Writing Prompt

YOU ARE WHAT YOU READ

This writing prompt relieves the writer of sole responsibility for the invention that the blank page demands. So, it's a good game to play if you are feeling blocked.

Reveal your secret self

This exercise works best when approached with a spirit of experiement, discovery and play. It comes to us from a group of French avante-garde poets called the Oulipians—mathematicians who believed no matter what you do to language, it has patterns of meaning that can't be broken.

1) Write your name vertically in capital letters down one side of a piece of paper.

2) Set the paper aside and gather ten or so of your favorite texts.

This set could include your favorite novels and poems, but also the liner notes from your favorite CD, your favorite cereal box or old love letters too.

3) Next, assign each letter of your name a number based on it's place in the alphabet. For example, A = 1 and Z = 26.

4) Now, pick up any one of your favorite texts, look at the first letter of your name, and based on your numbering system, turn to that page in a novel or count down to the corresponding line on your cereal box.

5) Look for the nearest word that begins with the letter you are using. For example, if the first letter of your name is a D, and you have scanned to song four of your favorite liner notes, you are now looking for the first words that begins with D.

6) On the sheet you set aside, copy out that word and all words that follow it until you've completly copied the line or sentence.

For example, turning to song four of the liner notes, the first word that begins with D might result in the following first line of your poem:

December 26, 1963 #1 for seven weeks

7) Continue on, alternating texts until you have a line of found poetry for every letter in your name.

8) Re-read your poem, look for any surprises. You may find things you didn't know about yourself revealed in the texts you adore.

POETRY

Train from Providence

By Frances Lozano

Poet & Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Traveling under a cloudy sky,
Rolling through a muted countryside,
The train moves steadily forward,
And my thoughts turn
To that which came before me
To things which are right now,
And to what, perhaps, is to come,
As I try to find a single strand to connect them all.

Sleepy, indolent miles.
Who first began to fish here,
To farm berries or to build these villages?
Who lives here now under these green trees and by these birded waterways?
Who was I when I first rode this train, and who have I become?

As I consider the pieces of my life,
Some on this coast and some far away,
The connections between them uncertain,
I think that somehow this long, suspended moment between stations
Should hold a key, a clue to my direction.
But my thoughts fly by like random vistas
And do not coalesce into a single focus,
Like this train that reaches no permanent destination,
Just stops at endless stations along its way.

I remember sitting in my first college English classroom here at Gavilan, just three years after emmigrating from El Salvador not yet feeling confident speaking English much less writing it.

My teacher went on and on, talking about main ideas, thesis statements, organization, transitions, and proper citation. Little sense all these components made back then. I felt I was given several pieces of a puzzle without really knowing how to put them together. Right then, I realized that learning to write at college was basically learning a different language within the English language itself.

I had to learn what it was expected from me as a writer, using the language I now call academic writing, which for me is using a more sophisticated and formal writing voice than I usually do.

When first introduced to this type of writing, I felt overwhelmed and limited. I wrote in fear, constantly asking myself, "Am I writing what they want me to write? How do they want me to write? Am I doing it correctly?"

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Me, you and the academy

Academic writing is hard to define, even for people within the academy. All of the English teachers I asked had a different concept of academic writing. For example, one said it's an attempt to appropriate aspects of scientific reasoning for less than scientific purposes while another said it's all about explaining something and analyzing it at the same time.

But every time I think of the academy I just cannot avoid thinking of a bunch of British guys with white beards discussing if a new word should be introduced to the dictionary or not.

The only problem with my picture of the academy is that it is not the right one or the only one.

The academy is the educational institution and community we are part of right now—the college, the university, the instructors, other students etc… If you keep that in mind, academic writing becomes a useful tool when it comes to expressing your thoughts.

Because academic writing tends to be taken more seriously readers, it creates the opportunity for writers to communicate their ideas as powerfully, clearly and precisely as possible. At the heart of this is the thesis statement.

The thesis statement: Code for expressing opinions

Every good academic essay needs a thesis statement. But even the concept of the thesis statement, a single sentence near the beginning of your essay, can be hard to grasp. According to Erin Crook, an English teacher here at Gavilan, "Topic + the writer's opinion = thesis statement."

For me, a thesis statement is simply about having a clear idea of what you're going to write and maintaining it throughout the essay. However, for some others, the thesis is basically one of the last writing steps, which can only be found once the paper is done.

But even as you juggle your thesis, all your ideas, analysis, and all your support, in academic essays you also have put them together using "proper" language. "Proper" language refers to correct spelling, grammar, syntax, and good vocabulary among other important elements.

The writer must stay away from slang, unsupported opinions, fragments that do not help to the fluidity of the paper and pieces of writing without a main purpose.

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And every idea that is not your own must be credited, meaning you must tell your reader where you found it with citations.

Academic writing key to freedom or tool of oppression?

Because of all this, I sometimes see academic writing as limiting my freedom as a writer. There are so many rules to follow and so many writing strategies that can't be used in an academic essay. For example, you can't write in first person, or use the type of language you typically do, or have a free flow of ideas since academic writing is in big part about structure. This makes academic writing a difficult genre to conquer.

After becoming even more familiar with academic writing, I started to notice and sometimes believe that this specific type of writing is just another way to keep the masses oppressed and silent since most people don't know how to communicate their ideas using academic writing.

It naturally excludes those writers who don't feel comfortable with it from having a voice within the academy.

Sometimes I feel like it would be easier for me to transmit my ideas if I did not have to write them using vocabulary I don't usually use or if I didn't write in a structured way, using paragraphs, intro, body, conclusion, etc...

As a writing assistant, I get to help students with brilliant and clear ideas. But they often freeze when they have

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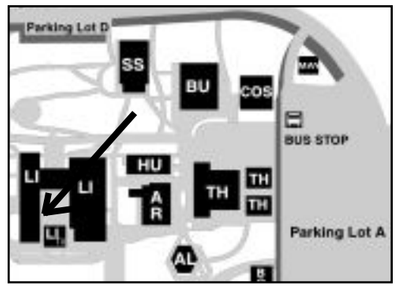

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