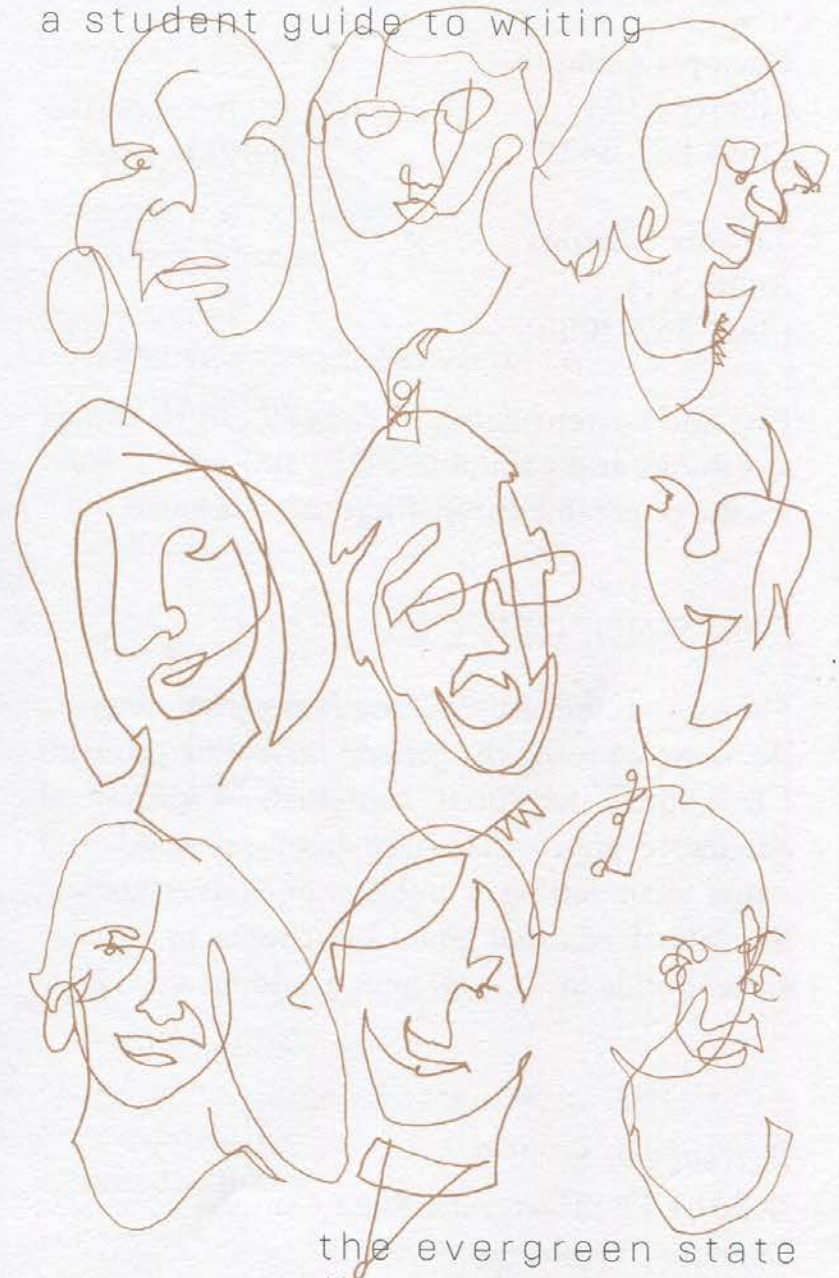


INKWELL 9:  
a student guide to writing



the evergreen state  
college writing center



## WRITING CENTER LOCATIONS

Olympia Campus  
Library 2304  
(360) 867-6420

Tacoma Campus  
Room 124  
(360) 867-3000

Past and current issues of *Inkwell* can be found  
as eBooks and printable PDFs at  
[www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter/inkwell](http://www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter/inkwell).

## ON GENDERED LANGUAGE

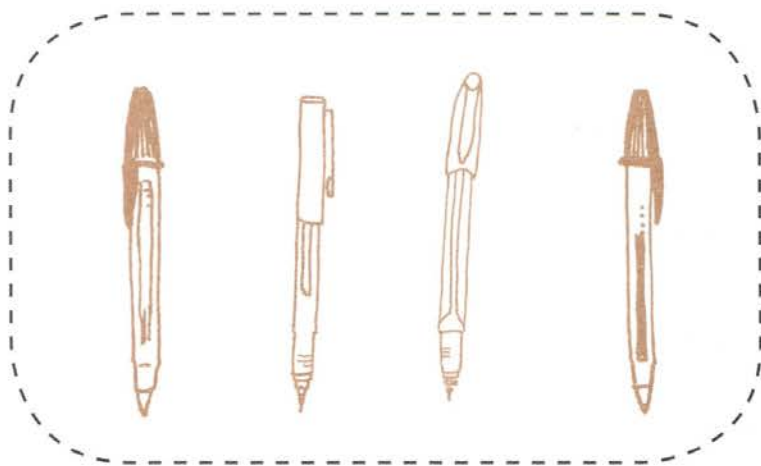
Throughout the history of modern written English, the norm of using the generic masculine pronoun (“he”/“him”) has been contested. A variety of alternative approaches have been proposed, but rather than setting a publication-wide standard, the *Inkwell* editorial board has chosen to let each writer decide for \_\_\_\_self how to address this issue.

INKWELL 9

© 2014 The Evergreen State College  
Olympia, Washington 98505  
[www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter)

## CONTENTS

From the Editors.....	iv
Writing From the Unknown.....	1
<b>Katelyn Peters</b>	
Silencing the Monsters.....	5
<b>JenAnn Eilertsen</b>	
Who Knows Best?: Developing Writing in Conversation.....	11
<b>Caryn Dudley</b>	
Make It Your Own: Turning an Assignment You Hate Into a Piece of Writing You Love.....	15
<b>Beth Cook</b>	
Construction of a Distance.....	23
<b>Matt Turner</b>	
You Can't Pretend You Don't Care: Building a Writing Practice.....	31
<b>Nicole H. Christian</b>	
The Act of Writing Grief.....	43
<b>Roxana Bell</b>	
Writing the Future: History as a Transformative Practice.....	49
<b>Rachel Cermak</b>	
Inside Out: Speaking for Yourself, Writing for Your Community.....	61
<b>Brendan Inkley</b>	



## FROM THE EDITORS

Writing can be both a labor and a joy. It is not a fixed ability, but a skill that can be learned and grown. Because writing is highly emphasized at Evergreen, it is important that tools exist to bridge the gap between this academic expectation and the realities of student writing. This is one of the reasons *Inkwell* exists: to help each student develop an understanding of their writing process in order to create their best, most fulfilling work.

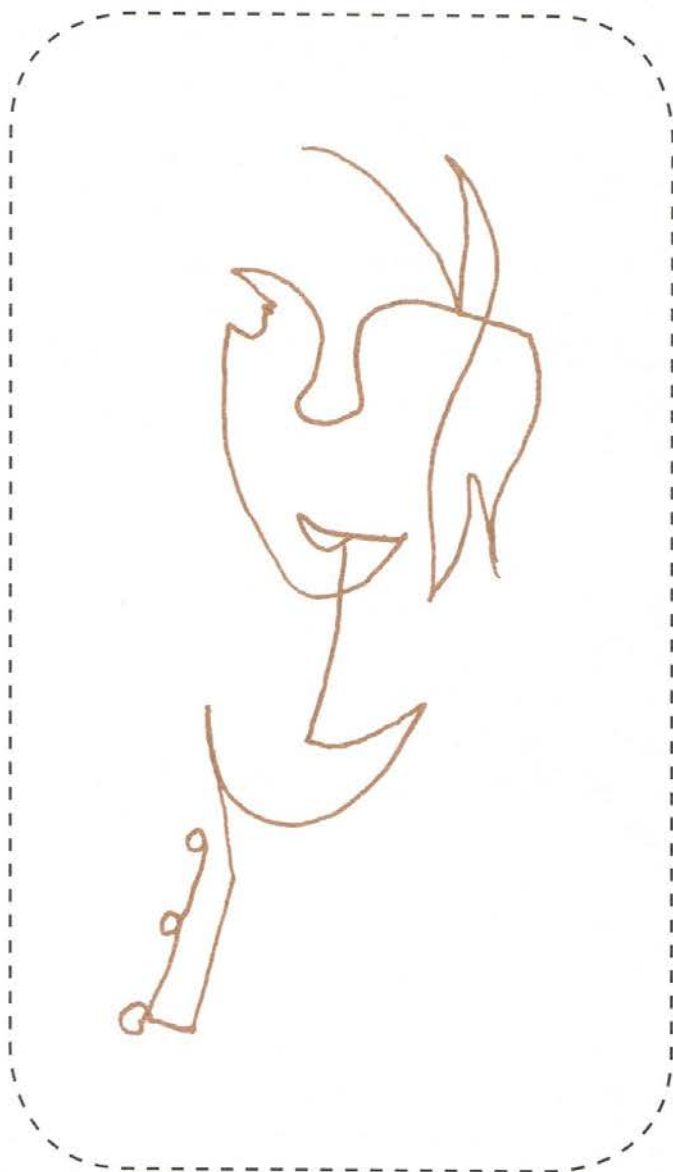
Written and edited by peer tutors at The Evergreen State College Writing Center, *Inkwell* is an ongoing conversation informed by who we are as writers and the work we do with students. As a publication, we hope to convey that the Writing Center is a place

from the editors

for all writers: those of us who struggle with our writing, those of us who love writing, and all of us who seek support as student writers. It's a place where we can engage in our written work, where we can go beyond the expectations of good grammar in order to explore the depths of our expression.

The Writing Center attracts some of the most creative, intelligent, and kind people at Evergreen. We are lucky to have worked so closely with these writers as they crafted the articles in this edition of *Inkwell*. ♦

nicole christian,  
thane fay,  
mary kallem,  
and matt turner



## WRITING FROM THE UNKNOWN

katelyn peters

I love to think about writing. I love to talk about writing. I linger here, vacillating in the abyss between intention and attempt, because there is no risk. Thoughts are private, speech can be forgotten, but I shy away from the materiality of written language. My ideas, once they become tangible in word form, are more permanent than I am. This is part of my fear: I am writing something lasting, a representation of myself, and its credibility lies in the eyes of an unknown audience. When I write, I wonder about my own thoughts, but I also wonder what others think of my thoughts.

The value of my writing is that I am a human expressing the unique experience of what it is like to be inside my body. I am making myself—something intimate, vulnerable, and sacred—known. The stakes are high for all of my writing. I want my writing to represent who I am, because the way I think *is* who I am. The writing *is* me.

If I save up and polish words before I write them, I evade the vulnerability of sending an idea out into the world in its infant stage, and the subsequent



katelyn peters

feeling that it is myself—not fully formed, inadequate, imperfect—that I am extending. I feel like my ideas have to be perfect, to accurately express what I want to say, before I write them down.

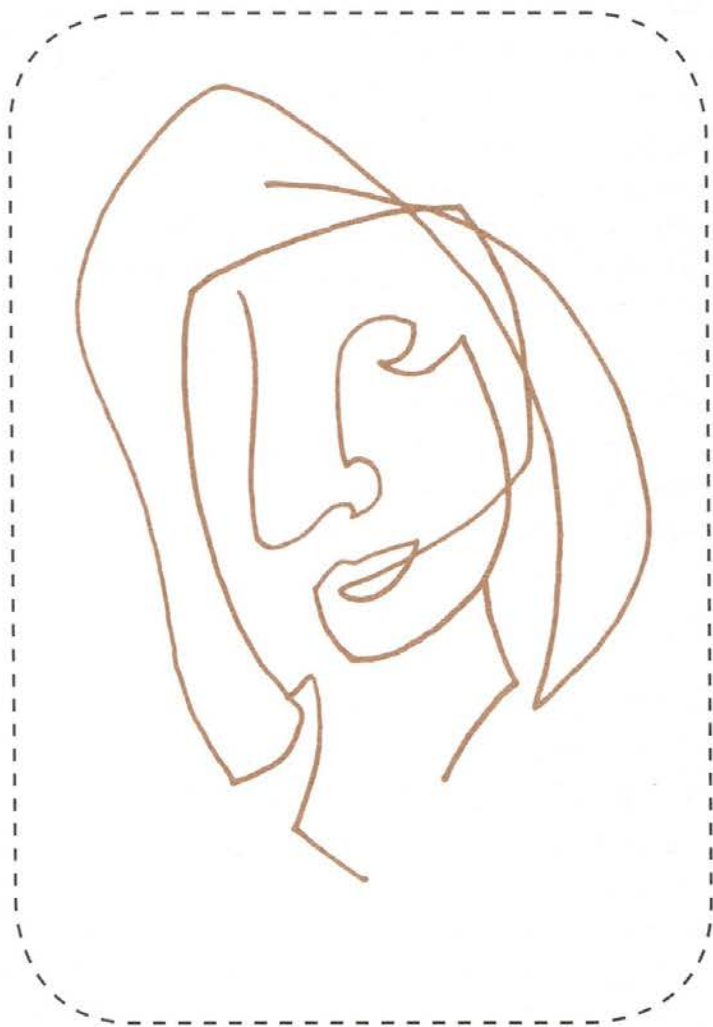
My reaction to this is to avoid writing.

I overcome this faltering by writing into insight. Writing into insight is admitting that I can never know exactly what I am going to say before I begin writing. When I practice writing into insight, I begin before I am ready, before I know whether what I want to say is novel or important. This process inverts thesis-based essay writing. When a writer begins with a thesis statement in mind, they establish that their thinking is done before the writing starts.

Writing into insight is a practice in trust; I learn to trust the writing process when I start with a question and write toward its resolution. This exercise demonstrates a reverence for writing as an active procedure. I can write my way into things I could not think myself into. Composition is the act of interrogating thinking: I begin to write and then I begin to know. My writing reveals that I am capable of more than I believed I was.

writing from the unknown

What are you failing to learn, and what are you neglecting to share about your form of divination, when you suspend writing? Write about what you want to learn. Write about who you are becoming and become that person. You are a body of language like you are a body of knowledge. It is necessary that even the smallest act of adding a voice and sharing a body is honored. So I type slowly when I write, hoping to unearth something in the pauses between words that I have never thought before. ♦



## SILENCING THE MONSTERS

jenann eilertsen

As a kid I used to write in a blue spiral-bound notebook. Uncensored by people's expectations, I didn't worry about themes, grammar, or spelling. I just wrote stories. Sometimes I wrote about events that happened around me, but mostly I wrote about much more important things: elves, dragons, and fairies. I loved clashing the real world with worlds of my own design, creating colors and wonders. But each time I shared a story, someone would ask me, "Why are your stories so dark?" I began to think something was wrong with me. The dragons I once wrote about turned against me. They transformed into monsters that bashed around in my head, leaving droppings of doubt and fear. The colors I had so freely splashed onto paper became muted until they were nothing but large black blots of ink.

Looking back as an adult, I realize I shouldn't have been ashamed of my stories. I should have kept writing. By allowing myself to be influenced by what others thought, I let my voice be silenced. I let fear and shame consume my words, and I still struggle with these emotions.



My fear stems from the reactions I received as a child, and also from dropping out of high school my freshman year. I eventually went back to graduate, but I had missed two vital years of academic English. I felt that I hadn't learned the grammar and syntax that would help me write like a real author. It wasn't that I couldn't write, but I felt like a fraud.

Not until I started community college did I begin to write again. In my first English class I would sit and nod my head in agreement, attempting to appear intelligent, when my teacher discussed protagonists and antonyms. I sat in the middle row trying to mesh into the class, my head down, praying he wouldn't call on me. Hell, the truth was, I was faking it. Whenever an assignment was due I would go to the writing lab to make sure every grammatical error was corrected before turning it in. I thought if I could keep up the facade I would be safe and no one would discover the monsters banging around inside my head.

I survived that first class, but the next one was a disaster. The professor gave me good grades, but every paper came back splattered with red pen. He would write comments like, "Comma splice in the first sentence!" or just "Yikes! Commas!" I swore off the comma. My writing became choppy.

My sentences shortened. I would never write a sentence that required "and," "but," or "therefore."

Eventually I found the courage to talk with my professor about my fears. He had no idea that I was feeling this way and encouraged me to continue writing. He told me I had good ideas and that my writing was strong, but it was his job to slice and dice our papers. I know he meant to help my writing, but instead he destroyed it.

When I came to Evergreen my faculty encouraged me by pointing out the strengths in my arguments, and the writing-intensive program meant that I couldn't run away from my fears. Instead I had to face them. As I began to slowly gain back my confidence, I became a writing tutor in order to help others explore their voices.

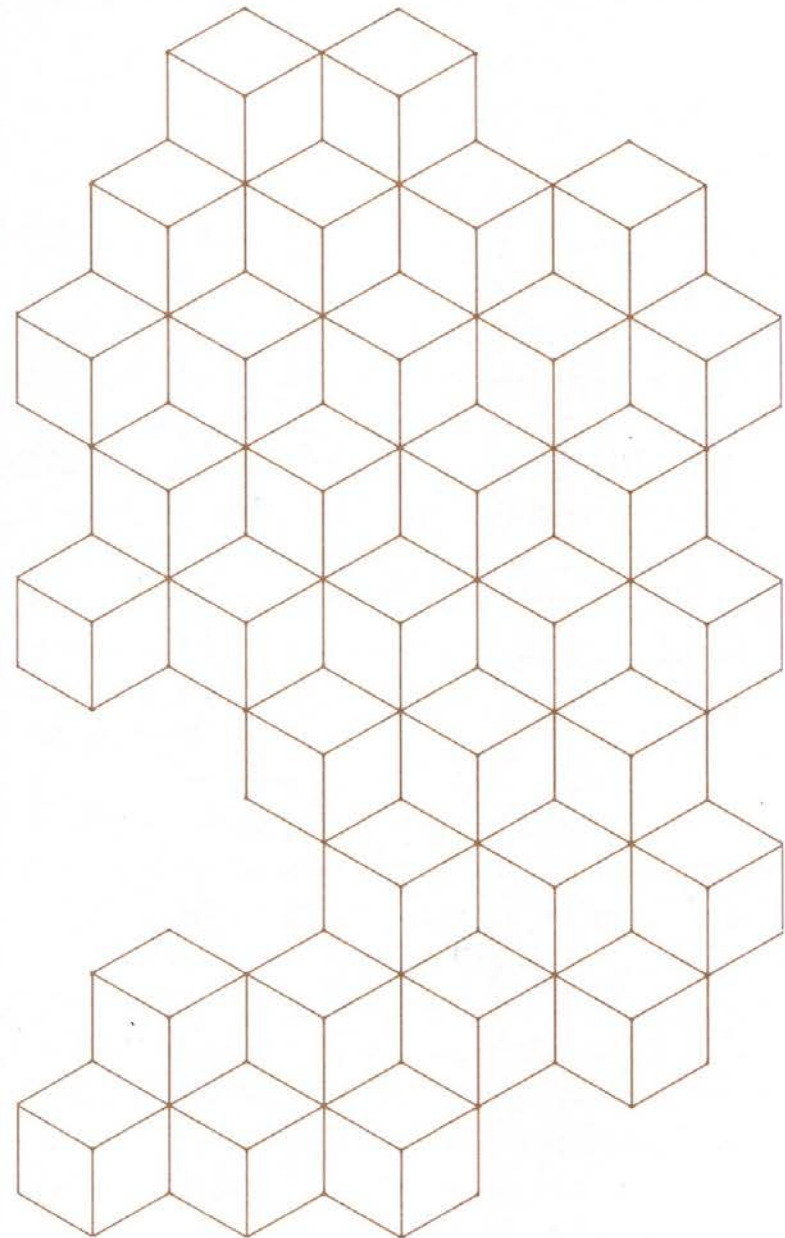
Although it is important for people to write well for educational purposes, what is most important is that people write for their own personal achievements. Writing can free those stigmatized by society. Every person on this planet, no matter their level of education, has the ability to produce worlds of their own design and generate independent thought. As a tutor, I hope not only to encourage people to develop and express their ideas, but to instill within them a passion, a desire, and a need for writing.

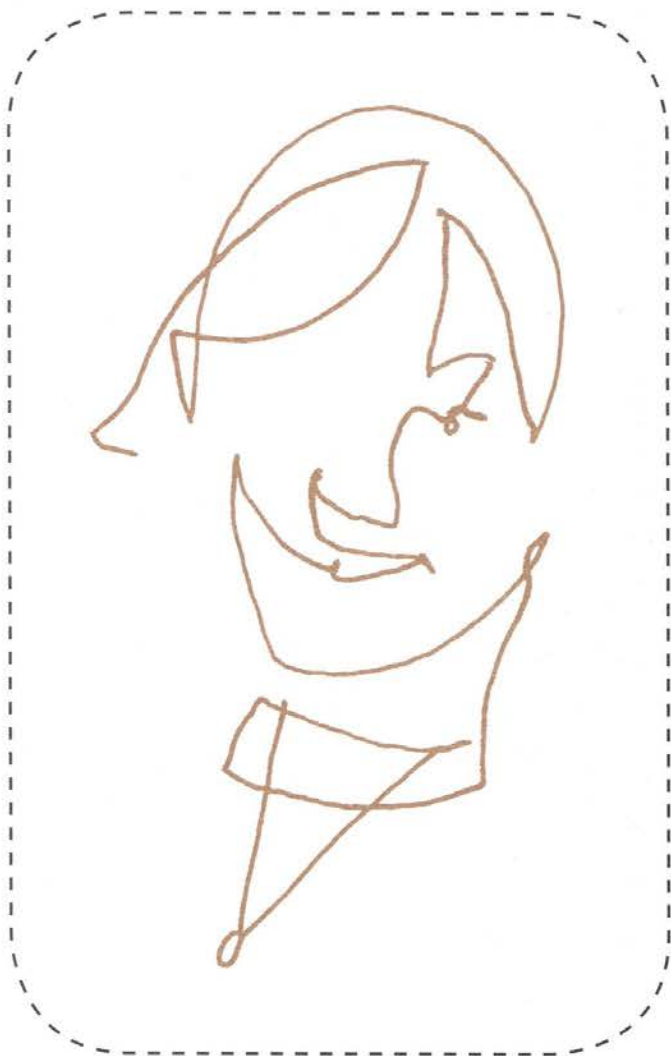


jenann eilertsen

In this way we can work together to create effective change: within ourselves, our writing, and our communities.

Together, we can tame the monsters. ♦





## WHO KNOWS BEST?: developing writing in conversation

caryn dudley

When I meet with a tutor in the Writing Center, I have a choice to make: I can either hand my paper over to the tutor and sit back to wait for their comments, or we can look through my paper together. If I surrender my paper to the tutor, I ask them to be the expert of my writing and submit to them my time, skill, responsibility, and voice. If we look at my writing together, I retain these things and remain the author of my work. My decision impacts the value I get from the session and represents who I think knows best what my writing needs.

If I do not engage in the session, I depend on the tutor to make my writing progress. If I uncritically accept the tutor's evaluation of my writing, I miss the opportunity to dig deeper into my ideas or better understand how I choose to express them. I falsely elevate the tutor's knowledge and burden them with the responsibility of my paper's success. I sometimes forget this is at stake even though I am a tutor.



The impulse to hand my paper over to the tutor may come from the dominant narrative in our education system that says to defer to the judgment and dictation of whomever “knows best.” Most students, including peer tutors, are accustomed to altering their writing to please the evaluator of the product. It is not uncommon—even at Evergreen—for writing to come back “red-penned,” ripped apart without any regard to what feedback the writer might have wanted. Student writers may fall into the assumption that tutors, like teachers, “know best,” and therefore defer to their input. But there is no universal consensus on what is “best.” While it is true that tutors are trained to give feedback and have general knowledge about writing, we can never be an expert on another’s process the way they can.

At the Writing Center, we aim to upset the dominant narrative and empower writers to become the experts on their own writing processes. A tutoring session is a conversation that requires both writer and tutor to ask questions and explore ideas rooted in the writer’s priorities for their writing. From this dialogue, writers gain a greater awareness of how they write and find new strategies to carry into future pieces of writing. They use feedback as a catalyst for more insight and new direction. It is not enough for a writer to walk away with a

well-organized, grammatically-correct paper if they never wonder about their choices or question the feedback they receive.

We hope to help writers become more self-directed, yet our intent is not to render feedback unnecessary. To grow as writers, we all need other people involved in our writing processes. While there is plenty we can figure out on our own, some insight can only be found in conversation with another person, when both are actively participating in the exchange of ideas. This is what tutors offer in the Writing Center: conversation that brings about insight neither writer nor tutor could have generated on their own. ♦



MAKE IT YOUR OWN:  
turning an assignment you hate  
into a piece of writing you love

beth cook

I once worked with a writer who was struggling with his final paper, an overview of project management. His research was leading him down a dead end; he was frustrated and overloaded with information. I pulled out a blank sheet of paper and said, “Okay—let’s start over. What do you want to say about the subject? At the end of the day, what do you want from this piece?” As he talked about his own ideas, he realized it would be easier to write about his personal experience with project management than an overview of the theory or history. By the end of our session, it was clear there was a paper inside him after all, it just wasn’t the one he’d been anticipating.

As students, we’ve all had assignments like this, the kind that make you grind your teeth, roll your eyes, and wonder why you took the class. You get through it because you have to: do the assignment or risk losing credit. Maybe you find yourself procrastinating as long as you can and then spitting



out a piece of writing that technically fulfills all of the requirements—but it's bland, beige, two-dimensional, and there is no living *you* anywhere to be found.

My high school English teacher once told us about a student who, instead of turning in a paper on the book they had read, handed in a jar containing the burned ashes of the book. "This is how I feel about this book," the student said. I consider this a success story because the writer took an assignment they hated and made it their own. I'm not suggesting you take such a drastic route, but it's okay to start out hating an assignment and let that intensity inspire you to create something powerful, unique, and unexpected.

You still have to do the assignment, but you can do it in a way that you find satisfying. The parameters of an assignment are like a professor saying, "Construct a house in this appointed location. It must contain a kitchen, at least one bedroom, and at least one bathroom." Boring, right? But it's still your house. Build secret passageways, a ball pit, a room with a trampoline floor, and a dungeon filled with vicious rats armed with tiny laser guns. Okay, you need a kitchen, so turn it into your dream kitchen with a talking espresso machine and a robot butler. You need a bedroom, but you can

include a bumpin' sound system and a disco ball above the bed. In the bathroom, add a water slide into the pool/dolphin tank.

Years ago in a community college writing class, the professor gave us an assignment to define a word and convince the reader that our definition was valid. I hope I didn't visibly roll my eyes when we received the assignment because I remember thinking it was strange and unnecessary. Imposing my definition felt arrogant, like we were supposed to say "I'm right, you're wrong."

I decided to define the word *creativity*. I thought about why the subject of creativity meant a lot to me, and why it offended me when the word got thrown around in an exclusionary way. I felt that the word had been unfairly co-opted by people who used it judgmentally. "Oh, it's so not creative," someone might say about the latest pop song. "Yes, it is," I defended in my paper. "Someone *created* it." To illustrate how the creative force can come from any circumstance and in any form, I described a time when my mother and I had to open a can of SpaghettiOs with no can opener. We ended up hacking the thing open with a kitchen knife—it was a dangerous and inefficient method, but it worked. We kept the mangled can as our own avant-garde artwork. By choosing a subject



I felt strongly about and adding some real-world examples from my own life, I was able to take an unengaging assignment and have some fun with it.

Throughout my academic career, I've unconsciously customized my assignments. Because I was usually a teacher's pet, I was rewarded, not punished, for doing this. When I graduated from my small, artistic high school and began attending a traditional four-year college, I was stunned at the change. My professors didn't want to hear opinions that challenged theirs. No longer a unique individual with something important to contribute, I was a number on a piece of paper, a score to be counted. The new rule was, "Sit down, shut up, do the assignment the way I say, and get out." It took me a long time to learn how to deal with this shift in reality, and it eventually led me to Evergreen, where I can personalize my education to my heart's content.

When you first get an assignment you dread, figure out exactly what you don't like about it. Does it feel too narrow or confining? Is it structured in a format that doesn't work well with your learning style? Does the subject matter make you feel bored, angry, or limited by a lack of knowledge?

Next, shift to what you do like. What makes you feel passionate or curious? What values do you believe in standing up for? How can you connect

the themes of the assignment with ideas that excite you? If you disagree with an author you're reading, what do you want to say instead? As you start to brainstorm, use mindmaps and freewrites to let your ideas run wild and find sources of potential energy.<sup>1</sup>

Approach your professor and talk about what you have in mind. Make sure you thoroughly understand the details of the assignment so you know where you have the freedom to expand, take some risks, and inject your personality into the piece. Be ready to explain your ideas and how they fit within the framework of the assignment. This approach may not work every time or with every professor, but I believe it's important to try. There's usually a way to work with your faculty member to find a creative solution that allows you to do the necessary work and still be true to yourself.

Many students don't feel comfortable approaching their professors, but I cannot recommend it highly enough. Your professors *want* to hear from you as soon as you start struggling, or even if you just have questions. As you go through your writing process, keep talking to your faculty, the Writing

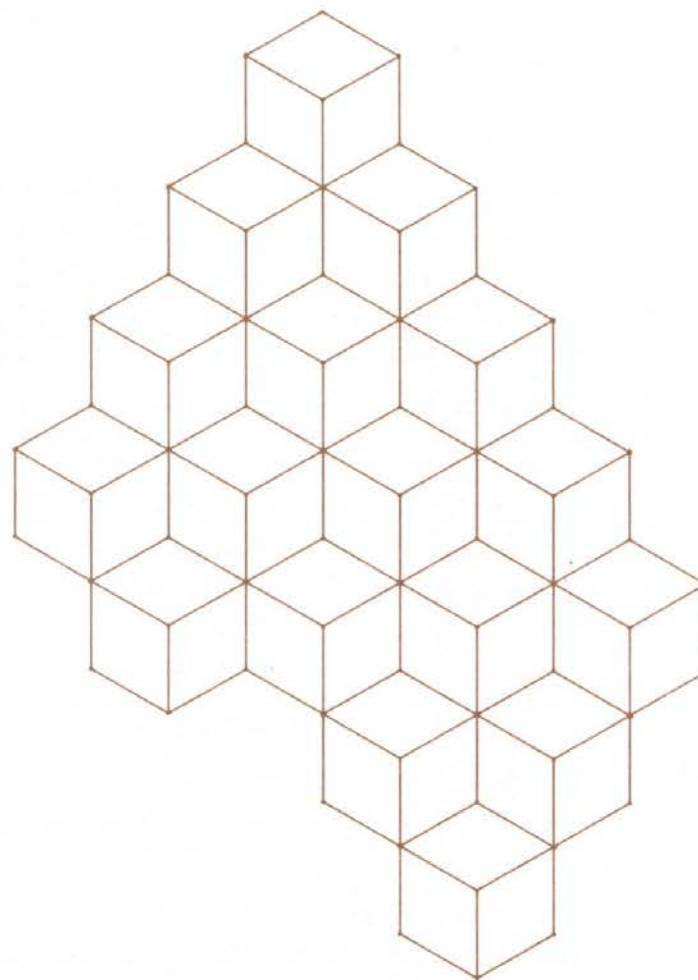
-----  
1. For helpful tips on brainstorming, see the article "Beingstorming" by Grant Miller in *Inkwell* 2 at <http://www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter/inkwell/>.



beth cook

Center, your classmates, the trees, whomever. You're not doing yourself or your faculty any favors by floundering alone until the last minute.

The liberties I've taken over the years have made me a better writer and student, and I think the same can be true for you. Keep going with your exploration until you find that sweet spot where you fulfill the requirements of the assignment and find meaning along the way. The pedagogy of progressive education at Evergreen exists to help each student facilitate their own learning in a way that is unique and appropriate to their needs. We have a lot of freedom here—let's put it to good use. ♦





## CONSTRUCTION OF A DISTANCE

matt turner

The word Essay comes from  
the academic word Essay  
which means *to follow instructions*—  
a rhetorical duty laid out with a grudge  
in the edifice of constraint  
(of institution).

Bodies of knowledge impose themselves  
on a student body  
(a student's body bent  
over in a bracket of time  
Essays through the night)  
and are processed through those who practice  
the production of language, the production  
of meaning to represent all they've learned.

If knowledge is the framing of experience  
it can be used to discuss experience directly  
(to avoid the strain  
metaphor laces  
into language,  
an outline to observe  
the image it contains,



matt turner

discarding the simulacra  
metaphor assumes)  
and eliminate a level of mediation between  
the writer and the reader.

(The compaction  
of expression  
burdens the writer  
more acutely  
with the materials  
of language.)

Contained in the burden of expression however  
is a form of liberation

(to unhinge what's been  
received and resift it  
in the untested voice,  
in the artifice of Essay)

formulated in the machinations of academia.

If language is the experience of experience

(Lyn Hejinian)

the Academic Essay is the language of knowledge.

(If language is  
the experience  
of experience  
the Poem is  
the language  
of language.)

construction of a distance

And so discrete genres of literature  
appropriate dissimilar distances from experience:

(this allows for  
varying modes  
and depths of  
reflection to  
occur depending  
on what's being  
read, written)

the Poem a commodious enterprise;  
the Essay a claustrophobic operation.

But these words assume a scale  
that Poem and Essay do not exist on,

(the poles being  
pure creative  
endeavor and  
onerous  
intellectual toil,  
two things that  
are conflated  
in all writing  
if done correctly)

which brings me to my point  
(or one of them).

All writing is creative writing because  
all writing necessitates artistry,

(all writing is  
 academic writing  
 because the production  
 of language requires  
 a prompt  
 in the first place)  
 but no matter what  
 all writing is some frail reflection of experience  
 (the frailty itself  
 a quality to admire)  
 begging the question Why?  
 (Why?)  
 In response, we could say  
 the construction of a distance  
 (a variety of  
 distances)  
 from experience itself  
 attenuates life,  
 (tempers what can be  
 hard to live through)  
 and while the Essay  
 (the experience  
 of the experience  
 of the framing  
 of experience)  
 and the Poem  
 (the experience  
 of the experience)

of the experience  
 of experience)  
 offer frail reflections from  
 different distances they are  
 nonetheless coplanar  
 (but not always  
 ancillary to each  
 other the way I  
 am doing here).  
 And though the form disagrees with the content  
 (and vice-versa)  
 fusing the two forces  
 an important question:  
 (like how  
 form effects the  
 production of  
 meaning)  
 as a commodious enterprise, the Poem  
 resists making an argument,  
 (resists even  
 deductive  
 reasoning as  
 a way to move  
 forward)  
 but the Essay, a claustrophobic operation,  
 demands a thesis,  
 (demands  
 demanding)



matt turner

confidence, something like a resolution.

So maybe the thesis of the Poem-Essay hybrid  
is a question, one that asks

(as innocently  
as the writer)

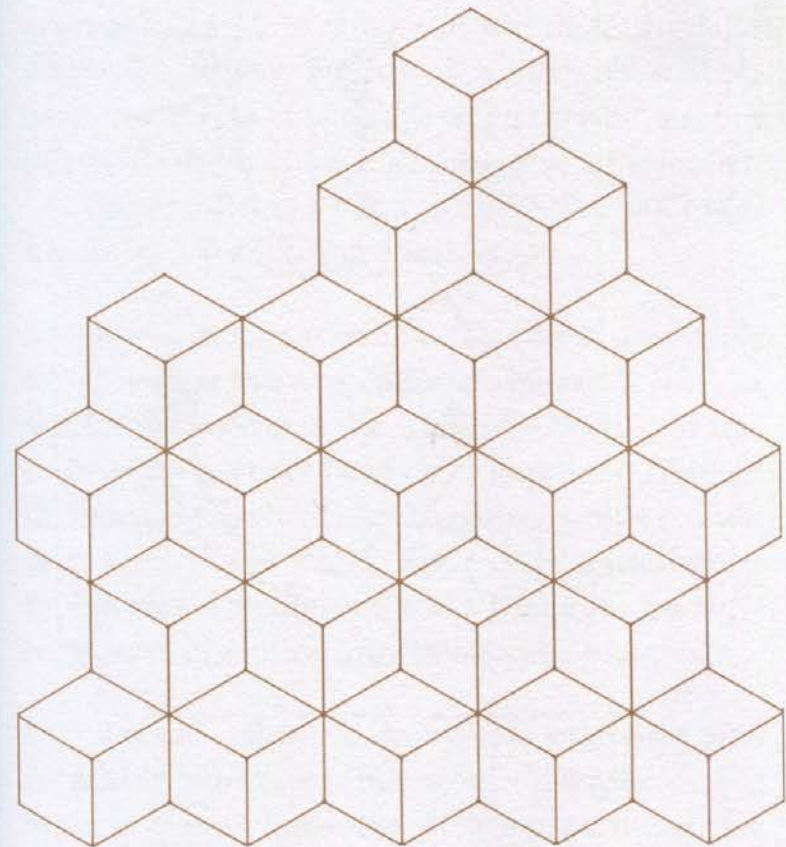
where it came from, why it is happening.

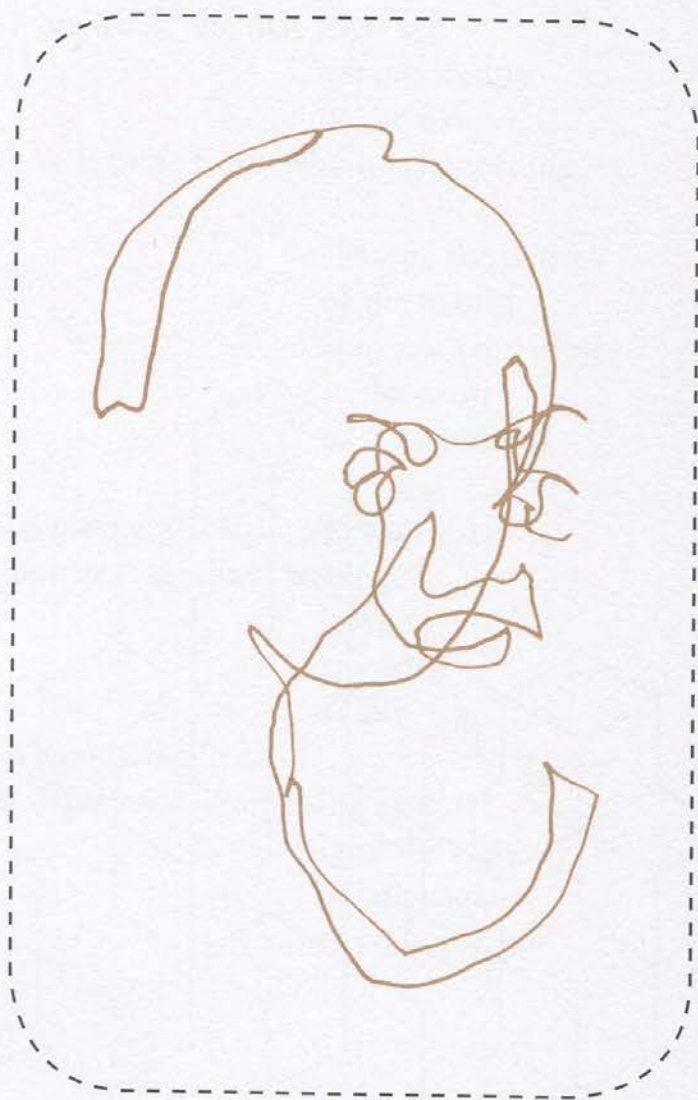
(Maybe the point  
of the hybrid  
is to ask a question  
in the form  
of a statement.)

And maybe this frail reflection itself  
is not actually about writing,

(about  
anything  
at all)

but something like  
the experience of anything at all  
(and the capacity  
of language  
to address it). ♦





YOU CAN'T PRETEND  
YOU DON'T CARE:  
building a writing practice

nicole h. christian

I create stories in my head as I sit in traffic. While out in public I am keen to eavesdrop, my ears taking in the conversations of others, and for long afterward I mull over how to use these words or characters in my writing. I sometimes scribble down fragments of language when they hit me, but this rarely leads to anything more than forgotten half-pieces drifting around a drawer. Instead, I beat myself up for not being a real writer.

Something in me insists that *real* writers are people who get up at five a.m., muster whatever it takes to shackle themselves to their desks for hours, and face their own creativity head-on. I have long admired this image of the hardworking writer, striving to add their light to the world. Their daily commitment to this sacred writing time is a strength, and their impressive discipline something to be proud of.

I've worked with an Evergreen professor who invariably winces at the word "discipline." For some it evokes memories of being punished. He



nicole h. christian

coaches students to adopt the word “habit” instead. My habits, though, are often unintentional: I pick up so-called bad habits all the time, while many of my good habits have been imposed on me by others. Unlike *habit*, *discipline* implies a choice, a deliberate decision to commit to a goal over a long period of time. Discipline is what I can use to choose my habits.

And discipline is a constant struggle for me. All too often I lose the fight against fear, anxiety, sleepiness, or anything; maybe it's simply a better time to clean my entire kitchen than it is to write. After I whined to one of my writing mentors that I lacked the discipline to write, she encouraged me to write about just that. Every day for at least ten minutes, I would write only about why I don't write.

The first day on the task, I sat down with pen in hand and told myself to let anything come out, writing too quickly to censor my thoughts. In ten minutes I produced little more than a list of the excuses I use to keep myself from writing.

I don't write because I never feel like I have the time.

I don't write because it hurts my hands.

I don't write because I'd rather sleep.

I don't write because it feels hard. And I'm sure I have no good ideas anyway.

you can't pretend you don't care

I don't write because it's work, and I don't feel like working.

I don't write because I'm tired.

I don't write because the table shakes as I do, and it's so annoying.

I don't write for any reason.

I don't write because my teeth hurt.

I don't write because it's a stupid waste of time and I have no talent.

I don't write for anyone.

I don't write for me.

I don't write because I can't discipline myself.

I have no discipline.

I don't write because it's hard.

What's so hard about it?

It makes me uncover.

I don't write because it means I can't hide anymore.

I don't write because people will say I can't do it well.

I don't write because I am afraid of being seen.

Why? Why do I want to hide?

I'm worried they won't like me.

Who?

Anyone.

I don't write because anyone may not like me.

I don't write because I don't know how.

I don't write because I'm no good at writing.

I don't write because it feels like I'm supposed to.

I don't write in inclement weather.

I don't write unless my life is on the line.



nicole h. christian

I don't write if I can avoid it, which is always.  
I don't write because I don't care.  
But I do care.  
And this is why it hurts not to write.

Unsure of how this practice could be of any help to me, I continued only because I had made a commitment to my mentor. The following day I approached the same topic: why I don't write. My words soon fell into the form of a dialogue with myself, and I became less and less willing to accept my excuses. I learned to press myself for the truth.

Why don't you write?

I'm afraid.

No, stop. You're not using that excuse anymore. Why don't you write?

I don't want to.

Nope, can't pretend you don't care.

Each day, I wrote, the practice building on what I had discovered the day before. I drilled deeper and deeper through my defenses.

So why don't you write?

It's hard.

you can't pretend you don't care

What's so hard about it?

Wanting greatness.

Must you be great, even now,  
as a fledgling?

I want to be great.

Why?

I will feel good?

How do you know?

I don't.

How will you know when  
you are great? When you  
are published?

Well, maybe, depending  
on who publishes me.

What if you are published,  
but no one reads your work—  
then are you great?

No, I guess not.

So, you are great if someone  
reads your work?



nicole h. christian

No, because anyone can.

You are great if thousands  
read your work?

No. Thousands may read  
but not like.

You are great if you get paid  
for your work?

Well, yeah, probably.

But many people who are not  
great can sell their work.

Yes, that's true.

So what makes you great?  
What makes a great writer to you?

If I read and I get lost.  
If I read and remember.  
The turns of language and  
the capturing of scents,  
sounds, all senses.

So who can determine if your  
writing does this?

No one. I can hardly tell,  
having written it, and I am

you can't pretend you don't care

unlikely to fully believe  
anyone who says so.

Why? Why not trust the feedback  
of your readers?

I don't know. What do they know!

All they have to know is that your  
words touched them. Is that enough?

Yes.

Can you believe someone who  
says that your writing touched  
them, that they liked your  
writing, even if you do not trust  
the person's taste?

Yes, I can believe that.

But will it make you feel great?

No.

So how do you know if you  
are great?

Only I can be satisfied, I guess.

And what makes you  
feel satisfied, really?

nicole h. christian

Putting in work makes me feel  
satisfied. Even if I am not finished,  
I feel good after a writing session,  
or after taking a draft to a new phase.

And so—does working  
make you great?

Working, producing something  
I feel proud of. Always striving,  
even in the face of fear or depression  
or feeling tired. That is great.  
Working, continuing to work at  
my craft, my passion. That is great.

Even if you produce  
no great works?

That seems unlikely, if I truly  
commit to working.

But even if you produce no great  
work in your lifetime, and nobody  
ever reads or hears or feels touched  
by your work—even if you do not  
become famous or revered or  
respected or anything—can you  
still be great for having worked hard  
at what you want to do?

Yes, it's called integrity.

you can't pretend you don't care

After seven days, I was so worn out from examining  
why I don't write that I just wanted to write. Moving  
my hand on paper or my fingers across a keyboard  
was enough to whet my appetite. I dug up a short  
story I had abandoned eight months before and got  
right to work.

Had I stopped this process after day one, I would  
not have discovered what was really holding me  
back. The value of my work came when I settled  
into that same creative space and addressed an idea  
for several days at a time. Only by returning did  
I make any progress. This, I learned, is how creative  
practice builds on itself, even in small pieces. I had  
created a new habit of writing daily, and a new  
desire to write.

It is not always easy, and I may have to revisit  
this practice in the future. But I know now that  
I can manage the discipline it takes to write for ten  
minutes a day. In ten minutes a day, every day for a  
year, I can slowly chip away at a novel.<sup>1</sup> By the end  
of the year, I will have written for over sixty hours.  
My consistent, short periods of work amount to  
more than what I could write if I waited to be  
seized by inspiration or desire.

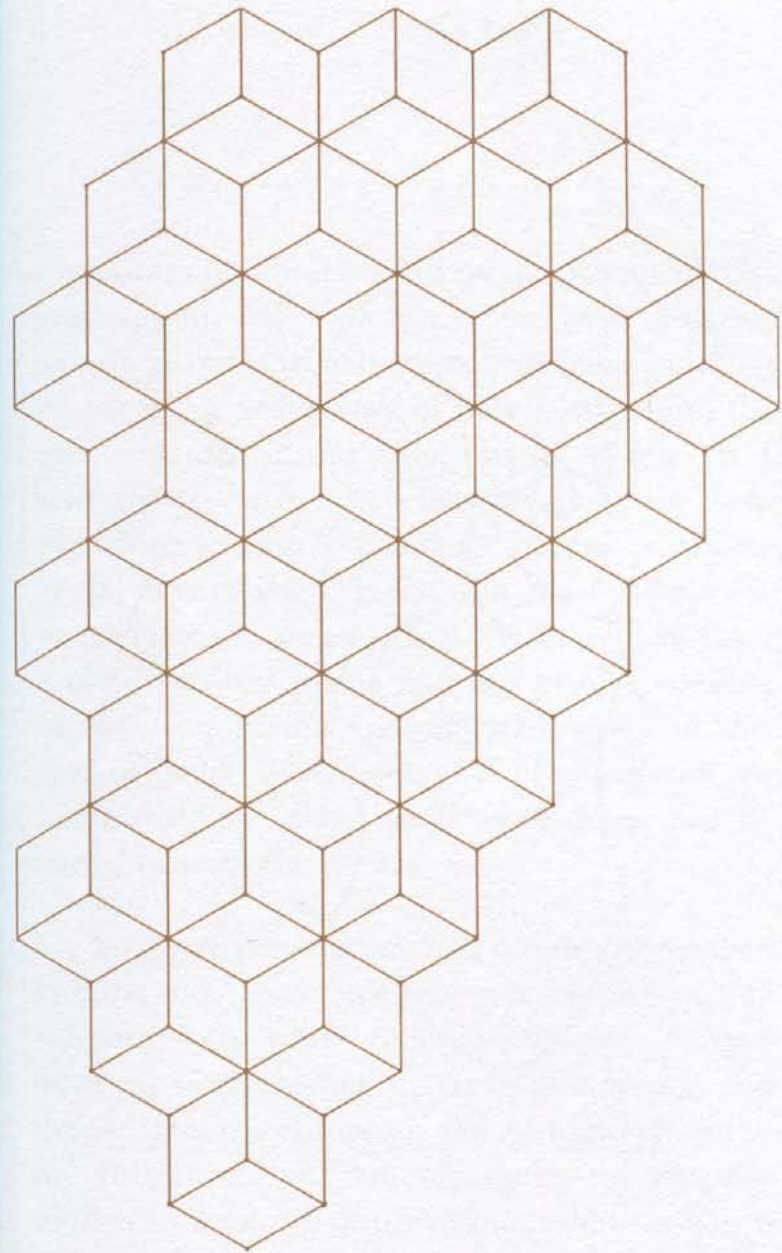
-----  
1. Very slowly.



nicole h. christian

So I fall back on discipline as my greatest tool, a skill I can grow with each practice. On days when nothing seems to flow, I allow myself to stop after ten minutes. I showed up and did my part, and I can feel at peace for the day. But far more often, ten minutes turns into thirty, or over an hour. I fall into a reverie, writing down everything that comes to me, unearthing something new each time.

Tomorrow I will return, sit, write for ten minutes. I delight to see my work expand on itself in this way, in small chunks of time devoted to my tasks. Disciplined writing can feel monotonous at times, and it can even be painful, but it is never as painful as not showing up to write. ♦





## THE ACT OF WRITING GRIEF

roxana bell

Sometimes we are forced to be silent. Out of self-preservation, and to protect those closest to us, we hide away our tears and create little boxes in which we place our wellsprings of pain—away from the eyes, judgments, and emotions of others. Yet I believe we have an innate desire to share our most wrenching sorrows. We long for another to hold us by the fiber of our thinnest skin and to witness as we navigate the mountainous terrain of pain. Grief is often ascribed to the time following someone's passing, but there is another dimension to this state of being: the intense grief of losing—or not acknowledging—those parts of ourselves that lie buried beneath the surface.

My own grief has complicated origins. At thirteen months old, I was adopted out of war-torn El Salvador by a white American woman. Severed from my birth mother, the Spanish language, and the indigenous, European, and African cultures of my ancestors, I was brought up by my adoptive mother in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio—a brown girl in a white world. As a child, I actively avoided Spanish lessons and the mention of El Salvador,



trying to pretend that I was not a Latina. I didn't recognize the olive-skinned, raven-haired, stocky, and petite girl who stared back at me in the mirror. I wanted to smash the image of the Other crying at me in the bathroom. I cringe to think about how hard I tried to fit, to erase so much of myself.

The real challenge of facing my identity and the grief I felt as an adoptee came as I started college. Bereft of language and vocabulary, I had no anchor to ground my emotional experiences. I was about to be nineteen years old, the age of my birthmother when war and adoption separated me from her, when I stood in an acting class and shared my adoption story for the first time. Buried in the simple sentences of my handwritten monologue was the grief of my ancestors, the grief of the young woman who gave me away amidst terrifying conditions, and perhaps even the grief that my adoptive mother experienced when she couldn't conceive children. My tears came with the breaking of my silence.

I would like to say that sharing my story gave me closure, but this was not the case. Instead, it freed me to begin the journey of acknowledging the grief of my adoption and my relationship to historical trauma.

As I sought out voices that echoed my own, I spent countless hours reading the works of Joy Harjo, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Audre Lorde, and Louise Erdrich. From these and other American women writers of color, I gathered strength and solace. In their articulations of finding voice, they wrote about the unspeakable, about silence and invisibility. They gave voice to the pain of their ancestors and communities. Even if their stories didn't exactly reflect my own experiences, I witnessed how writing and sharing our grief can transform and inspire.

I get to see this vulnerability, empowerment, and healing through language in my work as a writing tutor. When I sit with writers, I sometimes sense the familiar terror of being known, of having someone actually see you and hold your words, no matter how messy or bare. The veins of self are inevitably present even in the most academic of writing.

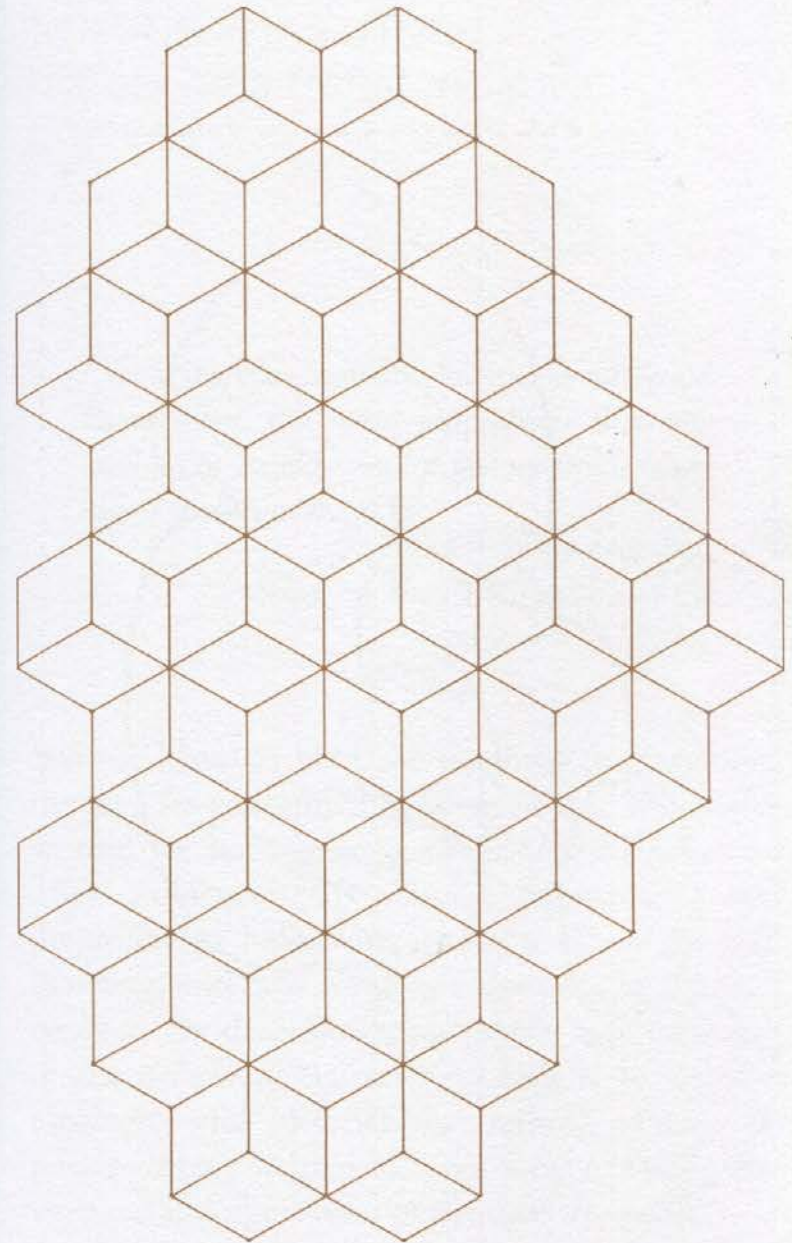
My own journey as a writer and tutor has helped me to evolve into a young woman with an ear tuned to the pulse of what goes unspoken, what we are silent about, our innermost grief. Our ultimate power as writers lies in showing the world our truths and taking ownership of our ideas and words.

I no longer avoid or silence the woman in pain staring back at me. I no longer overlook my

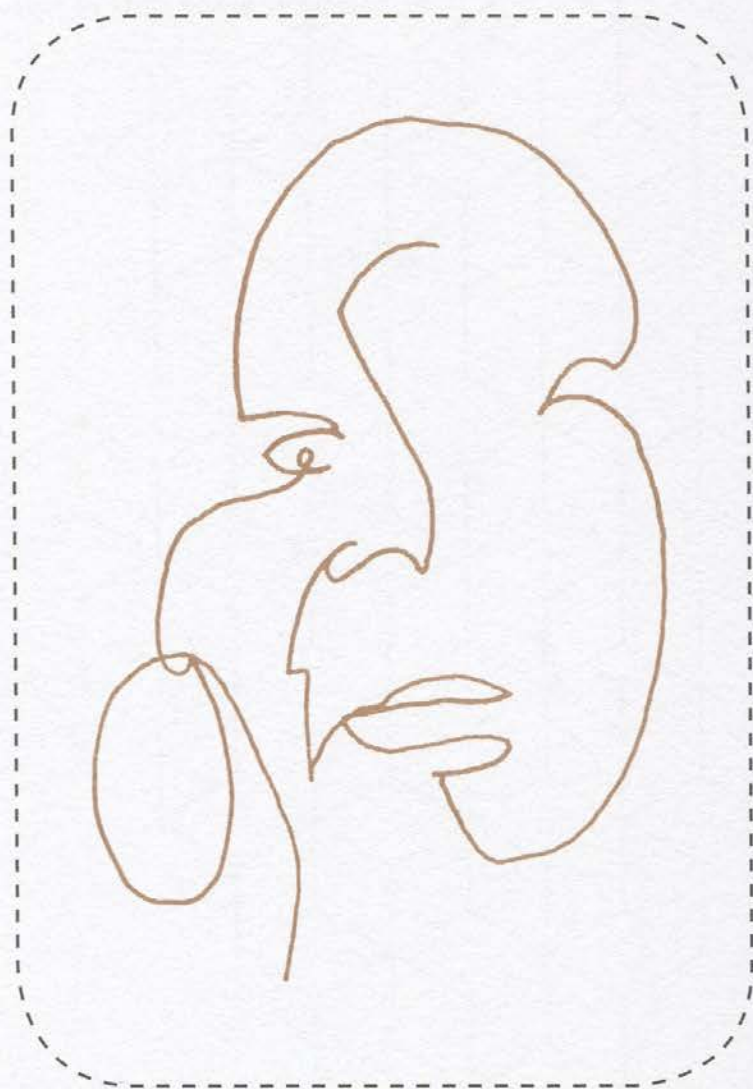


roxana bell

connection to my foremothers. Through writing  
my grief, I am finding a link back to my history,  
and in this, there is power. ♦







## WRITING THE FUTURE: history as a transformative practice

rachel cermak

“Yet being who I am and looking at the world from there, the mere proposition that one could—or should—escape history seems to me either foolish or deceitful.”

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot,  
*Silencing the Past: Power and the  
Production of History*

Written histories hold the potential to transform the way we conceptualize ourselves and the world around us, both consciously and subconsciously. They influence our political convictions, the prejudices we hold, what we know of our cultural heritages, and how we situate ourselves in a global context. By disempowering people not included in the dominant narrative—which is to say the ideologies and histories that uphold systems of power—many written histories serve to justify the violence and oppression of the modern world.



If we admit that these historical narratives are, in fact, constructions, then we are faced with a number of difficult questions. What history should we be learning? How can we write history that challenges the dominant narrative? How can we place ourselves and our experiences within the histories we write? I believe there is a simple answer to these complex questions: history must be researched and written in pursuit of liberation.

A history of the world that begins with the “discovery” of the Americas and leaves out indigenous histories, movements, and resistance does not serve the goal of liberation. Textbooks that regale us with biography after biography of white cisgender men only affirm the power already given them. We must tell the histories considered subversive and dangerous. We must be willing to “liberate those patches of ground on which we stand—in our classrooms, in our studies...with our whole selves all the time, rather than in moments carefully selected by others.”<sup>1</sup> Writing liberatory history is a process not constrained to the act of writing, but also how we read, research, and learn to be critically aware of the ways that histories we hold true affect ourselves and our communities.

-----  
1. Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 14.

The act of unlearning, of decolonization, requires constant engagement.

I am arguing in favor of intentional, value-driven subjectivity. We must reject the feigned objectivity of historians and the disinterested pursuit of pure academia.<sup>2</sup> Our own experiences can and should be prominently factored into our writing of history: subjectivity is unavoidable due to our unique socializations and cultures. The pursuit of a nonexistent objectivity places us in the passive position of bystanders, complicit in the reinforcement of dominant narratives.<sup>3</sup>

By speaking over or for groups of people, the dominant narrative constructs a representation of these groups and their histories that has little to no resemblance to reality. Through being intentionally subjective, we can write histories that affirm our own identities and begin a process of healing. Remember that subjectivity is a valid and powerful source of knowledge. Choose your values, rather than letting them be chosen for you, and write history with those values pressed close to your chest. Choose to write history that serves the needs of those in the present, including your own.

-----  
2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, 40.



Taking the reconceptualization of history into our own hands provides us opportunities to reorient ourselves in the world, giving us power over our self-representation and erasing the presumed truth of the dominant narrative. Perhaps, in the practice of writing history, we should strive to write historical futures—accounts that sing of the possibility of survival, struggle, and transformation.

#### toward a value-driven subjectivity

As the main argument of an essay, the thesis allows you, as the writer, to choose and argue from a certain perspective of an event. While it is uncommon to use the first-person “I” in an academic text, the thesis gives space for that “I” without directly referencing yourself. It allows you to take a stance about something that matters to you. While the body of a paper may convince the reader of the thesis’ validity, the thesis itself is merely one argument among many that can be made concerning a given subject. It is a premise, or a theory, and not a fact.

Even in the research and brainstorming stages, long before you construct your thesis, you can operate within the sphere of your own value-driven subjectivity. There are groups of people whose overlapping and intersectional stories are glaringly absent from most history books—women, people

of color, indigenous people, immigrants, young people, and more. Look for historical accounts written by members of these groups that reflect their struggles during the era or event you are researching. Recognizing the value of these identities and experiences means incorporating them into your writing in a meaningful way—beyond mere citations or sidenotes. For any history writer, the ability to integrate new information into your own paradigm and recognize when you may have left out important voices is vital and powerful.

#### representation and allyship

Find authors whose perspectives challenge the dominant thinking around the subject you are writing about. Noticing that I was struggling to find resources that challenged healthism in food justice movements, a friend suggested that I look for perspectives from a group of people impacted and stigmatized by healthism—fat people. Her advice demonstrated a basic tenet of allyship: you cannot write history without representation from the people you are writing about. Gloria Muñoz Ramírez presents a powerful example of this sort of history writing in her book *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement*. Based on interviews with the movement’s original organizers, Ramírez weaves together first-person accounts, historical context, and reportage in ways



that honor how the Zapatistas want their story to be told. Writing history is a process of writing in coalition toward mutual liberation.

This does not mean that you cannot use sources from those in privileged positions; as academia is oversaturated with white male voices, it would indeed be difficult to write without doing so. However, ensure that the authors you choose write in coalition with those they are writing about. You can often identify this by reading a text's abstract or introduction and checking the author's bibliographical references. Determine the author's purpose for writing about their subject and whether they carry out their intentions by sourcing voices that are often underrepresented.

primary sources and facts  
are not the same

Be sensitive and critical of biases evident in the lack or inaccuracy of primary source material—that is, sources written or created during the time under study. For example, birth records kept by plantation owners in the Caribbean inaccurately report low infant mortality rates. Historians trying to understand Caribbean slave family history may use these records as fact, when they are not: infant mortality was so high that owners often did not record a birth until the child reached a certain

age. Thus the records, superficially factual, make invisible a part of the trauma experienced by slave families.<sup>4</sup>

Make every effort to incorporate transparency into your paper. Interrogating the premises of your sources ultimately strengthens your paper's analysis. Research the sources that you use by seeking out critical reviews that can point to inconsistencies in analysis and figures. Do not purposefully mislead the reader, even if the faulty evidence supports your argument.

against the "justification" of history

It may be tempting to think that history can be explained merely by finding the antecedent events that make possible a subsequent event. Be aware of how you are framing your story. In a class that examined the development of and transition to capitalism, we learned to view history as a process in which different conclusions can be reached depending on which sources you examine. This opposes the more common practice of writing history backward, where a starting point is carefully chosen to make a predetermined endpoint seem probable or inevitable. Too often, this ends in histories that are both misleading and insubstantial.

-----  
4. William K. Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29.



The backward construction we examined in this class, for example, was the dominant capitalist narrative that Europe “forged” capitalism from feudalism, becoming the world’s hegemonic power in the 1500s “by its own strengths and virtues.”<sup>5</sup> However, by studying the Asian-centered global system that existed prior to 1400 AD, we realized that its downfall—which occurred prior to events that could have foretold the rise of capitalism and Europe—was a vital consideration in understanding capitalism. The question shifted from why the West rose to how and why the East fell. While the selection of a narrative starting point in the 1400s supports the ethnocentric idea of the West as the “natural” hegemonic power, examining capitalism from an earlier date refutes such claims.

#### beginning the process

I won’t pretend that I know all the answers to writing history. I know that being embedded in these systems of power—systems that both grant and deny me certain privileges—will constantly affect how I write and see the world. However, we must work and write in the direction of transparency. Acknowledge the inextricability of the historical subject and the positionality of the

5. Janet Abu-Lughod, “On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past,” in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 114.

writer. Acknowledge the delicacy and raw potential that exist in the intimacy between the writer and their subject. Acknowledge the privilege that exists in the very act of writing academically about people whose identities and experiences you may not share.

The transparency we work toward must be earnest, sincere, and humble because we will not always get it right. In recognizing that we cannot know everything, we also recognize that we will make mistakes. We must be willing to be held accountable for our writing of history. We must be willing to be wrong, again and again, because liberation requires a lifelong process of unlearning. The approaches outlined in this article are only steps in this process, but it is in knowing that they are not enough that we can begin.

#### bibliography and further reading

At fourteen years old, I read James W. Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. It was my first introduction to the idea that history could be



questioned. By analyzing numerous high school history textbooks, Loewen unearthed falsities, bias, and an artificial sense of resolution in American history. He made clear that thinking of history as a dull, closed subject serves the interests of those in power because alternative histories could erode the fabricated historical justifications for violence and oppression.

Since reading Loewen's book, I've come across a number of other books that have further enabled me to think critically about how I read and research history for my own writing. The following list is a non-comprehensive guide to some of these texts.

Abu-Lughod, Janet. "On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past." In *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, 111-129. Seattle: Bay Press, 1989.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

Levy-Nevarro, Elena. "Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?" In *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, 15-25. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2012.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.<sup>6</sup>

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Zinn, Howard. *The Politics of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. ♦

-----  
6. While *Gender and the Politics of History* is still a relevant and valuable text for feminist history research, it is cissexist in its lack of inclusion and analysis of trans women. The introduction to the revised edition begins to address this problem by responding to issues in the original text.





INSIDE OUT:  
speaking for yourself,  
writing for your community

brendan inkley

In many ways our work as writers is intensely personal. Epiphanies come to us when there is no one to hear them but the page. Feelings and ideas within us insist to be conceived, and the urge to write saturates our blood and percolates up through our brains.

Writing, though, is also an external practice, because it is interpersonal: it puts us in conversation with others. By disseminating our work, whether through publishing or simply handing a draft to a friend, we cast the seeds of our private worlds onto a shared discursive field. Language has the potential to be a conductive material, a door between humans that allows us to share these worlds with each other—but to make this a reality requires a concentrated mindfulness of our use of language.

Language expands daily to include new words that come with new ways of seeing the world. Within a learning institution, knowledge is exchanged in the



countless dialects native to the academic disciplines we write within. These are sources of power and of exclusion. As writers in this setting, we should work to be aware of the existence and influence of the codes we tap into, consciously or not, when we commit our thoughts to paper.

These academic dialects aren't lists of words whose use will somehow strip your expression of an authenticity that otherwise exists: heterogeneous language is as vital to our fields of study as it is to any other culture. But while certain language may carry authority in academic settings, to write for yourself is to write autonomously. Mindfulness is not the presence or absence of this word or that, but must be practiced in the invocation of any language. We students are often silently rewarded for approaching truths from a safe distance, using the practiced vocabulary of theory and discipline as a substitute for growing into our own grasp of subjects. Because of this, we must consider where our writing draws its strength from.

In my education, I was exposed to established academic mindsets and vocabularies at the same time that my writing assignments became more and more demanding. During times of stress, these began to appear increasingly viable as sources of preformed wisdom to rely on. To engage subjects

critically in my writing required me to dig inward, a challenging place to go looking for answers. I didn't always like what I found. So when the search for understanding took me to the threshold of discomfort, I was willing to defer the work of finding my own words, and rely instead on elevated vocabulary. The ideas that drew me to write in the first place remained uninvestigated.

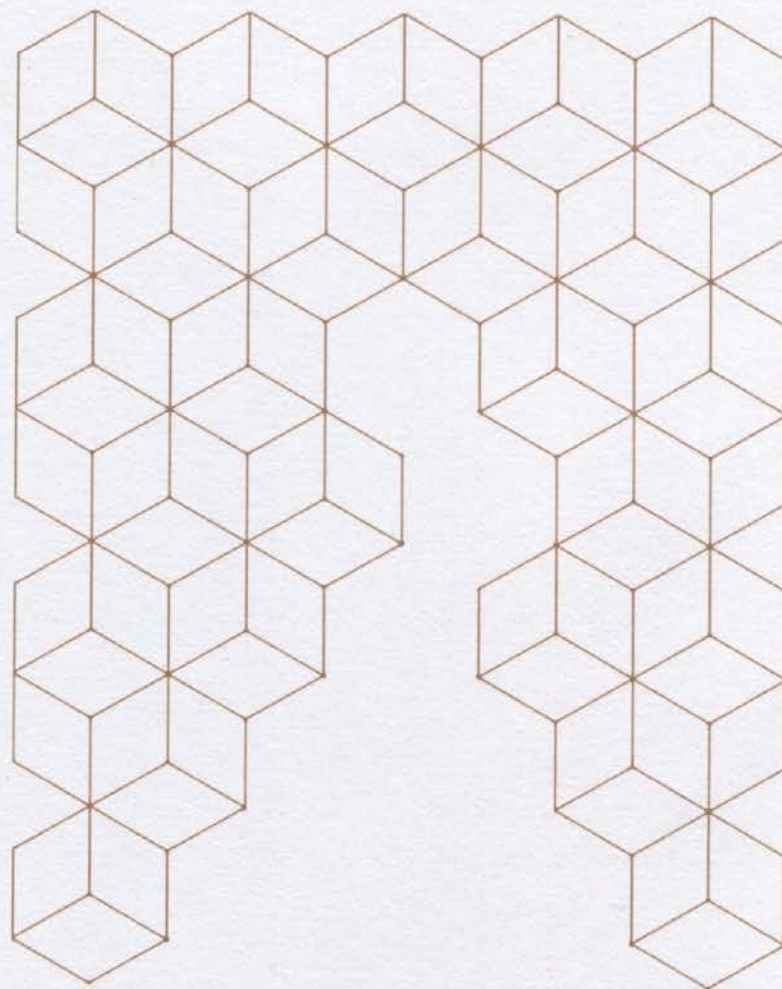
The surety of academic vocabulary is especially convincing in an environment that often asks for polished writing products and forgets that writing—like learning—is above all a process. For writing to be critical, an internal journey has to take place. In our learning community, it is a legitimate fear that ideas still growing will be perceived as weakness. But when we armor our text with borrowed words to guard it from the criticism of our peers, we build a broken learning community where it is easier to put down others' expression than to expose your own vulnerability. Each writer who forfeits this security allows others to do the same, building instead a community where the vulnerability unearthed by our writing processes is honored rather than hidden.

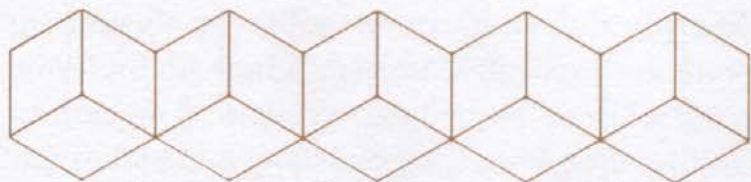
Before you sit down to write, interrogate your motives and your means. Will you shield your ideas from judgment, or open them to inquiry? Pass up



brendan inkley

the struggle of writing, or accept its difficulty and grow into the truths it yields? Will your work draw its strength from the voices of others, or will it force you to find and grow into your own? Your writing is a piece of a grand conversation—ask whether it speaks for you. ♦





EDITORS

Nicole H. Christian, Thane Fay,  
Mary Kallem, and Matt Turner

VISUAL DESIGN

Mary Kallem

PROOFREADERS

Beth Cook, Caryn Dudley, Silas Johnson,  
Victoria Larkin, Katelyn Peters, and Sandy Yannone

INKWELL 9 WOULD LIKE TO THANK

Capitol City Press, Sandy Yannone,  
Tom Carlson and Ali Mediate,  
and The Evergreen State College Writing Center staff

ABOUT THIS INKWELL

Set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Brutal Type  
Printed at Capitol City Press in Tumwater, WA  
*Inkwell 9* uses an adapted version  
of *The Chicago Manual of Style*

