





# A STUDENT GUIDE TO WRITING

THE  
EVERGREEN  
STATE COLLEGE  
WRITING CENTER

# WRITING CENTER LOCATIONS

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EVERGREEN.EDU/WRITINGCENTER

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## REGARDING NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE

Sometime in the 20th century, the norm of using the masculine signifier (“he”/“him”) was challenged. As an alternative has yet to be agreed upon, the *Inkwell* editorial board has chosen to let each writer decide for \_\_\_\_self how to address this issue.



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## FROM THE EDITORS

Whatever your path of study, take a moment and picture a spiraling strand of DNA.

At the Writing Center, we talk a lot. We talk about “cultivating voice.” We talk about “holding space.” These concepts form the spine of our unique pedagogical DNA. Infinitely nuanced, our spine comprises things even less tangible than infinitesimal chains of sugars and phosphates: ideals.

On a practical level, those lofty, beautiful ideals start with successful communication. Conversation forms the bonds that keep our DNA in sequence: we engage with and adapt to the dialogues we’re having. *Inkwell* is a student guide to writing. Inside, you will find writing that grapples with social and academic roles and assumptions often taken for granted. *Inkwell* is our attempt to contribute to greater conversations around writing and academia and how we listen and communicate with each other. In doing so, we widen the purview of what a guide can be.

Just as our DNA is not a solid, it is also not static. This year we invited Alison Rosa Clark and Paul Johnson, writers who regularly used the Center, to allow us to showcase their work alongside reflections by the tutors who worked with them. We hope that these collaborations can serve as raw examples of the tutor-writer process and our pedagogy at the Writing Center. We thank them for what they have taught us and for letting us exhibit their work.

We are exceptionally proud not only of every piece in this year’s edition, but also of the Writing Center’s and *Inkwell*’s praxis of flux. Evolution.

Our double helix continues to spiral.

CAMILLE BOULTS + TOM CARLSON

WHEN YOU SET OUT TO WRITE,  
WHAT GREATER FORCES HAVE  
BROUGHT YOU THERE?

WHAT IS COMPELLING YOU TO  
WRITE?



# NOTES FROM THE DIVING BOARD

JESSIE WEAVER

The page is a yawning, swirling void into which I must jump.

*Jump.*

*Jump.*

*Ok, now jump!*

I remember thinking this as I stood on the edge of a high diving board as a child. The pool lay below me, and a terrible blank expanse of air between me and it. I felt like the connection between my body and my brain had been cut. My legs were two saplings, rooted to the board.

*Jump.*

Each time I write I must dive, jump through my fears and into the page, into the realm of chaotic ideas that inhabit it.

Fear can take many forms, but for me it expresses itself most of all as a tendency to avoid: to constantly stop and read (pretending to look for inspiration when really I am looking for escape) or to aimlessly surf the web without even the pretention of productivity. My fear can

have different flavors depending on the type of writing, on time, on place, on my current mental moodscape, but it always comes back to one simple notion: **I'm not good enough.** That's it. I am afraid because I suspect that I am inadequate, that there is nothing I have to say which has not been said before, that no one will want to read what I have written.

Though I am lucky, or unlucky, enough to consider myself a writer, I worry that my soul is somehow different from those of the Great Masters. I torture myself with thoughts that they must have had hearts of ink and paper fiber, while mine is nothing but a lump of flesh. That their power and scope of imagination must have been like Hubble telescopes to my toy binoculars. That they were special, and I am not. *Oh, I find myself thinking, I am so ordinary, so dull. All of my ideas smell of mildew and mothballs.*

These thoughts can paralyze a writer, can make it all too easy to never write anything at all. Once, near the beginning of my work on this piece, I fell into an agonizing crisis. I wondered who I thought I was, what absolute gall I must have had to think I had something to say about fear and writing. I, who so clearly had not found any perfect escape from fear, who was even at that moment trapped within its jaws. I almost gave up then and there.

But I remembered the pride and satisfaction that I have found shepherding a piece of writing through its development: the beauty of watching ideas, images, and metaphors mature draft by draft. I remembered the passions and desires that had driven me to begin this piece in the first place. The rewards of getting past fear are enormous. The works that we create are infinitely richer than the pale images that float in our heads before we start.

And so...

I jump.

I dive.

I take that leap, terrifying and electrifying, into the page, never knowing exactly what I will find down there. Not the calm, sterile waters of a YMCA swimming pool, this is certain. Nor the ordered world of someone else's finished work. Here, I am in the wild, swirling waters of my own ideas—a vast ocean limited only by the distant boundaries of all that I have ever experienced, read, thought, intuited. Such wonder and relief to find myself here. The jump is never as bad as I imagine.

These waters are filled with floating memories, strange creatures, pearls of knowledge. Sometimes the water is clear, lucid; I move effortlessly through it. More often it is cloudy, everything swirls before my eyes with no more order than might be found inside a hurricane. How did the Great Masters navigate this chaos? Am I lacking some essential tool that they possessed? What if my ocean is too strange, too incomprehensible? What if these waters are dead-zones from which nothing can be dredged but bits of plastic and bone? *I need air!* But to quit, to stop writing, is to acquiesce to the fear that I am not good enough. *Relax*, I must tell myself, *swim, surface, examine what you have brought up from the deep, and then take a deep breath and dive again.*



WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVATION  
FOR SEEING YOUR WRITING  
THROUGH?

IS THERE ANYTHING IN YOUR WAY?





# BEYOND CATHARSIS

WRITING TO CONNECT

BAKI WRIGHT

## I. WRITING FOR CATHARSIS

I initially turned to writing for emotional release when I was in middle school. Adolescence is often difficult; for those of us who have experienced extreme emotional states, it can be even more excruciating.

“Why are you so crazy?” a friend once said, after I had confided in her. “I’m going to put you in a box until you’re not crazy anymore.”

“How would that help?” I asked.

“You would be so crazy that you wouldn’t be able to get out. But you would want to get out, so the only way you could get out of the box would be to make yourself not crazy anymore.”

My friend’s insensitivity is an example of the ways that I was shamed for the emotions that I was experiencing. I was struggling with what may be called mental illness, yet I was made to feel that it was my fault. I craved validation and acceptance, yet I feared rejection and condemnation if I revealed anything too personal.

In writing, I found that I could become emotionally intimate with myself. While my journaling was connected to the literal details of my life, my creative writing provided a level of abstraction that helped me to begin to interpret my experiences. I also used my writing to seek support and understanding from my friends. I hoped that readers would be able to connect with my stories, but I wasn't yet able to offer any insights. My mind was still "puzzling its way out of its own shadows."<sup>1</sup>

## II. WRITING FOR SUPPORT

In Seattle's performance poetry community, I was accepted and understood. I was sixteen when I started attending writing circles hosted by Youth Speaks Seattle. Many of the writers in this group were dedicated performance poets in their teens and twenties. At my first writing circle, I recognized a few names and faces from open mics and poetry slams. I hesitated to share my writing, but what other people read was so vulnerable that I was moved to read as well.

I attended writing circles religiously. Every Wednesday, I came early to the Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center to greet people as they came in. This was better than church. When the facilitator gave the prompt, we congregated over our notebooks in silent prayer to the written word. When we shared our work, it was as if all that divinity flowed through each writer in turn. My favorite poets were now my peers and my mentors. **The secret of our talent was that we came together to inspire each other.**

Simply to have my voice heard and to know that my words were valued was therapeutic. It helped me gain confidence in myself. I wasn't just writing for catharsis anymore. I had begun to refine my writing to a level where it was more accessible to other people. I came to think of myself as a writer. This gave me a sense of self-worth.

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1. Debra Gwartney, "When the Action is Hot," *Poets and Writers*, January/February 2013, 23-26.

In writing circles, I learned to create work from freewriting, which was foundational to the development of my writing process. The Youth Speaks community also taught me how to revise. Other writers gave me critical feedback on my work and shared their revision techniques. Performing poetry at open mics was also an important source of feedback. Over time, I became more committed to Youth Speaks as an organization. I participated in business meetings. I sat in on workshops as a facilitator-in-training. I was one of the poets representing Youth Speaks to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation when Youth Speaks was being considered for a grant. It was a joy to be of service, to further the cause of making poetry accessible to a younger audience.

Then the unthinkable happened: I stopped writing performance poetry. I stopped because I was feeling better and no longer craved catharsis through writing. My creativity shifted to other mediums: music, photography, sculpture. Because I stopped writing poetry, I fell out of the organization.

About a year after I stopped attending meetings, I saw the local director at the mall and she offered me a ride. In the car together, I apologized for leaving. I was ashamed for not writing and for not contributing to Youth Speaks. I felt like I had betrayed the organization and let her down personally. She seemed disappointed, but she was also understanding. Youth is a time to grow and explore, to find your voice—wherever that path leads you.

### III. WRITING TO CONNECT

When my creative journey took me beyond performance poetry, still I wished that I could have clung to my identity as a Youth Speaks representative, because that identity had brought me belonging and self-esteem. As Natalie Goldberg says in her classic book, *Writing Down the Bones*: “Writers get confused. We think writing gives us an excuse for being alive. . . . Often we use writing as a way to receive notice, attention, love. ‘See what I wrote. I must be a good person.’ We are good people before we ever write a word.”

While it can be affirming to share work with a community of writers, today I am supported outside of writing. I am blessed to have a therapist and a support group. I also share emotionally with my family, my friends, and my romantic partner.

My time in writing circles and open mics was crucial for getting my writing beyond catharsis. Writing for emotional release provided the wellspring of inspiration that fueled my initial development as a writer. When I saw that other people were able to connect with my work, it encouraged me to hone my abilities. Now that I am well-established in my journey of emotional healing, I am able to offer insight into what I have experienced instead of overwhelming the reader with pathos.

As I wrote with a community of performance poets, I realized the power of writing to build connections. In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher says that “a writer’s job is to tell stories that connect readers to all the people on earth, to show these people as the complicated human beings they really are, with histories, families, emotions, and legitimate needs.” Writing can provide you a window into another person’s life, their thoughts, the people they care about. **I believe that this is the ultimate stage of a writer’s craft—to not simply express yourself, but to connect.** This is an audacious task that can only be undertaken in time, with perseverance and love.

# MORE ON WRITING GROUPS

If you are considering joining a writing group, I would encourage you to look around to find a group that is appropriate. If you are still gaining confidence or you enjoy coming together to freewrite and share new work, you may feel at home in a writing circle. If you feel that you have a solid draft of a piece and you are looking for critical feedback, you may prefer a critique group. If you want to listen to poetry and share your work without receiving critical feedback, an open mic may be a good fit. Different writing groups will also have different levels of intimacy. Some writers will want to share very deeply, and some will prefer to interact as professionals.

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WHO ARE YOU WRITING FOR?

WHAT IMPACT DO YOU IMAGINE  
YOUR WRITING HAVING ON  
INDIVIDUAL READERS AND  
ON SOCIETY?



# AN INTRODUCTION TO AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

PAUL JOHNSON

The reason I wrote *The Long Road to Advocacy* is because it is not very often that a person with developmental disabilities writes an autobiography. For many years, people with developmental disabilities have been left out of the inner circle of education as we know it today. Because of this exclusion, it takes time for a person with developmental disabilities to learn all that I'm writing in this paragraph. In my own life, I was bullied and had to take myself out of junior high; I did not have the opportunity to learn about basic grammar until I took classes at a community college in my early thirties.

Not only is there lack of equitable education for people with developmental disabilities, there is also lack of encouragement. People with developmental disabilities have been segregated, bullied, and put aside because we are different than the average non-disabled person.

Fortunately, I had someone in my life who saw that I had the potential to learn more. Randi Moe, a mentor I worked with at a vocational skill-building center, went out of her way to encourage me to continue my education. Because of her encouragement, I was able to get my GED and attend community college later in my life. We need more encouraging and patient people like her. We must encourage people with developmental disabilities to study more about their interests. I would like people with developmental disabilities to be able to



accomplish what they set out to do. I found this encouragement at South Puget Sound Community College.

Later in my life, I also found encouragement at The Evergreen State College Writing Center with the Kokua LEAD program. I started writing my autobiography by dictating my story to a job coach named Cori. As time went on, Randi Miller of Kokua got me connected with the LEAD program and set me up with Josie Jarvis, an intern from The Evergreen State College. As we were working on my book *The Long Road to Advocacy*, Josie helped me to develop different ideas on how my book could be written, organized, and revised. She also suggested that I go visit The Evergreen State College Writing Center. This is where Josie and I met and began working with writing tutor Haley Bea.

Working with the Writing Center has been a wonderful experience. Working with Josie and Haley has given me a different perspective on how to write my autobiography and make it clearer. It gave me an idea of what sentence structure should look like; it's also been a helpful and broadening experience in getting my ideas across. I thought that writing my autobiography was going to be simpler than it was.

I've learned that I have a long way to go and that there is more to writing than I thought. I would recommend collaborative writing, especially if you are a student at Evergreen or any other educational institution. It has given me new ideas and shown me that there is more I can do with my writing. I would encourage teachers of all walks of life to help students learn about writing what is on their mind, even if it's just a simple sentence. **It is my hope that people learn how to work together on writing projects.**

Community programs like the Kokua LEAD program are so important because people with developmental disabilities need a "hand up" to accomplish their education goals. They need inspiration so that they can believe in themselves and their potential and see the possibilities



that are out there to read, write, and more. I think these programs are also important because they provide students, staff, and non-disabled people the opportunity to learn about and connect with people with developmental disabilities.

It is my hope that teachers and tutors make it a point to have their students with developmental disabilities learn about the writing process—perhaps this would encourage and empower people with developmental disabilities to write their own stories. I want to get people with developmental disabilities excited about writing their story and being heard. It is therapy for them to write their feelings down.

FROM

# THE LONG ROAD TO ADVOCACY

PAUL JOHNSON

## CHAPTER 2

### SCHOOLING CHALLENGES

In 1963, when I was twelve, we learned that a new special education wing was being built onto John Rodgers Elementary just around the corner from my family's house. With the new renovation in place, I was excited to attend a new school in my neighborhood. That summer, before school began, we received a phone call saying that my new teacher, Mr. Monahan, was going to come to each student's home to get acquainted with the incoming class. I showed him my sports trading card collection. He was impressed; apparently he had been a football coach at one of the other schools.

As the upcoming year approached, some of the PTA members made it known that they disliked the idea of children with disabilities attending the same school as those who were not disabled. Despite their objections, I entered into John Rodgers Elementary School.

The transition into the John Rodgers special education program was difficult, and I frequently found myself caught in between the two worlds of “regular” and “special ed.” Although I was able to keep up with and understand the work in all other classes, the faculty and school frequently misunderstood my capabilities and wrongly thought my cerebral palsy was a mental or behavioral disability. Cerebral palsy is a neurological condition that mainly affects muscle function and coordination; it does not diminish my intellectual capacity or my ability to learn.

During my time in the special education program, the other students and I took Mr. Monahan’s class in the mornings. He was a good teacher, although I often felt bored and isolated because the program was unable to accommodate all of my learning needs. For example, my reading level often excelled beyond what my peers were learning in the classroom. In the special education program I was the only student with a physical disability; most of my classmates in the special education wing lived with mental and learning disabilities. Although I was able to participate in a traditional reading program, I was not given many other opportunities to challenge myself.

The special education students were frequently segregated from many of our peers. For a while the teachers and school staff brought lunches to our rooms in the special education wing on a cart. Apparently, they were not yet ready to “mainstream” us into the regular population. It wasn’t until later that year that people with disabilities were able to eat in the cafeteria with the rest of the students. Looking back, I feel cheated that we didn’t get to join our peers for lunch.

It’s sad for me to think that the kids without disabilities weren’t able to experience and grow up learning about the lives of those with developmental disabilities. I would have liked to have seen more integration between the programs. People come from different places, and it’s important that in public communities, such as public schools, we see what we have in common and come together.

Growing up in the '50s and '60s and having lived through the many dramatic changes in ideas and events shaped my relationship to politics and advocacy in America. 1963 was an especially charged year both for me personally and for the nation. It was the afternoon of November 22 when our teacher came into the classroom to announce the bad news that President Kennedy had been shot. The whole school was in shock, wondering, "Who would want to shoot President Kennedy?" This event, along with witnessing the Civil Rights Movement at this time, planted seeds that helped me become more aware of the social and countercultural movements happening around me. During this particular time in my life, I felt deeply segregated within my school, and it was moving to watch how others around me were fighting the injustice they felt. I would realize later that these acts of individual and community activism helped me see the potential for creating positive social change through self-advocacy.

# SUPPORTED INDEPENDENCE

## NAVIGATING A NECESSARY PARADOX

JOSIE JARVIS

In the fall of 2012, I was approached by Randi Miller, the volunteer coordinator of the Kokua LEAD program. This program works to link Evergreen students with adults with disabilities who want support in accomplishing their learning goals. In our conversation, Randi told me about Paul Johnson, a person with cerebral palsy seeking support in his life goal to write and publish his autobiography. I was excited about the project and began working with Paul as a Kokua LEAD tutor that winter. I have been an active volunteer ever since.

Before I worked with Paul, I took many aspects of my life for granted. Society saw me and my body as capable of learning, and because of that, I was given access to people and resources who encouraged me to develop as a writer from a young age. I can sit privately in a room and put my thoughts to paper without having to show them to anyone. If I decide to go somewhere, I don't have to schedule it with public transit four days in advance and hope that staff is available to accompany me. I don't have to worry my plans will fall through at the last minute because of a scheduling error or staff cancellation.

When in public I can go just about anywhere, move through any building, and have my needs met fully. I can live and work and socialize and write fairly spontaneously. As someone with a typically-mobile body, my life is rather blissfully free of constraints.

Although my writing is often bound by anxiety, deadlines, other projects, and page limits, I was not really prepared to understand the conflicts and challenges that would impact working with Paul on his writing. It is more clear to me than ever that ideals do not exist in a vacuum: when implemented, they come with real-world constraints and compromises. Seeing where my privilege, assumptions, good intentions, and goals got in the way of Paul's independence and voice ended up being one of the most challenging and rewarding lessons of my academic career. It was difficult; it was frustrating; it was challenging; it was imperfect; and above all, it was worth it.

Many of the goals of this project contained internal, unavoidable conflicts. My overarching goal was to effectively support Paul in his independence as a writer. This paradox created a line that was difficult to balance on: **support and independence are not concepts that are usually paired.**

In writing, Paul relies heavily on dictation and physical support to get his ideas down. In this role I found it easy to make assumptions about what Paul wanted to say and to influence the content beyond what was appropriate. There were many times when I would write down a sentence for Paul and inadvertently include words he had never heard before. I tended to encourage him to talk about personal experiences of oppression that went beyond what he felt comfortable sharing. I would often not give Paul the opportunity to put sentences together on his own. It was difficult for me to recognize and acknowledge when I was influencing the writing process in a way that denied Paul's agency as a writer.

It took a lot of practice, mistakes, and apologies to be accountable to Paul's voice. In order to walk this fine line of support and independence, consent became very important. I needed to ask before I offered help,

and make sure that what was transcribed was what he wanted to say, even if it meant that the sentences did not sound the way I would word them. I still made mistakes, but I'm glad I did not give up. It is really important that Paul sees his voice, not mine, in his autobiography.

# PRESERVING THE SPLENDID MESSINESS

REVISING MYSELF DURING  
PAUL'S REVISION

HALEY BEA

## I. COMBATING MY BIASES

I came into this project later in the game. Paul Johnson's autobiography had already been six years in the making, and he and Josie had been working together for nearly a quarter on its revision. In the beginning, I applied a thick layer of professionalism to mask my nervousness and ignorance around tutoring someone with cerebral palsy. When I first met Paul, he had come into the Center to revise and eventually edit his autobiography, *The Long Road to Advocacy*, but I struggled to give him the honest or thoughtful feedback that I felt he deserved. Rarely did I stray from the "safe" and patronizing responses of "Good job!" or "You're doing so well." During these first few months, I wasn't sure why these phrases had left me feeling so confused and unsatisfied. I had used these go-to sentences many times before as a way to pad other awkward or tense tutoring sessions, but while working with Paul, these little words felt harmful—even caustic.

It wasn't until embarrassingly recently that I realized why cushioning our sessions was more destructive than helpful. Though I had thought



at the time that my polite words were simply sparing Paul's feelings, by doing so I had assumed what so many able-bodied people do: that those with disabilities are incapable of the same physical or mental challenges as those of us who are able-bodied. These saccharine responses I had doled out so readily were just one of the many ways I maintained, rationalized, and even fueled my ignorance around disability.

Before Paul, I had never worked with someone whose range of motion was directed by a mouth-operated electric wheelchair. It had never occurred to me to check to see if a room was ADA accessible, and I wasn't sure how to interact with the caregiver who would pause our sessions to feed Paul water or adjust his glasses. One of my biggest hurdles was understanding why Paul's wheelchair intimidated me. During our sessions I struggled to know how (or even if) I could see Paul's body as separate from the complex machine that moved him forward. The sheer force and power behind Paul's movement was at times unnerving, as it challenged the cultural biases I held equating disability with frailty.

This last fall, during our revision process, I received a message that Paul couldn't make it to our session: his chair needed to be fixed. For three weeks, Paul's movement became severely limited, and the Kokua LEAD program struggled to get the appropriate people to respond in a timely manner for this urgent repair. Suddenly, I realized just how unruly every body is, and for the first time I could acknowledge Paul's body for what it is as a whole—both machine and flesh.

In my conversations with Evergreen professor Chico Herbison, he discussed how those with disabilities can challenge those who are, in his words, temporarily-abled: "I think people's fears around disability and those with disabilities are rooted in mortality. People with disabilities are a reminder of what we could be one day after a car accident, a slip... anything at all." As a response, he says, many able-bodied people infantilize or dehumanize those with "unruly bodies" as a way to convince themselves that this person is not a mystery or a challenge, but rather "pet-like" or even nonexistent. The more I

worked with Paul, the more conscious I became of this phenomenon. Quite regularly, I noticed two very distinct ways people chose to convey information to Paul. The first was communicating through other able-bodied people in the room, typically Josie or me. The second was a shrill and sing-song cadence usually accompanied by slow and basic sentences, a combination usually reserved for children and small dogs. Though both were pervasive, the latter became almost expected.

One of the most destructive moments I witnessed came several months into the revision process, when Paul's twenty-year-old caregiver pinched his cheek while feeding him water. "You're just my little Gerber baby, aren't you?" she cooed while wiping the spoon on a napkin. Unsure of what to do, I watched as the moment unfolded. Within ten seconds, Paul's six decades of life had been downsized. Paul's sharp mental faculties, language skills, and the sheer fact we were there to edit and hone his autobiography seemed to mean nothing during this moment.

## II. THE REVISION PROCESS

If you don't preserve a person's splendid messiness, you silence or modify their voice: you change their voice. When you change or modify a voice, it's just as unforgiveable as silencing a voice.

– Chico Herbison

Before working with Paul, I had an established tutoring system. I developed certain patterns and assumptions about how I greeted people and interacted with their written piece. Typically, I would begin a session by asking the writer to find a seat in an area of the Center they felt comfortable. Once we were both seated and the writer had picked up a pen and filled out an author's note, we would eventually begin our conversation about their writing. Despite the whirlwind of noise that can easily scatter throughout the Center, we would work until the writer felt that they had enough raw materials to take home and knead back into their piece. After the session, hopefully both of us satisfied, the writer would walk out the door.

After I began working with Paul, I had to rethink and revise my original system. First, Paul already has a seat far superior to any plastic chair I could offer him in the Center. Second, Paul cannot move his hands without assistance, so his mind and our conversations were his pencils and paper.<sup>1</sup> Last, Paul's voice, though eloquent and sincere, needs amplification in order to be heard in a busy room. Though it took me a relatively short amount of time to figure out that my "foolproof" system was flawed, it took me far longer to figure out why.

Looking back, it terrifies me to think about how easy it could have been for me to negate Paul's voice in the midst of my own ignorant clamor. From the moment Josie and I began working with Paul on his autobiography, we struggled to understand if we were capable of supporting and amplifying Paul's voice without silencing it. Eventually, to combat this fear, Josie, Paul, and I decided to enact a revision process based mostly around dictation. When Paul communicated his ideas, Josie and I dutifully incorporated them into the piece. Every word or idea that we transcribed was meticulously reviewed by Paul. It seemed silly at times to be talking for fifteen minutes about four or five words, but it was what I needed to feel that our sessions revolved around agreement and consent.

Even after a year of this specialized revision process, I never found a magic answer. Usually, I just found more questions. Like many Evergreen students, I consider myself fairly conscientious and familiar with anti-oppression work. Also like many, I still battle my biases around disability. Even during the first edits of this article, the *Inkwell* editorial board helped me to become aware of my words and intentions when writing about this revision process. Without realizing it, my previous drafts had spoken for Paul, and in many ways had left him peripheral and voiceless. Becoming aware of this, as you may guess, was a hard blow. As a person who has dedicated over a year to supporting Paul's revision, I had felt entitled to my opinion on the

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1. Eventually Paul began to use a tetra-mouse, a mouth-operated device that enables him to compose pieces of writing on the computer.

do's and don'ts of what I had experienced. I had assumed that because I had been working with Paul for quite some time, I had the ability to accurately speak about *my* experience as well as *our* experience.

Working with Paul on his revision process has made me keenly aware of both my humility and humanity. As my work with Paul and the Kokua LEAD program winds down and he prepares to self-publish his book, I realize that the most challenging and unflattering experiences I have faced during Paul's revision have helped me to find my voice. Whatever my abilities, disabilities, or perceived disabilities are, I am messy. By choosing to embrace this splendid messiness, I was able to approach both what I needed to revise, and what I needed to accept, honestly and wholly.

# WHY DOES YOUR WRITING MATTER?

DOES IT ANSWER A QUESTION OR  
SOLVE A PROBLEM THE AUDIENCE HAS  
OR SHOULD HAVE?

WILL IT CONTRIBUTE TO A SOCIAL  
MOVEMENT OR CONVERSATION?



# “I DON’T KNOW, WHAT DO YOU THINK?”

## PERFORMING GENDER AT THE FORMICA TABLE

MARY KALLEM

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*In 1999, social psychologists Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Anthony Mulac, and Kathryn Dindia conducted a study on gendered communication patterns as seen within two-party conversations. Entitled “Gender-Preferential Language in Spouse and Stranger Interaction,” the study identified twenty conversational traits coded either as masculine or feminine. Question-asking was coded as feminine and appeared far more often in the speech patterns of female participants.*

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It only took a couple months of working at the Writing Center for me to realize the inflamed and frequently load-bearing intersection between my identities of woman and tutor. I often hear tutoring described as the art of holding space for another’s process: this is a beautiful definition with an uncanny resemblance to cultural expectations of women. In contrast to my male peers, whose precursor to employment was ten weeks of training, I had a lifetime of female socialization to equip me. Being patient, selfless, and helpful had always been obligations within my interpersonal relationships. When

I fulfilled them well, I was socially rewarded; when I strayed from this attentively gendered performance, I was either humiliated or ignored. Occupying the role of “listener” was not something I did for money, but as a requisite for respect.

It's easy to slip into a caricatured archetype of woman while tutoring, as I know this predictable performance has the potential to generate interpersonal comfort. Especially when I'm worn out or tutoring assertive men, I find myself attempting to minimize possible friction within a session by becoming the paragon of “feminine listener.” I adopt demure communication patterns; my vocal register shifts into higher tones; my questions leave less and less space for me to speak. **This is a time when I allow my gender, and not the labor of my craft, to define me as listener.** Within this context, it feels like I'm socially and economically profiting from my femininity.

Inversely, because so many of my relationships with men come at the expense of having to weather masculinity's micro-aggressions, I was initially wary about trusting men's ability to adopt a listening role. This was not a dismissal against individual male tutors, but an anxiety originating in my own trauma and distrust of confiding in men. If they had seldom listened to me, how could they listen to strangers? Could I trust a 10-week training course to override a lifetime of social programming? Men, too, must continuously perform their gender or risk losing their own social collateral.

Outside of the Center, my speech patterns lie well within the tender and emotionally laborious legacy of traditional femininity: after all, I learned how to speak from my mother and sisters, the nurturers of the Kallem family. I exhaust myself fine-tuning my many questions in an attempt to render them as “answerable” as possible. In turn, I measure the success of my conversations by my partner's engagement. If I don't understand a sentence, a word, an idea, I disclose this vulnerability and ask for clarification. I demonstrate my attentiveness through soft, epiglottal offerings, sighing out, “mhm” and “uh-huh” when appropriate. Passed down through generations,



these patterns are cultural inheritances: the only drastic divergence I've made from this linguistic genealogy has been a heightened sense of self-awareness about it. History and privilege have intertwined to provide me politicized insight into the mechanics of gendered language. I know that the topography of my speech is pocked with question marks, and that these patterns came into being because of my conditioning.

It's critical to note that although I recognize my complicity in this performance of gender, I haven't dropped inquisitive intonations from my register. I haven't stopped muttering "mhm" or bobbing my head. Although I have allowed my voice to swell with greater confidence, I have no intention of becoming a worse listener or sacrificing the sincere pleasure I derive from asking questions. Only retroactively do I recognize that my decision to become a writing tutor was a means of honing the craft of listening, allowing my question marks to become powerful didactic tools in addition to their everyday discursive function.

Hugely sculpted by our writing center's rhetoric, my personal tutoring practice aims to enfranchise listening as an active and productive undertaking, not merely passive and consumptive. Obviously I consider question-asking and listening valuable enough to refine them into a domain of "expertise," thus institutionalizing the craft as an epistemologically valuable activity. By doing so, I pay my dues to the emotional laborers who have made this world livable. I seek to hold a space where educational healing may take place, allowing the writer who sits across the table to finally feel listened to. Although listening is a skill set systematically conditioned into women, we aren't the only ones whose voices are taken away. Regardless of gender, the education system disciplines students into silence: "the student body" serves as synonym for "audience." Student voices are rarely viewed as epistemologically valid. In a system where few actually feel heard, my coworkers and I are the first to provide the service of listening. This is a position I am honored to hold.

Yes, I expect dominant culture to impact the operation of a college resource center—exemption from historical context is never an



option. No matter how visionary our pedagogical theory is, our practice will always be tempered by insidious oppression dynamics. Yet, like many have argued, tutoring has the potential to be a radical and transformative act.<sup>1</sup>

Although I'm not in the business of congratulating people for committing acts of decency, I do think there is something remarkably subversive about self-aware male tutorship. By altering their communication habits, men are reworking routes of privilege and expectations of gender performance. They are learning how to listen, even if it means working against their privilege as a speaker. Although I still find myself reticent to be tutored by a man, my trust of them is on the upswell. I am ensconced in a rare place, surrounded by men working toward unlearning socially-conditioned behavior. I am also lucky to find myself employed in a writing center that carries an ethos and praxis of anti-oppression, where I trust my coworkers to be wary of institutionalizing their privilege within their positions as employees.

To recode listening as a human attribute and not a feminine one is to work against our—and our writing center's—historical context. I only make one demand, and that is to see this hard work be continued outside the Writing Center's walls, both institutionally and independently. Specifically, I would like to see the men in my life make a concerted effort toward becoming better listeners and acquainting themselves with question marks—besides being the signs of a good tutor, these are also signs of an ally. Sometimes, the reciprocity needed is just a question in return.

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1. Victoria Larkin, "Tutoring as a Radical Act: Changing the World One by One," *Inkwell* 1, 2006, 6-8.

## ON THIS ESSAY

The study referenced in this essay did not consider the ways that gender-variant identities impact the formation and performance of conversation patterns, rendering it not just incomplete but problematic. My article does not include a discussion of gender-variant identities and tutoring dynamics, primarily because I am speaking from my own experiences as a cisgender woman. My intention is not one of exclusion, but that may be an unintended effect. It is pressing important for more work to be done around issues of gender and peer tutoring in order to change this pattern of erasure.

Interpersonal dynamics are established according to inestimable variables, and gender performance is only one of these influences. Interactions are mediated by the inextricable tangles of race, class, physical and mental abilities, and age, to name a few. These social markers impact the way we communicate, just like femininity and masculinity. My experiences are in no way capable of being universalized, as they're rooted in my composite identity and the identities of those around me.

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# IS YOUR TOPIC SAFE OR CONTROVERSIAL?

ARE YOU “PREACHING TO THE CHOIR,”  
OR CHALLENGING THE OPPOSITION?

HOW WILL YOU ADDRESS YOUR  
READERS’ BIASES?



# ON THE GROUND

ALISON ROSA CLARK

AUTHOR'S INSTRUCTIONS: "READ THIS OUT LOUD!"

From the time I took my first *Introduction to Sociology* course—spring semester 2010, at Community College of Philadelphia—I have reflected on how my identities were created and influenced by, or were in reaction to, social forces. I came into this world on the first wedding anniversary of my parents, Leonard Clark and Erma Lee Williams Clark. My father was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and my mother, in Toledo, Ohio. In the early 1950s, they were a young, Negro, working-class couple, attempting to make a life in the big city of Chicago, Illinois. But they were not alone. I don't know the chronology of when their extended family members arrived, but I did have grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins in the city.

My sister and three brothers arrived on the scene within a twelve-year period. I was too young to fully appreciate what was going on in the world when President John F. Kennedy was shot on November 22, 1963. I had my hands full with sibling rivalries; with rats, roaches and Raid, in south-side and west-side ghetto apartments; with overworked, underpaid parents; with prejudiced parochial and public school teachers; with questions about the legitimacy of Roman Catholicism and the Church; and with my pre-adolescent maturation.

My purview expanded with news of the Civil Rights Movement, and the arrival of the Beatles. Assassinations of beloved leaders, civil

uprisings, police shootings in Chicago and around the nation, and the neo-Nazi Party in the western suburbs. We were all “fit-to-be-tied,” as the saying goes. My parents didn’t want to let their children—especially the boys—out of their sight. Fear was the daily bread. Anxiety was the milk. There was so much for me to learn about how to survive, and I was very inquisitive, which sometimes annoyed my mother to no end.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to add his voice and presence to the 1966 campaign for fair housing in Chicago, I wanted so much to be there, among the throng. But my parents wouldn’t hear it! So I had to satisfy myself with television, radio, and newspaper reportage. After King left Chicago, I took public transportation west to Marquette Park, the “conflict zone,” to see the Brown Shirts for myself, as they handed out literature and petitioned the residents to keep outsiders out of their neighborhoods. I stayed on the bus and watched them through the window. When I rode back to my community, I could barely walk home. Housing segregation was then what gentrification is today: a diabolical tool of social control for power and profit.

I came of age during the great social and political agitations of the 1960s and 1970s. Black power, feminism, gay liberation, resistance to war, global indigenous sovereignty, anti-imperialism, environmental justice, and ecology forged in me complex and multifaceted identities. Today I walk with awareness of the great tribulations and sacrifices endured by my parents, my ancestors, and by contemporaneous peoples determined to recover and reclaim their/our wholeness/ oneness. I also walk with how sensitive and outraged I have become to indifference, justified brutality, and rapacious sociopathy.

While I embrace what appears to be the relative privilege of seeking more education—a kind of vision quest—I struggle with this question: **How can I turn what I learn into something of value?** What can I contribute to the body politic? Through personal scholarship, occasionally provocative discourse, and exhilarating student collaborations in *Making Effective Change: Social Movement*

*Organizing and Activism*, I am reminded that the Authentic Self matters. We need each other's respect, compassion, empathy, and candor to foster real, substantive change.

To the Evergreen classroom and community, I bring all I am and all I hope to be. I bring the fears and realities of economic, housing, and food insecurity. I bring the anxieties about being unseen, unheard, and dismissed. The canary that is my spirit is battered and bruised; and although my soul is bone-weary, I am not yet dead. Over the years, many family, friends, and acquaintances have been stricken down by cancer, suicide, AIDS, or random—and particular—acts of violence, but I have survived. And in continuing, it is my job—indeed, my responsibility—to share, encourage, and provide passionate, visceral testimony to life.

## ABOUT THIS WRITING

A version of *On the Ground* was one of the winners of The Evergreen State College 2013 Academic Statement Essay Contest.

Learn more about the Academic Statement initiative at Evergreen at <http://www.evergreen.edu/academicstatement>.

# HER SOUL

## AN EPILOGUE

DORIAN EBERLY

Tutoring became vibrant when I met Alison Rosa Clark.

I recognized the depths of her living knowledge and her talent of articulation early in our tutoring sessions. Whether she focused on individual texts or synthesized her collective program materials, her voice revealed storms and fire. She wrote without fear, with a provocative edge, and I listened, questioned, rapt.

I asked her to explain, to unpack her thoughts, and I tested her writing process until I thought she might abandon me. But as we cultivated our peership with time and trust, we built a bridge of sorts that connected us somewhere between her survival and my privilege, her tenacity and my disadvantaged perspective, and we recognized and confessed our diversity.

As I worked with Alison Rosa, I assigned myself a social responsibility in our tutor-writer relationship to acknowledge her history and passion as it relates to her work. I understand now that the gifts she lends to us as readers are born from the soul of her experiences. I invite you to read her work again, with unhurried patience, for this writer lends you her soul.



# A REFLECTION

WORKING WITH  
ALISON ROSA CLARK

TOM CARLSON

It has been a privilege to work, speak, and share with Ms. Alison Rosa Clark. Tutoring with her meant more than wrestling with sentences and paragraphs. It meant close scrutiny of our backgrounds, our assumptions, and our roles within academia. In translating her energy, exuberance, and tremendous insight into the written form, I must acknowledge the limitations of the form, the respect I must maintain, and my responsibility as, really, a mere messenger.

My time at Evergreen has taught me how gingerly and warily I must step, how vastly dimensional the consequences of my thinking and acting are. Working with Ms. Clark meant frequently confronting the, at times triggering, implications behind my words. This deepened my understanding of who and where, geographically and historically, I am. By looking squarely at my ignorance, I was able to grapple critically with the demands of higher education, the Euro-imperial paradigm that the written word is pursued within—that our very being is subject to restriction within.

What is the task of Western academia? How does it serve empire? How much of education can be understood, as she has put it, as a “tool of social control?” Who has a cultural “leg up,” is more comfortable



within this framework of socialization, and who is asked to amputate particular pieces of their identity before they are allowed to even participate in what we call education?

What is writing for? When are we writing to perform or show or demonstrate, perhaps in order to ascend some social ladder? And how often can we write to share, to enhance a better understanding of ourselves and strengthen the bonds within our community? Furthermore, when we have the opportunity to share, how able are we to even utilize it? Are we taught *how* to? Working and struggling with Ms. Clark meant ruminating on these questions.

She described her writing process as an attempt to interpret herself, her heart, and her history. “I’m wary, because the words I write down matter to me.”

Do my words matter to me? Do I even know how to locate what matters to me? Or am I scribbling so that I can check a box?

Ms. Clark has said multiple times, “My writing is not centered in the head.” Where else can it be centered? **What is writing that is centered in the heart and soul?** How often is what we write recognized as an interpretation of our experiences, sensations, vulnerabilities, and what we hold most intimate and sacred? Working with Ms. Clark meant trying, *trying* to “show up from the inside out.”

That’s hard. I still struggle to understand what she means. The English language vainly provides some dusty catch-alls: authenticity, genuineness.

“People of color don’t have the luxury of not bringing their whole selves,” she said. What are the contents of the whole self? There is our history, background, our skin, our body, the assumptions we make, the assumptions others make of us, our taste. What else? There is the intangible, my core emotional responses: what makes me giggle, sob, feel ashamed, and feel horrified. Are we getting somewhere? These lists are hopelessly short, the attempts themselves fall into the old

Western habit of atomization—and I thought we were talking about the *whole* self.

There can never be a sum total of the self, and the very idea is repulsive. People are too big for data sets; we have to respect the dignity of the soul. And there is no sum total that captures what Ms. Clark taught me and what she shared with me. I will say this: my ignorance runs deep and recognizing its dimensionality will never be complete, but I am beginning, *beginning* to understand how to bring my whole self. So far, it means widening my conscientiousness by allowing my ignorance to transcend the selfish confines of embarrassment—my naiveté is an opportunity to deepen my sensitivity. It means speaking and walking with integrity, and wearing my heart. I am grateful for knowing her and eager to keep learning.

WHY IS THIS WRITING  
IMPORTANT TO YOU?

OR, HOW COULD  
YOU SHAPE IT  
TO BE?



# USE YOUR WORDS

## MAKING ROOM FOR AGENCY IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS

SHAINA FAY

More recently than I want to admit, I ripped apart someone's writing.

What I said wasn't wrong, per se, but that's not the point. Everything about how I did it was. I was in a program that involved weekly peer-critique, and—[*record scratch.*]

Wait. Let's start here before we go any further.

"Critique." "Review." Even the terms we use imply our adherence to models of feedback that set the reader up as an authority, usually over a piece that has nothing to do with them. Somewhere in the formulation of the feedback process in American academic writing, everyone forgot about the writer. And for the most part, I've seen student writers either ignore that fact entirely or shrug their shoulders, content to accept someone else's authority over their writing, to be told whether their writing is "good" or not, or what is "wrong," regardless of what they actually want from or prioritize about their own writing.

Which is fine, I guess, if you're looking at writing as a product to be consumed and think that a writer's work should be dissected as "good" or "worth reading" the way *Consumer Reports* rates the new

Toyota Camry. But it doesn't leave room for a living process, or for the writer—or, for that matter, the reader—to advocate for themselves, to define what they want out of the feedback process or their writing in general. **It's supposed to make writing better, but doesn't allow writers to define what "better" means to them.**

So the feedback that student writers receive often runs the gamut, from inspiring to bafflingly irrelevant, banally positive ("Good job!") to completely hurtful, and only the people who receive it know how much the feedback we ourselves give may miss its mark in turn.

Even in programs where professors attempt to circumvent those models, many students are so used to top-down feedback that it can feel alien to try to bring communication into the process. Put on the spot and told to "critique," students emulate the tools that have been used on them.

We correct grammatical mistakes, or make vague and unclear notes about things being "vague" and "unclear." We throw darts of opinion wildly into the darkness and hope at least one hits its target. This approach to feedback misses a fundamental point: the writer can be the one to decide what a piece of writing means to them and to request the feedback they need for their purposes.

When I ripped apart that other student's writing, I wasn't even thinking about what she might want. It was all about my priorities. I thought I saw significant problems, so I told her, and not too delicately—even though it was so early in her drafting process, even though I had no personal investment in the outcome of the story. It felt good. Then it felt bad. But seriously? I think it wasted both of our time.

Taking agency, in this piece, means recognizing the choices that you have the power to make within the feedback process, both as a giver and receiver of feedback. Centering the feedback process around personal agency facilitates effective feedback through explicit, intentional

communication about each person's expectations and priorities. On a larger scale, it recognizes writers' authority over their own lives and writing, and respects their capability to decide what role a given piece of writing should play within those processes.

Feedback is a monolith when it should be individualized. In order to engage in an agency-centered feedback process, both the reader and writer must understand what they are asking of each other. Most importantly, that understanding must be created, not assumed, and must be reevaluated every time, in every feedback relationship. It is work, but it is worth it.



# I. CHECKING IN WITH YOURSELF

WRITER: WHAT ARE YOUR WANTS AND PRIORITIES FOR THIS FEEDBACK SESSION? WHAT DOES THIS PIECE, AND YOUR WRITING PROCESS IN GENERAL, MEAN TO YOU?

In order to be able to tell your reader what you want, you have to know what you want. If you've never been in a position to articulate those ideas, you might not know yet, and that's fine. Don't stress out about it. You will gain more understanding each time you go through this process.

Maybe you already know certain things, like you don't want to deal with grammar until you're almost done and don't want your reader to focus on it. Or maybe you know this draft is not your best work and just want to put that out there.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- What's your history with this piece?
- What do you feel good about?
- What are you having trouble with?
- What are your goals for the feedback session? Try to be specific, e.g. "I have some things written but mostly I want to brainstorm."

READER: WHAT YOU ARE BRINGING TO THE FEEDBACK PROCESS?

Authorities are faceless, needless, objective. You are a human with a history, needs, emotions, and baggage. Recognize this. Whether you realize it or not, your approach to writing is shaped by the things you prioritize and value. You're certainly welcome to invite the writer to reflect on them, but you don't get to decide if other people want the same things as you.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- What's your relationship with the writer like? How will it affect the way you approach this process?
- What investment do you have in the outcome of this writing?
- Are you working to help the writer, or are you using the feedback process as a platform to negate your own vulnerability, create a soapbox to prove your intelligence, or take moments of power over other people?

## II. CHECKING IN WITH EACH OTHER

WRITER: ONCE YOU'VE FIGURED OUT YOUR GOALS, ARTICULATE THEM TO YOUR READER AS BEST YOU CAN.

Part of expecting things from your reader is giving them the right information and tools to support you. One way to do that is with a written or verbal author's note: a way to qualify your piece so that your reader can know what feedback is valuable and what might be redundant or ineffective. We use author's notes at the Writing Center to help facilitate our sessions; feel free to come in and pick one up or ask more questions.

An example author's note could be:

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"This is my third draft of this essay. My first two drafts were more focused on [this aspect] of [this topic], but on this draft I started focusing more on [this aspect]. I'm still figuring it out, so I'm looking for feedback on how well my ideas fit together. I know I don't totally have a clear thesis yet. I'm also curious about whether my organization is working to transition well between these ideas, particularly the transition between [this thing] and [that thing]. Thanks!"

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Your author's note can be as long or as short as you want, but the more information you give, the more tools your reader will have at their disposal. Try to be as specific as you can—for example, what exactly do you mean when you ask questions like, “Does this make sense?”

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- Are you putting your reader in a position of higher authority or expertise than they feel comfortable or willing to be?
- Have you made sure your reader can show up for you in the ways you need? For example, if you want to argue their points, do they feel like arguing back? If you need them to be sensitive about certain things, can they be?
- If it becomes apparent that you are not a good match for each other, do you still want to go through with this feedback process? What could make this feedback relationship work?

READER: ALLOW THE WRITER TO ARTICULATE WHAT THEY WANT FROM THE FEEDBACK PROCESS. LISTEN AND COMMUNICATE TO MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE WRITER WANTS AND PRIORITIZES.

This is your time to clarify and ask questions. If a writer has included an author's note or otherwise requested that you focus or do not focus on certain things, verify that you're on the same page.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- Do you understand what your writer is asking of you?
- Do you feel prepared and capable of giving them the kind of feedback they've asked for?

### III. GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

WRITER: LISTEN OPENLY. YOU HAVE CHOICES IN HOW YOU RESPOND TO THE FEEDBACK YOU RECEIVE.

Recognize that the feedback you receive is being shaped by another person's opinions and experiences; it's not an absolute truth. Get multiple opinions. Take what you need and remember that you can accept something as "true" without being obligated to use that feedback right now. If you are told something "doesn't make sense" or "doesn't work," ask clarifying questions. Trust yourself, and believe in yourself enough to be able to listen to feedback that is negative. Ultimately, if it makes you want to stop writing, ignore it.

READER: GIVE FEEDBACK RESPONSIVELY WHILE KEEPING YOUR WRITER'S REQUESTS IN MIND.

Think of your feedback more as one half of a conversation than a polemic. You are not a source of definitive answers or objective truth. You are filtering your opinion through your own experiences. Be honest about that, with yourself and your writer. Remember the ways that your writer has made themselves vulnerable to you. In a peer-review process, it may soon be your turn to be the vulnerable writer.

# A FEW MORE THINGS

“BUT I LIKE HAVING MY WRITING TORN APART!”

This comes up every time I talk to someone about feedback. If this sort of “tough love” is something you like about the feedback process, that’s your choice, and something that needs to be clarified, whether you are the writer or the reader. (As a request, it’s pretty vague, by the way. Do you want your writing torn apart structurally? Conceptually? Grammatically?) Wanting it tough doesn’t make you smarter or a better writer than someone else—it just means that it’s something that works for you. Recognize that you are a person whose preferences fit comfortably within the traditional feedback model, so you might have to be more conscious of how you work with people whose preferences don’t. Also, consider whether your reliance on other people to tell you what’s wrong with your writing means depending on someone else’s role as an authority, rather than working to enhance your own abilities and authority over your writing.

## ON PROFESSOR/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

This article is primarily directed at the feedback process between two writers who are partners in peer-critique: classmates, a student writer and a student tutor, or two friends. That said, student writers can advocate for themselves by using many of these agency-centered tools in their professor/student relationships. For example, an author’s note can enable students to get the feedback they want while helping professors use their limited time and energy most effectively. However, the professor’s position of authority will ultimately affect the feedback process in a way that two students working together will not.

WHAT CONTOURS OF YOUR  
WRITING ARE ALREADY VISIBLE?  
WHAT IS PREDETERMINED AND WHAT IS  
OPEN?



# BEYOND THE SHINING IDOL

CHLOË BRADLEY  
SILAS JOHNSON

To endeavor toward a completed essay is to approach an unsolvable problem. Every idea, every opinion, every notion we possess will never find its way to another mind in its original form. When we communicate, each interaction asymptotically approaches our initial thought in the mind of our listener. College professors, however, want these thoughts on paper, flawlessly formatted, immaculately worded, gradable, testable, markable, and most importantly: whole. For students, who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, the essay can be muddled by expectations and requirements; academic language, complex prompts, and fear of negative feedback threaten to overwhelm a writer.

The first use of the word “essay” is attributed to an influential French writer named Michel de Montaigne, but it was only once his British contemporary Francis Bacon began to describe his own writings as essays that the term became widely used. The French verb *essayer* means “to try,” and, further back in its etymological history, meant “to test the mettle of, or put to trial.” It suggests unpolished writing, and its use in American academia is a bastardized version, far removed from the original French. In fact, the twelve-point, Times New Roman, double-spaced, and single-sided papers we’ve so often faced are listed

as the third definition for essay in Merriam-Webster's dictionary after the long-forgotten "to test" and "to try." The priority of these definitions reveals that the complex structures and opaque verbiage we've come to expect from "good" writing are superfluous. Bacon used the word to alter the metric of writing, prioritizing exposition over formalities. **During its infancy, the essay was embraced as a release from the strict rubric of traditional academic writing.** How did it become a formulaic mass-manufactured piece, a shining idol of academic competence?

The true nature of the essay implies rough edges, a handmade sincerity that says, "These are my thoughts, as clearly as I could depict them. They are unfinished, waiting for you, the reader, to make what you will with them." There's a professor at Evergreen who never likes to talk about writing as being "done." He emphasizes that a piece of writing is ever evolving, that you could edit and rewrite and revise the same paragraph a hundred different times. Keeping this perspective can be an important strategy for avoiding writer's block: let go of the desire for a perfect essay, and be willing to regard a piece as "due, never done." If we allow ourselves to accept the knowledge that our writing will forever be unfinished, it releases us from the pressure of a blank page begging for perfection. Without the fear of missing this imaginary target, the process and provenience alike finally become approachable.

Unfortunately, such an easy-going attitude towards essays is not common, nor easy to develop, and mention of an essay assignment can stir up apprehension, procrastination, and dread. Submitting your essay to your professor doesn't afford you the instant feedback of a personal conversation, which makes the process feel especially daunting. Since we, as individuals, cannot see into the minds of our readers, each and every essay we aspire to write requires a head-on confrontation with the unknown. To begin with the intention of getting everything 100% right naturally feels overwhelming. When you encounter this obstacle, remember that you as the writer are not alone! Communication goes both ways, and readers share the



responsibility of interpreting ideas. Despite appearances, writing is anything but a solitary task: your readers can make new connections between your ideas, analyze your language, and discover untold perspectives. Communicating with your readers and receiving their questions and feedback will help you iterate toward an essay with which you are completely satisfied.

In academic writing, the guidelines of a perfect essay follow a rigid and terribly uninspiring formula. As the essay developed throughout the centuries, certain effective strategies of argument and diction became recognizable and gained repeated use. However, in order to teach academic writing, professors saw fit to mold these informal techniques into intimidating requirements and rubrics that allowed them to quickly evaluate every piece of writing they received—scrawling bright marks along the margins and cryptic symbols between the sentences they deemed unworthy. These comments may or may not come as a surprise, but they often feel like direct attacks on us or our ideas as authors, rather than assessments. By repeating this pattern throughout academia, teachers have firmly planted themselves into the role of editorial board in the minds of their students. Ideally, feedback should be taken (and given) as a chance to improve the clarity of a piece, and professors needn't hold a monopoly over editing and revision. The grammatical errors your professor criticizes may seem cold, distant, and unrelated to your thesis, but these changes can clarify and strengthen the way your ideas impact your readers.

All communication is flawed, and all we can do as writers is try. Being a writer often means finding contentment with imperfection. We tweak our words, their order, and their implications. We use thesis statements and transition words to guide readers through our thoughts, hoping that they reach conclusions similar to our own. And it is time that we stop claiming our authorship timidly, in fear of critiques and edits. It's time we claim our attempts as fabulous, messy, intricate *essayers*. It's time we embrace the trials and the drafts, and celebrate them for what they are: triumphs of process and revision, lumpy and imperfect, but earnest endeavors to communicate.

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I'D

CARYN DUDLEY

A variety wide  
of ways of linguistic expression  
| Restricted so, so restricted |  
Ideas in numbered sets  
little rows, neat  
OVERRATED, grammar is  
"Training of the soul"  
or  
chaining of the mind?

AUTHORITY  
decides?, Who  
Power, where none there is  
Freedom  
    can cause  
        discomfort  
    can cause  
freedom  
rather be free, I'd

INKWELL WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING  
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