interest in the subject for the student, and encourages them to explore the subject more.

If a deep-approach encourages a better understanding and subsequently gen-
erates interest, then it is important to see what role the teacher plays in engaging students and the problems they may encounter when trying to design the curriculum for these introductory courses. The breadth of the different scientific fields has led to a large number of standards that dictate what the course must cover in order to prepare students for subsequent science courses (Kohn 7). This creates a problem for the professor who must address both the students' different conceptions of learning and the huge breadth of material. Many introductory science courses are still taught with traditional lectures, where the teacher talks and the students frantically take notes. This style of teaching relies on the student being able to make the same connections that the professor makes, and sometimes leaves them to connect the different facts and ideas for themselves (Kohn 9). Students are then graded according to how well they are able to reproduce these connections. Students with different approaches are not going to be able to connect these facts in the same way. This shows the problem with this style of teaching, as it does not account for students' different conceptions of learning (Kohn 6). It is possible that because the traditional lecture-based curriculum does not match well with different students' styles of learning, and it may become a disincentive for students to remain interested.

The competition for grades in college often adds to the students' troubles. Kohn points to several studies that suggest when students know they are going to be evaluated on a task they tend to choose the simplest version of the task. These studies also have shown that when the students, given the same task, are told it is an "opportunity to learn," (i.e. the emphasis is not on performance) they were more willing to try more difficult tasks (3). With the emphasis on performance in college, students having difficulty understanding the course material may be more likely to gravitate towards whatever they can most readily understand. Because of this, they may never really be able to acquire a deeper understanding of more difficult concepts, and become disengaged and discouraged by the course. If lecture-based curricula and emphasis on performance are factors that are hindering students from gaining a deeper understanding of the material, then there needs to be reconciliation between the curriculum and the evaluation of the student. Newer problem-based learning curricula have emerged as a viable solution to this problem. These curricula are often structured around fewer lectures, which are more comprehensive in nature, and small discussion groups, in which students discuss the course material in depth and work together to solve different problems. These methods have been shown to be successful in an academic setting. This has been confirmed in research performed by Stacy Klein and Robert Sherwood, who tested their own version of a problem-based learning curriculum. Through this method, called the Legacy Cycle, they taught students different science fields, such as physics, through specific problems in Biomedical engineering. The curriculum revolves around presenting students a challenge, in the form of a question that involves
the topic of biomedical engineering. It allows students to try out different ideas, research how they may attempt to solve the problem, and then test themselves on how well they are able to eventually answer the challenge question (385). Klein and Sherwood concluded from the results of the experiment that this style of curriculum resulted in greater growth in understanding of the basic concepts being taught by the course (392). This greater growth shows that the curriculum helps students think of the material in a way that reflects a more deep approach to studying that is essential to higher education.

Another benefit of making the curriculum more directed and broken into smaller parts is that it allows the student to work towards more manageable goals, reducing the emphasis on performance (Koning et. al, 321). By removing the ambiguity of the learning tasks it gives the student a better understanding of what is expected of them. It also allows the teacher to observe how students are trying to solve problems and gives them a chance to intervene when they see a student who is struggling to understand (321). This method takes pressure off both the teacher and students: by giving more direction in the students' studies, and by giving teachers a better way to understand where their students are having trouble, and provide more meaningful feedback. Most importantly for students, however, this method can make learning a less confusing and arduous a task, which gives them room to explore their interest in the subject.

Higher education, like any other form of education, is a process. It is important for students taking a course to understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how it relates to the world around them. Students who drop out of a science degree program often aren’t able to identify with these aspects of the lecture-based curriculum, employed in many of higher-education institutions today. It does not reflect a failure of the student as much as a need in higher education to better express to the student the meaning of what is being learned. The goal moving forward for these courses will be to better convey the meaning of the different aspects and disciplines of the sciences. By doing this, perhaps more students will come to appreciate the sciences and pursue them as a life interest in order to enhance the quality of society.

Works Cited


INTERVIEW WITH THE WRITER

Q: What sparked your interest in this topic?

A: What sparked my interest was something that always struck me as odd. I’m one of only two people from my high school to go to this school. The other was here before me. That’s not so weird; I went to a high school in Minnesota, but then my high school—right around 50% graduated and even less went to college. This paper is about students who struggle in introductory science courses, and I just remember how much people hated taking science courses in high school. I found an article about the relationship between student learning styles and how well they take to certain sciences. And how the way introductory science courses are taught catered to specific learning styles. I translated the high school experience to my college experience. It’s close to me because I’ve taken about eight or nine introductory science courses in my time at Madison because I’ve spent some time deciding what I wanted to do, and I’ve had a range of frustrations with those classes. . . . I was able to use some of what I’ve learned in other classes too. I’m a psych major, so studies of cognition and learning styles — those were familiar to me.

Q: What was most helpful to you as you wrote this paper?

A: Getting into the research. Coming into college, I could barely write the 5-page paper. But after writing this, I felt like, ‘I can do this.’ I did the research before I started writing and had all the ideas mapped out in my head. I know that’s what
you’re supposed to do, but I didn’t always do that. I put a lot of time into it. It worked out that it was something I could get into that was personal, close, and at the same time, it was an assignment for a class . . . And during class discussion, when we were able to discuss different ideas about an issue and think about arguments different writers make . . . All that debate was helpful. I learned that you have to put one idea next to the other and work them out. Decide where you are going as a writer so that you can say how one argument is better than the other. Sometimes, you get writer’s block and you sit there. I think I had this thing up to 10 pages. Half of it was just junk. Extra parts of ideas, things not completely fleshed out. The nice thing is you get rid of the filter and you dump it all out, and it’s there. At least you have 10 pages to work with instead of sitting there with only a page, trying to write the perfect paper from the start.

Q: Was that process of allowing yourself to write a bad first draft new for you?

A: Yeah, I think it was. The last big paper I had to write in high school, I didn’t really do very good research beforehand, and when I sat down to write it, I tried to write the perfect paper from the start. . . . I think that those two things are really important: knowing exactly what you’re going to talk about before you talk about it, and getting it all out there. Don’t stop yourself; it’s part of the process. It’s not that hard. You really could sit and brain dump for four hours and it’s there. You got something to work with.

Q: Do you have any advice for other English 100 students?

A: Get into the research. The more familiar you are with it, the easier it’s going to be to think about it. I think that’s one thing that bums people out about writing papers. It seems challenging to think about some complex issues. But it shouldn’t be like that. Don’t put yourself into a situation where you are loathing every moment you are working on it. Because anything—once you get past the annoying part of learning terms, the basics of learning something new—anything can be interesting. That’s the biggest thing. Zone in on something that you know you are going to like, something you know you can relate to. Don’t just pick a topic because it looks easy. Everybody makes that choice on a daily basis. It’s natural to gravitate toward something easier, but if you’re not interested, it will be a chore to do. If you’re not into it though, you won’t be getting anything out of it.

*Student Writing Award Honorable Mention: Critical Essay*
We live in a society where we put value on justice, but what exactly does it mean to be just? Many people consider that our system is just because it assumes our innocence, provides counsel to those who cannot afford a lawyer, and prohibits cruel and unusual punishments. But can we say it is just to put innocent people in jail? Or is it just to discriminate against certain groups of people? Of course not—but these things happen in our current legal system. As concerned members of society, we need to evaluate the 6th Amendment’s right to an impartial jury in order to address these flaws in the system (Constitution). Our jury system needs to be eliminated because it inhibits our criminal justice system from achieving greater justice due to jurors’ lack of expertise; inherent discrimination that undermines the democratic value of a jury; lack of awareness or control over psychological factors; and some ineffective trial procedures.

Take a moment to consider the case of John White. White served more than 22 years in a cell, living a harsh, restricted lifestyle for a crime that he did not commit. He wasn’t released until an organization, The Innocence Project, investigated his case and proved his innocence. The crime he was accused of occurred when a man broke into an elderly woman’s home and beat, raped, and robbed her before fleeing the scene. At the scene, police collected skin and hair samples from the couch, but they were never tested for DNA for the trial. Some time later, the victim was presented with a lineup where she was “almost positive” that the offender was White. Because memory is constructive and not nearly as reliable as we’d like to believe, it is not the victim’s fault that she chose the wrong person in the lineup (Lichstein). Nevertheless, a jury found White guilty based on this unreliable but influential evidence. In the end, White was sentenced to life in prison for a crime that he had nothing to do with. It sounds like a distant, twisted nightmare, but to John White and many others this is their reality. In total, there have been more than 300 innocent people released from prison in the US simply due to properly examining DNA evidence (The Innocence Project).

Although there are multiple causes for wrongful convictions, many can be traced back to the inexperience of the jury. Currently it is estimated that “between 2.3% and 5% of all prisoners in the U.S. are innocent.” That may appear to be a small number but that translates to between 46,000 and 100,000 innocent people in prison (Innocence Project). To a jury, the most influential piece of evidence is eyewitness identification (Lichstein). This is when the victim or another witness attempts to identify the offender in a lineup. Eyewitness identification also happens to be the “single greatest cause of wrongful convictions
nationwide” (The Innocence Project). This is mainly because memory is “not like a tape recorder,” but it is more malleable (Lichstein). When victims are presented with a lineup, they are pressured to pick an offender. Studies have shown that someone is more likely to choose the person that looks most like the offender rather than choosing no one at all (Lichstein). Byron Lichstein, from the Wisconsin Innocence Project, explains how the witness who identifies the “offender” is asked in front of the jury how confident they feel that the person who they identified is the real offender. More likely than not, their answer is 100% confident. The Innocence Project explains that this may be due to how actors in the system often encourage the witness on their identification by saying things like “good job, we thought that was the guy” or even by clapping (Lichstein). In short, a witness’s confidence can turn from partially confident when they first identify an offender to completely sure by the time they face the jury at the time of the trial.

False confessions are another cause of wrongful convictions (The Innocence Project). Many may question why anyone would ever plead guilty to a crime that they did not commit, but it happens more often than we think mainly due to interrogations. These interrogations “prey on psychological vulnerabilities” with hours of continual questioning and accusations until the suspect either truly begins to believe that they committed the crime or until they confess in order to be released from the stressful interrogation (Leo). Inexperienced jurors may fail to question the validity of eyewitness identifications or consider the possibility of false confessions, which can lead to punishing the innocent. Overall, punishing innocent people is too frequent a phenomenon for a society that puts an emphasis on justice.

In addition, psychological factors can have a negative effect on the reliability of a jury. It is known that people tend to favor the group to which they belong and often discriminate based on group membership. These groups include race, age, gender, religion and many more. A juror’s personal biases may affect the outcome of the trial. Psychology research at Harvard University emphasizes that jurors may not even be aware of their prejudices (Cromie). Social psychology also plays a role in influencing juries. The Asch Experiment concluded that people easily conform to the group, either because the group truly convinces them that their opinions are wrong, or because the individual fears the criticism that comes when they deviate from the group (McLeod). The experiment consisted of a group where everyone except for one person was aware of the experiment. The group was then presented with a simple visual matching task, and the people involved in the experiment were, at times, directed to pick answers that were clearly wrong. The researchers discovered that the actual participant would go against his or her own judgment and agree with the people who had already given clearly incorrect answers. This behavior is important to note because in a
jury it is very unlikely for one person to challenge the opinions of others, even when that one person may be right. Both inherent prejudice and this tendency to conform may cloud a juror’s ability to make an impartial decision.

Many would agree with the American Bar Association when they say that “trial by jury is a vital part of our democracy,” but the discrimination in our current jury system seems to undermine this democratic value. This discrimination extends to both the juror selection process and the decisions jurors make once they are on a jury. An article in the Boston College Journal of Law and Justice explains a 2012 study done by the Equal Justice Initiative. The researchers found that prosecutors in Houston County, Alabama, removed “eighty percent of qualified African Americans” from jury selection (Weddell 458). In theory, I agree that the jury system epitomizes democratic values, but many fail to acknowledge that it overlooks the idea that jury selection is inherently biased. Although the “Supreme Court mandated [...] that jurors represent a ‘fair cross section of the community,’ in reality it only draws from a pool of registered voters” (Weddell 459). By doing this, it potentially leaves out many people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or others who have not registered to vote. Ben Keller, a writer for The New York Times, focuses on the idea that the jury system is beneficial because it gives citizens an opportunity to be educated on the criminal justice system. However, he fails to understand that the cost of juries may be too great just so someone can “feel like a more dutiful member of society” (Keller).

There are many safeguards in place for keeping a jury as impartial as possible, but these often fail. One attempt to safeguard justice is to have twelve people make the decision as opposed to one judge. I have to disagree with Weddell that many people are more “capable of achieving a wisdom together that no one person is capable of achieving alone” (Weddell 486). She is resting that statement on the questionable assumption that quantity automatically equals quality. Even the process of the trial tends to limit the potential of the jury. As the fact finders of the court, one would think that juries could be allowed to take notes or ask questions to try to understand the case to the best of their ability, but these things are not allowed. Also, the judge is required to “instruct” the jury right before they leave to make their decision. This instruction is essentially extra information about the case or legal procedures. This practice should be helpful, but the instructions commonly consist of full-on legal jargon that ends up confusing the jury and thus the outcome of the trial. One criminal justice professor used the analogy that if you needed surgery, you wouldn’t just hand over instructions on how to perform the surgery to someone who is not a trained doctor.

For our legal system to function effectively without juries, we would need to instill more power into the judge’s role, because in our system, judges, and not juries, symbolize impartiality. Many people assume that a “jury can soften the
rough edges of the law,” but studies have shown that “federal judges are more likely to acquit than juries” (Keller, Krause). Keller, in his The New York Times article, admits that there are even cases where a jury can be “razzle-dazzled by a skillful attorney or lost in the complications of evidence.” The law is complicated; that is why people dedicate years of their life to study it. Putting not just the law, but also someone’s life, in a jury’s hands is not a logical solution. I also agree with Keller that “judges are human too,” and they are not immune to these influences. Since a judge can make mistakes as well, I am proposing that there be a panel of judges to make an even greater step towards justice. I am not saying that judges are perfect, but we cannot overlook the fact that they have more experience than the typical juror. For example, they may be more familiar with organizations like The Innocence Project, and thus more likely to be aware of the potential for witnesses to identify an innocent person and or for innocent people to make false confessions. In the end, the judge should take over the role of the jury in our criminal justice system in order to create true justice.

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In our section of English 100, the Sequence 3 project was an extension of the student's research in Sequence 2. Students wrote informative essays about an issue in Sequence 2 and then narrowed in on their own argument related to that issue in Sequence 3. The benefit of this structure is that each student becomes an expert on his or her chosen topic; the challenge is that students often have several sources from Sequence 2 that do not end up fitting into the Sequence 3 project. This was certainly the case for Giovanna, who researched the relationship between students and Madison police in her Sequence 2 project, and then found a related but different issue that she felt strongly about arguing in her Sequence 3 project. The evidence that Giovanna uses in this essay impresses me, but I am almost as impressed by how much research I know she left out. I think that one of the biggest challenges for writers can be cutting those sentences, paragraphs, or pieces of evidence that we have spent time and effort finding and writing when they turn out to be tangential or unnecessary for our final project. Giovanna accomplished this by including only those pieces of evidence that directly supported her argument about abolishing the jury system, resisting the urge to show her readers all the additional information she had about the justice system more broadly. This resulted in a focused and persuasive essay.

Another challenge for Giovanna in this project was making her argument accessible to her intended audience. Because she had spent a lot of time researching the topic and was taking a criminal justice class, she was comfortable with terminology and background knowledge that her classmates were not. The first draft of the essay was much more technical and might have been accessible to her criminal justice classmates but was difficult for an audience without that background to follow. When her English 100 peers brought this up, she had to think deeply about which audience she was trying to reach. Ultimately, she decided that she wanted to introduce this issue to an audience that was not already familiar with criminal justice scholarship, and so she changed the style and explained her evidence to make it more accessible. For me as an instructor, it was interesting to read the same argument written for two different audiences and to see how Giovanna changed her writing choices depending on how much prior knowledge her audience shared with her.

There are many things I admire about this essay, but what impresses me most is how challenging it is to me as a reader. Giovanna doesn't make a safe or familiar argument that many people would already agree with. Instead, she argues against something that most of her readers (including me) take for granted and assume is good—the jury system. She challenges us to think differently about it, and presents strong evidence for why we should do so. This essay tries to per-
suade an audience, but it also represents Giovanna’s process of trying to figure one whether common sense is right or not. I enjoy reading this essay because it makes me think differently about familiar ideas.

—Jennifer Maclure

**WRITER’S MEMO**

This writing project was assigned around the time that my criminal justice class had three guest speakers. One of the speakers was in prison for more than ten years until The Innocence Project proved his innocence. In class, we had been learning about wrongful convictions and the role of the jury for quite some time, but it was an entirely different experience to hear the story come to life from someone sitting in front of you. After listening to the speaker, the topic for my paper became very clear to me. I was enrolled at the same time in an introductory psychology class where I learned about memory and perception, which also influenced my thinking for this paper. It was from these two classes that I drew the majority of my ideas. The writing process, however, was not as easy as deciding on a topic.

It is one thing to be passionate about what you’re presenting as a writer, but it is another thing to effectively argue for what you believe. One main struggle I had was keeping my audience in mind. The peer-review process was especially helpful in this area. My instructor and peers pointed out that I used a lot of the legal jargon that was fresh in my mind from my criminal justice class, without realizing the majority of my audience wouldn’t have had that legal background. For my final draft of this paper, I simplified my arguments and evidence for an audience that may not be familiar with the criminal justice system. Because my peers helped me to see that listing fact after fact can get pretty dry, I also included the specific case of John White to add more of an emotional appeal. During the revision process, to stay focused on my major points, I even narrowed down how much evidence I put into my paper. One main challenge that I came across was trying to figure out what exactly to simplify or remove completely to make the clearest argument without bringing in too many different ideas. Receiving feedback from my classmates allowed me to figure out which ideas were the most persuasive: for example, the John White case example, the surgery analogy from my professor, and some psychology principles. In the end, these revisions helped to express the overall two-fold purpose of my paper. First of all, I am trying to establish that there is something wrong with our current system. Second of all, and most importantly, I want to persuade my audience that eliminating the jury would lead to greater justice in our system.
— Giovanna Stern

Student Writing Award: Critical/Analytical Essay
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