

# Who Teaches Writing?



# WHO TEACHES WRITING?

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# INTRODUCTION

Dr. Joshua Daniel

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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=22#audio-22-1>

*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to the chapter.*

Welcome to First-Year Writing (FYW) at [Oklahoma State University](#). FYW is a university-wide effort comprised of various stakeholders across campus, including the [First-Year Composition](#) courses you take (English 1113/1313 and 1213/1413), [The University Writing Center](#), the [Edmon Low Library](#), the [OpenOkState Fellows Program](#), and many different graduate programs which train and supply those writing instructors who teach your courses. In addition to teaching you the writing practices and concepts you will need to succeed in FYC, this textbook will introduce you to many of these stakeholders and their investments in writing within and outside of Oklahoma State University.

First-Year Composition is, in fact, the only required course for all incoming students at every public university in the United States. Why? It may surprise you to learn that the answer is complex and many historians—such as [Robert Connors](#), [James Berlin](#), [Susan Miller](#), [Victor Villanueva and Kristen Arola](#), [Sharon Crowley](#), [Ryan Skinnell](#), and [Tyler Branson](#)—have written on the subject across multiple decades. A too-short, over-simplified answer is that university teachers and administrators recognized long ago that to have the best chance of success in college, students must be able to read, analyze, and write texts well. But here is the big secret: you will not leave FYW at Oklahoma State as an expert writer, nor will you leave FYW fully formed and capable of writing well in all genres and situations, even academic. However, all students everywhere are capable of becoming excellent writers, and all students who write often and work at their writing with intent will improve. Our big, broad goals in your FYC classes are to help you improve in your writing (often this means becoming more confident in your writing, or even just dreading writing a bit less) and for you to leave the course having developed some good habits to help you improve throughout your life. Much like exercise, if you take one aerobics class you will not be transformed into an expert gymnast now and for all time. However, if you keep working at it consistently over time, you can become a master of your craft.

A major secret to writing success is simple: find ways to enjoy it more and fear it less. Think about it. If you dread that aerobics class, you will find reasons not to go. You will not like everything about writing (I definitely don't) nor will you like everything about your FYC class. Find the joy where you can find it and lean into that. Great writing comes from people who take great joy in writing. Moreover, all writers, like all athletes, will improve with respect to the work and dedication they apply. Both also improve better and faster with an expert helping them along the way. Think of your writing instructor as that expert guide and trainer. They are here to help you exercise your writing, which may include exorcizing some writing demons (think of procrastination and binge writing). I promise you that your writing instructor loves writing, and they want to share that joy with you. We are here to help.

## Who Teaches Writing?

The above question serves both as the title and the central organizing concept of this book. As you will see from the various readings in this textbook and your time within the First-Year Writing program at Oklahoma State University, a great many professionals across

a range of academic disciplines teach writing with a variety of approaches. While every course in FYC has the same 4 basic units and uses a common textbook, those units are intentionally described broadly. As you skim, you will note *Who Teaches Writing* is divided into four sections; these sections correspond to your four major units in English 1113/1313 and include a range of short essays to teach you concepts to help you with your assignments. *Who Teaches Writing* uses a wide range of approaches in order to maximize the ability of your instructor to teach writing from a position of their own expertise and to maximize the ability of students to approach learning to write from their own interests. Your instructor may be an expert in Shakespearean literature, or feminist methodologies, rhetorical theory, or something whack-a-doo like videogames (that would be me, by the way) but they all know how to write and how to teach you to write better and more effectively. The English Department at OSU has five program areas (Creative Writing; Film & Media Studies; Linguistics; Literature; and Rhetoric & Writing Studies) and our instructors likewise have a diverse range of voices and expertise. This is the fundamental strength of our FYC Program. Scholarship on student success and retention is clear on this fact: all students, regardless of their backgrounds, beliefs, and political persuasions, benefit when they hear from a wide range of voices and write often and with range. This textbook and the curriculum to which it corresponds provide that.

If you take some time to browse the textbook, you should notice that each chapter provides one possible answer to the book's title. *Who Teaches Writing*? In one chapter, Dr. Sarah Beth Childers shows us how "A Memoirist Teaches Narrative." In another, Dr. Anna Sicari shows us how "A Feminist Teaches Writing through Institutional Ethnography." Dr. Charlotte Hogg explains how "A Former First-Year Comp Student Teaches Narrative," and Dr. Josiah Meints diagrams how "A Sports Rhetorician Teaches Evaluation." In short, these chapters collectively illustrate what I believe is *the* answer to the book's central question. **A lot of people teach writing in a lot of ways.** By foregrounding that fact, our FYC courses maximize the range of concepts and types of writing to which you are exposed. While they introduce you to a lot of concepts, these chapters are intentionally as jargon-free as possible. Any important terms are introduced and defined for you in chapters of about 10 pages. We made these chapters as readable as possible because, well, *we want you to read them*, and we know managing time as a first-year student can be a challenge. While we have scholars from 7 different universities in the book, many of our contributors are right here at Oklahoma State. Google them. Swing by their office. As you read their chapters, search hard for something you like, something that makes sense to you, something that you find fun or interesting. Start from there. Write a lot. You will improve. Hey, and how's this? If this textbook doesn't help you become a better writer, I will personally refund your money. Guaranteed.

## Open Education at Oklahoma State University

*Who Teaches Writing* is an Open Educational Resource (OER). This means the book is free (It was a good joke, right?). When I became Director of FYC in June of 2020, one of the first things I did was survey instructors and students to learn what they thought of the program. At that time, the program had two commercial textbooks students were required to purchase, and we were in negotiations with another textbook company to add a third. Many things became clear when I talked to students and instructors, but two points are relevant here: 1) instructors hated using the textbooks; 2) students hated the textbooks and generally did not do the reading. I don't think that is because instructors or students are lazy; I think it's because commercial textbooks generally aren't very good. The reason for this is they, as products that need to be marketed and sold for profit, need to be as applicable as possible in as many contexts as possible. In other words, the textbooks we were using stood the best chance of being profitable if they were equally as useful at OSU as they would be at OU, or UC Davis, or NYU. See the problem? Even though many commercial textbooks are quite good, by being applicable in so many contexts, they are never as good as they could be in any specific context. This book was built by and for the instructors and students in *this FYW program right here*. Moreover, when we find problems, we get to update it as you go (none of that, "Do I have to purchase the third edition, or can I get by with the second edition?").

So that's a reason to embrace Open Education: the textbooks are better. Here is another. Education is both a **right** for every human being and a **responsibility** for every democratic nation. Speaking as a 90's child now staggered by student loan debt, I can tell you with certainty you are already paying more than enough for your education, and textbooks for FYC should not add to that

burden. All told, if you calculate the three textbooks previously in use and under consideration, students were spending just under *half a million dollars per academic year on commercial textbooks*. This for textbooks that instructors hated and students did not read. Not the best investment, at least not for us. I believe all of you have a right to pursue education as far as you wish, and a small way we can help enable that is to remove as many barriers to entry as possible. I was a first-generation college student. I grew up on a farm in Mississippi. Both of my parents had to drop out of high school for work, and none of my siblings were able to pursue higher education. When I arrived at my first undergraduate institution (I bounced around quite a few before I managed to graduate) I was lost and straight up broke. I dropped more than one course simply because I could not afford the textbooks. Many of your instructors have similar stories to this. For our part, in the FYW program, we are committed to removing the cost of commercial textbooks as a barrier to your education.

## A Few Words on Grammar & Grading

Many people—including students, parents, and even faculty from other departments or upper administration—are surprised to discover how little attention grammar and usage are given in FYC courses. For people who are not trained in the study and teaching of writing, a common assumption is that students should “learn the basics” of sentence-level grammar, and then build to paragraphs, and then on to lengthier manuscripts, such as essays. On the face of it, this assumption makes a lot of sense, but research in my field—Rhetoric and Writing Studies—has consistently shown that, contrary to what might seem like common sense, this assumption is flatly wrong. In fact, college-level writers tend to improve most when they focus most on writing a lot of words in a lot of situations focused on “macro level” issues such as theme and organization. It tends to be the case that more experienced writers benefit from overt grammar instruction. This reminds me of a quote made famous by astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson: “The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you.” Language is really old and has been developing for quite a long time. It is often the case that what we learn about language through research does not intuitively make sense.

So why do experienced writers tend to benefit from overt grammar and usage instruction, but not beginning writers? While grammar and usage are often talked about as “the basics” or the “nuts and bolts” of writing, it is better understood as the fine artistic styling and finishing touches of good writing completed by experts. Think of it in terms of another artistic medium, such as sculpture. If you were going to your first college level on sculpting, do you imagine your instructor would have you start by sculpting the tiny details such as the veins on the clenched hand of Michelangelo’s *David*? Of course not, because you are so inexperienced with sculpting that you don’t yet really understand how to chip a chunk of marble into the general shape of a human body. Think of “macro level” writing concerns like organization, theme, and content as the general shape of the human body, and think of “micro level” concerns such as sentence-level usage and style as the delicate details on *David*’s hand. With time and dedication to your craft, you will be able to sculpt those veins, but it need not be today. Focus first on shaping the body of your writing into the general shapes and structures you imagine.

This is also a reason that many of the FYC classes you take at Oklahoma State utilize what we call “labor-based assessment.” This is another way of stating that we grade you based on the amount of work you do on your writing (such as pages produced, words produced, numbers of revisions and reflections completed) rather than the overall “quality” of your writing at this stage. If you’re concerned about making a perfect, “A-level” sculpture the first time you approach a block of marble, you may never build up the nerve to strike the first blow. All you need to do right now is write, and write a lot. We grade you based on how much work you do because the amount of work you do on your writing will directly reflect how much your writing improves, and that is the goal.

Why not get started now? If you’re reading this and taking an FYC course this semester, sit down and write for half an hour. Write down three things you would like to improve about your writing, and then write 1-2 paragraphs reflecting on why you set those goals.

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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=22#h5p-1>

## About the author



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# ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

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OSU Libraries and Oklahoma State University believe that education must be available to everyone; this means supporting the creation of free, open, and accessible educational resources. We are actively committed to increasing the accessibility and usability of the textbooks we produce.

## Accessibility features of the web version of this resource

The web version of *Who Teaches Writing* has been designed with accessibility in mind. It is our goal to optimize the resource for people using screen-reader technology. Content should be navigable using a keyboard, and links, headings, and tables should be formatted to work with screen readers. All images considered essential include alt-tags. Information is not conveyed by color alone, and there is an option to increase font size. (See tab on top right of screen titled, “Increase Font Size.”)

- It has been optimized for people who use screen-reader technology.
  - all content can be navigated using a keyboard.
  - links, headings, and tables are formatted to work with screen readers.
- All images in this guide are screenshots that are considered non-essential as they are described fully in the text. As such, they do not include alt tags.
- Information is not conveyed by color alone.
- There is an option to increase font size. (See tab on top right of screen titled, “Increase Font Size.”)

## Other file formats available

In addition to the web version, this book is available in a number of file formats including PDF, EPUB (for eReaders), MOBI (for Kindles), and various editable files. Here is a link to where you can download this book in another file format. Look for the Download this book drop-down menu to select the file type you want.

## Known accessibility issues and areas for improvement

While we strive to ensure that this resource is as accessible and usable as possible, we might not always get it right. Any issues we identify will be listed below. There are currently no known issues.

**List of Known Accessibility Issues**

Location of Issue	Need for Improvement	Timeline	Work Around

## Accessibility standards

The web version of this resource has been designed to meet [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0](#), level AA. In addition, it attempts to follow all guidelines in [Appendix A: Checklist for Accessibility](#) of the *Accessibility Toolkit – 2nd Edition*.

## Let us know if you are having problems accessing this guide

We are always looking for ways to make our resources more accessible. If you have problems accessing this resource, please contact us to let us know, so we can fix the issue.

Please include the following information:

- The location of the problem by providing a web address or page description
- A description of the problem
- The computer, software, browser, and any assistive technology you are using that can help us diagnose and solve your issue
  - e.g., Windows 10, Google Chrome (Version 65.0.3325.181), NVDA screen reader

You can contact us by completing [this web form](#) or by sending an email to [kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu](mailto:kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu).

**This statement was last updated on February 20, 2021, by Kathy Essmiller.**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Joshua Daniel

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When I was in graduate school at [Texas Christian University](#), I attended a talk by [Dr. David Parry](#) called “Ending Knowledge Cartels.” It was a version of a talk he had given many times at academic conferences like Computers and Writing, and it is essentially an extended description of the privatization and monetization of general rhetorical knowledge by commercial textbook providers and academic journal distributors. Parry argues that, like pharmaceutical companies, knowledge cartels have taken what should be a basic human right, access to knowledge, and have hoarded it. Like all cartels, they arrive early and often and are always here to take their cut. The completion of this book fulfills a basic dream of mine since arriving at Oklahoma State University in August of 2014: to use my job as a platform to cut them out, broken limbs or not. Together, we have made an FYC Textbook bigger and better and more innovative than profit can imagine. We offer it to you for free. Please accept.

There are too many people to thank, but a few cannot go without notice. To Holly Reiter. If there is a kinder, more generous, more decent person at this university, please introduce us. To Matt Upson, just a real cool guy, who gave \$10,000 from his own endowment so we could pay contributors for a book that would never be sold to or create profit for anyone. To the great Kathy Essmiller, the knower and doer of all things. You have made this book possible.

Most of all, this book is for all the FYC students trying to find a way into the university, to the FYC instructors just trying to help those students learn to love writing a little more and a little better. To all the Directors of FYC and Ph.D.s in Rhetoric and Composition: [may we never again attend a Norton party](#).

To A. You are everything. Life is more joy than I ever imagined.

## About the author



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# OPENOKSTATE SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

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to promote free textbooks!



## [OpenOKState Spotify Playlist](#)

# OPENOKSTATE STUDENT PRIVACY GUIDELINES

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OpenOKState and the OSU Libraries Library Teaching and Learning (T&L) Team\* strive to enable engaging learning experiences for students using a variety of digital resources\*\*. When you—the student—use these resources, you’re likely to produce some data, such as data about how you used the resources (e.g., what you clicked on) or the content you produced while using the resources (e.g., answering a question).

In line with our values and our beliefs about student data privacy, our T&L team has created and closely follows a set of guidelines, made up of 5 core principles, for any type of student data we might come in contact with.

**We aim to be exceedingly transparent with you about your data.** On this page, you can learn about our team’s values and beliefs regarding student data privacy as well as explore the 5 core principles of our Student Data Privacy Guidelines.

If you have any questions about these guidelines or about your data privacy, please don’t hesitate to contact the Director of Library Teaching and Learning, Holly Reiter, at [holly.reiter@okstate.edu](mailto:holly.reiter@okstate.edu).

\*The data and Guidelines referenced on this page are unique to Library Teaching & Learning, and do not indicate guidelines for the Library or the University as a whole.

\*\*For our purposes, digital learning objects include interactive tutorials, OStateTV or YouTube videos, the mobile Library Scavenger Hunt, visits to web pages that host these items, Pressbooks, and graduate student workshop registration.

## Values and Beliefs

### Values

Our Library Teaching and Learning team values:

- Prioritizing student needs and welfare
- Restoring and protecting equity and assisting students in doing the same
- Incorporating student voice and experiences and using it to shape our practice
- Providing “digital sanctuaries,” or digital environments that prioritize and promote student safety

### Student Data Privacy Beliefs

As a Teaching and Learning team, we have foundational, ethical, scholarship-shaped beliefs about student data that have shaped our student data practice and guidelines.

We believe in prioritizing student data privacy to...

- Protect students
- Respect student autonomy
- Return power to students and establish equity
- Protect students’ intellectual freedom
- Build trust between students and Library Teaching and Learning
- Enable student data privacy literacy

# Core Principles of Student Data Privacy

## Responsibility

The Teaching and Learning team believes it's our ethical responsibility to protect your data privacy. Specifically, we uphold the responsibility to:

- Ensure any collected data is handled carefully, used effectively, and used only for the stated purpose.
- Prevent unauthorized disclosure, use, or collection of your data
- Follow specific steps in data collection, use, storage, and destruction.
- Carry a shared understanding of our role in your data privacy.

## Transparency

T&L believes you shouldn't have to wonder what's happening with your data, so we strive to be as open and transparent with you as possible. For each digital learning object we use, we'll share the following:

- What we are and are not collecting
- Why we're collecting it
- How it's being collected
- How it's being used
- Who has access to the data

To keep you safe, we strive to store and process all data according to best practices. We'll only collect the minimum amount of data necessary to achieve our stated objectives.

## Privacy and Consent

T&L believes that privacy is your right. We strive to honor your privacy by never releasing any personally identifiable information unless it is to your instructor of record who is using the digital learning object within their class.

Occasionally, we may share aggregates of de-identified or anonymized data internally (e.g., with Library administrators) or externally (e.g., at Library or industry conferences). We do this to continuously improve effectiveness, evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching and learning program, or to help evolve and shape the practices of our profession. Aggregating the data means that the data is in summary form and no individual student can be identified.

Finally, we will never sell or otherwise commodify your data, and will always prioritize the use of vendors and resources that do the same.

## Confidentiality and Security

T&L takes great strides to ensure that any and all data we collect is kept confidential and secure.

We use several vendors to help us create and host digital learning objects and collect analytics. Sometimes, these vendors have access to your personally identifiable information for operational purposes, so we intentionally investigate and select vendors that also prioritize confidentiality and security.

## Access

Sometimes we do collect and store personally identifiable information so we can do things like retain records for your instructor of record or keep track of event registrations. In these cases, T&L believes you have the right to know what that data is, request corrections if you think it's incorrect, and request that it be deleted. Please note, we'll always make every effort to honor deletion requests, but sometimes we're required to retain records for various reasons. If that's the case, we'll be open about why we can't delete it now, and if and when it can be deleted.

## Acknowledgements

Library Teaching and Learning would like to acknowledge several projects that helped inform our *Guidelines*. We extend our sincerest gratitude for the effort and dedication that individuals invested in these works.

- [The Open University's Student Policies and Regulations: Ethical Use of Student Data for Learning Analytics](#)
- [The JISC Code of Practice for Learning Analytics](#)
- [National Information Standards Organization's \(NISO\) Consensus Principles on User's Digital Privacy in Library, Publisher, and Software-Provider Systems](#)
- [Stanford CAROL & Ithaka S+R Project of Responsible Use of Student Data in Higher Education](#)
- [UC Berkeley Research, Teaching, and Learning's Learning Data Principles](#)
- [University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Resolution Supporting Learning Data Privacy Principles and Practices](#)

Last updated 8/10/2021 by Kathy Essmiller.



PART I

# WRITING A NARRATIVE



1.

# A MEMOIRIST TEACHES NARRATIVE

Sarah Beth Childers

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:  
<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=26#audio-26-1>

*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to this chapter.*

18 min read

[AMemoiristTeachesNarrative.\\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn to create concrete images and develop yourself into a character in a true, narrative account of an event that happened in your past. You'll learn to meticulously construct your piece so that every line and image, from the first word, builds toward an effective ending. You'll also learn to use your life experience to comment on your life and the world, revealing the ways you have changed as a person between when that event occurred and today.

## Key Terms

- Perspective
- Persona
- Voice of innocence and voice of experience
- Turn
- Scene

## Choosing a Story to Tell

The word *memoir* comes from the French *mémoire*, meaning “memory,” or, more specifically, a person’s memory of their own experiences. Perhaps you’ve heard of memoirs as long, narrative books that famous, older people write about their lives, but anyone,

of any age, can write a memoir. The memoir's length can be thousands of pages, focusing on many memories connected by a theme (like the writer's experience with their dad over twenty years), or it can be a short essay focusing on one clear memory.

For this class, you'll be writing a narrative essay (not a book!), so it's easiest to pick one memory for your focus point. While the subject of a memoir can be anything at all, memories that work well for memoir have a few common characteristics:

1. The remembered event happened long enough ago that the writer has gained new **perspective** on the event, or a more mature way of viewing the situation in light of other experiences and personal growth.
2. The remembered event inspires complex emotions in the writer to this day. Perhaps those emotions include a mix of pride and sadness, or a mix of anger and joy. The work of memoir involves puzzling out why a memory is important, and how the writer feels about that memory.
3. The memory includes at least one clear, concrete image that the writer can develop into a **scene**, a particular moment on the page that takes place in a specific space.

In the memoir essay "[Chop Suey](#)," Ira Sukrungruang<sup>1</sup> tells a story of a visit to a bowling alley with his mother that happened when he was a child, long before he crafted the essay. In the memoir essay "[Dogged](#)," Barrie Jean Borich<sup>2</sup> describes a dog she saw running across the highway when she was a young woman, twenty-five years before she wrote the piece. But there's no set amount of time that needs to have passed, as long as you've been able to gain **perspective** on that memory. Perspective, in a memoir, means the ability to see the memory with more complexity than you could see it at the time, and the ability to put the memory in context of the world around you and other events in your life. The memory also needs to have taken place long enough ago for you to take advantage of your brain's natural memory sifting process. When something happened last week, it's often difficult to decide which parts of the story are worth telling, leading to long, dull passages like packing a suitcase for a trip. Years after the event occurs, you'll have forgotten the inconsequential details, and you'll be more able to focus on what, for you, was worth remembering.

While great memoir pieces can be about enormous, life-changing events, like a career-ending injury or the death of a family member, they don't have to be. Sukrungruang's trip to the bowling alley and Borich's running dog are small life moments with big implications. What's important is that you choose something that you can interrogate, dig into. Something that allows you to ask yourself why your brain has stored that memory, how you felt about the event then vs. how you feel about it now, and what that memory can tell you about who you are today.

## Splitting Yourself in Two

When a writer crafts a memoir of any length, it's impossible for them to put their whole self on the page, with every detail that makes them the human being who currently lives in the world. Instead, much like a fiction writer, the memoirist creates a character who experiences and tells the story, choosing the elements of the self that most relate to the situation at hand. In her book *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick calls that character-self the **persona**.<sup>3</sup>

In "Chop Suey," Sukrungruang's persona, or character-self, includes the following: he's the ten-year-old son of a woman who immigrated from Thailand; he loves his mother but disagrees with her about American culture, people, and life; he has some experience with bowling but no real skill; and he and his mother are the only people of color in a bowling alley full of white men. Notice that while the writer chooses what information to give the audience about their persona, they must also decide what to leave

1. You can find "Chop Suey" by Ira Sukrungruang online in the fall 2005 issue of *Brevity*, <https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/chop-suey/>. The writer's last name is pronounced "SUKERUNG-RUNG."

2. You can find "Dogged" by Barrie Jean Borich online in the January 2011 issue of *Sweet*, <http://www.sweetlit.com/3.2/proseBorich.php>. The writer's last name is pronounced "BORE-itch."

3. Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.

out. We don't learn, for example, anything about Sukrungruang's father, or about other relatives who might be important in his life. We don't learn anything about the house/apartment/trailer/etc. where he lives, or what he ate for breakfast that morning, or the car or train ride or walk to the bowling alley. We don't learn about his religious beliefs. We don't learn how he's doing in school. What's important is his relationship with his mother in that bowling alley on that day.

Of course, the little boy in the bowling alley isn't the same as the adult, experienced person (or *persona*) who is narrating the piece. The adult narrator of the piece is proud of his mother, and he's well aware of her skill at bowling. Sukrungruang begins the essay, "My mother was a champion bowler in Thailand." The very next sentence shows the contrast between that adult narrator and the little boy in the bowling alley. Sukrungruang writes, "This is not what I knew of her."

In her craft essay, "Innocence and Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction," Sue William Silverman talks about these two different character-selves that show up in every memoir.<sup>4</sup> Taking inspiration from the English Romantic poet William Blake, who wrote a book of poetry called *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, she uses the term "**voice of innocence**" to describe the younger, past persona who experiences the events as they happen, without time for real reflection, and the "**voice of experience**" to describe the more mature writer-persona who puts the events into perspective, analyzing them on the page. That adult voice that begins Sukrungruang's piece—"My mother was a champion bowler in Thailand"—is clearly the voice of experience, and the little boy in a sentence much later in the essay—"I put my head on her shoulder"—is clearly the voice of innocence. But, as Silverman notes, these two voices often intersect and overlap. For example, Sukrungruang describes the moment he learned more of his mother's history, writing, "I listened, amazed that my mother could bowl a 200, that she was good at something beyond what mothers were supposed to be good at, like cooking and punishing and sewing. I clapped. I said she should stop being a mother and become a bowler." Crafting that childlike thought and phrasing, "stop being a mother and become a bowler," Sukrungruang wields the voice of innocence. However, readers can also sense some gentle self-mockery from the voice of experience throughout that passage—the experienced adult writer chuckling at his clapping child-self. In a memoir, innocence and experience balance each other out and sing together.

While Ira Sukrungruang begins his piece with the voice of experience, Barrie Jean Borich takes the opposite approach in "Dogged." She begins with the voice of innocence, narrating the memory as she experienced it as a much younger woman. She writes, "The dog on the Calumet Expressway was no discernible breed, a good runner the size of a Doberman or greyhound, sleek and short-haired, dark with russet markings. No collar. The dog ran toward my car as I wound around the exit ramp toward the old East Side, where I was headed to pick up Little Grandma."

Then, with the beginning of the second paragraph, Borich's voice of innocence takes a step back, and the voice of experience steps in. The voice becomes more thoughtful, less precise, reflecting the fuzziness of memory. "This was near to twenty-five years ago," Borich's more experienced voice reminisces. She gives readers the details they need to understand the young persona who experienced that memory, explaining that she'd moved away from Chicago to Minneapolis, and she "was probably home for a short visit." We learn that Little Grandma, who doesn't drive, is Borich's maternal grandmother, and Borich gives Little Grandma rides on her visits home.

In "Chop Suey," Sukrungruang gives readers very little character info about the voice of experience that narrates the piece, focusing on developing his persona as a little boy. Borich, however, provides equal, or even more, life detail about her voice of experience/current persona, telling readers facts about her current life as well as describing relevant experiences, which presumably happened after the running dog, that helped shape who she is today. Beginning in paragraph four, Borich tells readers she currently owns dogs and pampers them, giving them Christmas presents and letting them sleep in her bed. She reveals she's married to a woman named Linnea, and she tells a dog-related story of a time she and Linnea faced discrimination and hate because they were lesbians.

Reading "Chop Suey," you'll witness a life-changing moment that brought the worldview of the little boy, or the voice of innocence, closer to the adult voice of experience that narrates the piece. "Dogged" functions much differently. The dog on the

4. Sue William Silverman, "Innocence & Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction." *Brevity*, 2005. <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/innocence-experience/>

highway didn't change Borich's life—she was just never able to forget it. The narrative power of “Dogged” comes from the new perspective the voice of experience brings to the memory, and from the contrast between the way Borich experienced that running dog as a young woman and the way she views that memory today.

## Structure and Scene

Memoirs of any length build to a **turn** that comes right at or very close to the memoir's end and continues to the final word of the piece. At the turn, the memoir plunges into deeper emotional and/or intellectual territory. The voice of experience comments on the situation. The piece's meaning becomes clear. The reader gets the distinct feeling, *We're getting serious now*. Often, though not always, the turn reads like the climax in a fictional short story or novel, with a zoomed-in, slow-motion focus on an important, complicated **scene**. In a scene, a specific moment unfolds in a concrete space.

In “Chop Suey,” the turn begins when Sukrungruang's mother changes her bowling shoes, and a “man with dark hair and a mustache” begins walking toward her. The turn lasts all the way to the final line, when Sukrungruang's mother says, “You're welcome,” and Sukrungruang's outlook on his mother and life changes forever.

Sukrungruang's turn is so effective because he has built the entire piece to set up for that final moment. He's set up the space physically with the “rumble” of pins on the wood floor and the “haze” of cigarette smoke. And he's set up for the turn on an emotional and intellectual level. The first paragraph reveals Sukrungruang's underestimation of his mother as a ten-year-old, and his childhood lack of understanding of why her view of American culture might differ so much from his own. In the third paragraph, he describes his mother through the voice of innocence, showing her as a middle-aged, matronly, potentially boring woman with heavy makeup “to cover the acne she got at 50” and a smelly handkerchief she puts over her nose, complaining about the “haze of smoke.” But in that same paragraph, Sukrungruang uses the voice of experience to set up the space's danger: “My mother was the only woman in the place. We were the only non-white patrons.”

Sukrungruang also sets up the turn with a short scene, narrated mostly through the voice of innocence. Ten-year-old Sukrungruang tries to show off his bowling skills, fails miserably, and then his mother shocks him after picking up a bowling ball. Like any great scene, this one has clear, physical, grounded detail. His mother chooses a “ball from the rack, one splattered with colors.” Sukrungruang shows his mother's body in action, writing, “When she was ready, she lined herself up to the pins, the ball at eye level. In five concise steps, she brought the ball back, dipped her knees and released it smoothly, as if her hand was an extension of the floor.”

This scene is crucial for two reasons: Sukrungruang's mother's sensational bowling performance begins to change her son's view of her, and her performance apparently challenges the racist, loafing smokers, one of whom soon approaches her to attempt to assert his dominance with racist actions and remarks.

Then comes the turn, which in this case, functions much like a climax in a work of fiction. The ending stands out from the rest of the essay because of how closely Sukrungruang zooms in, showing every moment. The turn takes up a full third of this short essay's length. Earlier in the piece, Sukrungruang summed up the dialogue, leaving out the quotation marks, including the line, “I said she should stop being a mother and become a bowler.” In the turn, all the dialogue has quotation marks, and, along with the dialogue, Sukrungruang shows the man's changing facial expressions and body language along with Sukrungruang's mother's reactions. His mother holds tightly to her son and purse, while the man “toast(s) his beer to his friends, laughing smoke from his lips.”

Like the scene where Sukrungruang's mother bowls, the turn takes place in a very specific, grounded space, right behind Sukrungruang and his mother's lane, and a “few lanes over” from where the man's friends stand. Readers can smell the cigarette smoke. They can see all of the characters' bodies moving in this specific space: the approaching man clutching his cigarette and beer, the man's friends “huddled and whispering.” Readers see Sukrungruang's mother standing up after changing her shoes, and Sukrungruang himself leaning against her leg. And readers can feel Sukrungruang's relief and admiration for his mother, and his brand-new understanding of this complicated country and world, as she protects her son and stops the man's laughter with her measured response and the look in her eyes.

In “Dogged,” just like in “Chop Suey,” the turn comes close to the end of the piece and extends to the piece’s final word, “running.” While Sukrungruang’s turn hinges on a climax-like scene, Borich’s turn hinges on a revelation through the voice of experience of why she thinks she remembers this dog so clearly, and how she sees the dog differently as a much older writer than she did on the day it ran across the highway. In the next-to-last paragraph, Borich comments on the fact that she has been using she/her/hers pronouns for this dog during the entire essay, though she wasn’t close enough to determine the sex of the dog. She says she “assign[s] [her] memory of the dog a female gender” because she thinks of that dog and sees herself and her female relatives, who lived on through difficult circumstances that were due, in large part, to the fact that they were women. In the turn, readers understand Borich’s difference in perspective that has come twenty-five years later. When she witnessed the dog, Borich felt only sad and worried. Now, she remembers that dog and sees the “breathless, beleaguered female strain to keep on living.”

Also like in “Chop Suey,” the writer has constructed every line of the essay to build to the turn. However, the piece works differently because there’s not a whole lot to this memory—it’s just a collarless dog running on a busy highway. The dog on the highway provides a clear, concrete scene, as the dog “sp[ee]ds toward the rumble of rusted sedans and semi trucks, into the far southside industrial speedway.” But unlike “Chop Suey,” there is no story to spread out over several pages. In fact, Borich gives readers most of the memory of the running dog in the first paragraph.

In the subsequent paragraphs, Borich builds toward the turn by providing context through her voice of experience. She defends her past self to her current self, and to readers, explaining that because she was on her way to pick up Little Grandma, she couldn’t put that dog in her car. Borich tells readers about her current dogs, who wear hats and receive Christmas presents, letting readers know how much it hurt her to leave that dog behind.

She also shares a very short additional scene, illustrating the time that Borich and her spouse Linnea took care of two lost Golden Retriever puppies. She writes:

Some rough-looking young men, either neighborhood gangsters or pretending to be, showed up at our door. This was the year we saw neighbor boys with guns stuffed into their pants, the spring city papers started calling the street one block over from us Crack Avenue. The boys leaned up into our faces, calling us the worst words they could think of to let us know they could see we were lesbians, then accused us of stealing their dogs. We handed the puppies over. A few weeks later we adopted a dog of our own.

The boys at the door, leaning into Borich’s and Linnea’s faces, give the scene its clear image of action in a concrete space. This scene fits wonderfully into the essay because it includes dogs, and it builds directly to the ending, setting up the essay’s theme. In this scene, two women face danger because of who they are, and they determinedly live on by getting another dog together.

It’s important to note that while Borich spends much of her essay in the voice of experience, developing her current persona and providing context for the piece’s central memory, she also keeps returning to the running dog in between the background info and commentary, keeping readers grounded in that scene throughout the essay. She adds more detail to the running dog scene in paragraph three, telling readers it was raining and discussing the area’s terrible pollution at that time, calling it a “yellowish, smoke-stained drive to Little Grandma’s.” In paragraph five, she tells readers the dog was “running...headlong into traffic.” In paragraph six, Borich focuses on the dog’s eyes.

This brings us to the final paragraph of Borich’s piece. Great memoir endings often have two things in common:

1. Commentary from the voice of experience.
2. A final line that leaves readers with a powerful image.

At the end of “Chop Suey,” Sukrungruang uses the voice of experience to narrate his thoughts about his mother during her encounter with the racist man. He writes, “In that instant, I saw in her face the same resolve she had when she spanked, the same resolve when she scolded. In that instant, I thought my mother was going to hit the man.” Note that in his commentary, Sukrungruang doesn’t sum up the point of the essay (which is already clear) or tell readers what to think—he just reveals what *he* was thinking in that moment. After his commentary, Sukrungruang ends the essay with the image of his mother’s smile, “too bright, too large,” as she says, “You’re welcome.”

In the final paragraph of “Dogged,” Borich builds from the voice of experience’s commentary in the previous paragraph, where she just analyzed her female gendering of the dog. Now, she uses the voice of experience to zoom out in the running dog scene, showing readers the highway’s proximity to the pollution-choked places where her female family members have led difficult lives. Then, like Sukrungruang, Borich leaves readers with an image: the running dog, which, seen through through her current perspective—this new lens of determination—seems almost hopeful. In Borich’s memory, the dog still runs on that highway, not hit or starving, forever alive.

## Discussion Questions

- In a narrative reading that your instructor assigns, where has the writer used the voice of innocence, where has the writer used the voice of experience, and where do those two voices mix together?
  - In that same narrative reading, find a concrete scene. What physical details create that space on the page and show bodies in action?
  - Make a list of three moments that changed your life and three moments you see much differently than you saw them when they happened. Next to each item on your list, jot down some physical details you’d use to develop the scene that would be important if you developed that memory into an essay. Choose the idea that interests you most and start writing.
  - Take a narrative essay (a published piece or one written by a classmate or yourself) and identify the turn. Then, for each paragraph in the essay before the turn, write a note about the information we get that builds to that turn. For pieces written by a classmate or yourself, look for paragraphs that don’t build well to the turn, and make notes or friendly suggestions for cutting or better tying in those parts to the piece’s overall narrative and theme.
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## About the author



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Sarah Beth Childers is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University, specializing in creative nonfiction, and the nonfiction editor of the Cimarron Review. She is the author of the memoir-in-essays *Shake Terribly the Earth: Stories from An Appalachian Family* (Ohio University Press, 2013), and her essays have appeared in *Brevity*, *Colorado Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Pank*, and elsewhere. Sarah Beth lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with her family, including a dog-chasing little girl.

2.

# A RELUCTANT STUDENT TEACHES THE LITERACY NARRATIVE

Dr. Ron Brooks

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[A Reluctant Student Teaches Literacy Narrative \\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

This chapter explores the importance of an expanded view of literacy. It argues that writing about what you love and care about will improve your writing and also deepen your connection to your own expertise. This connection between literacy and expertise likely helps all writers, but it is especially important for writers who may not think of themselves as good writers.

## Key Terms

- Literacy
- “Cross Curricular” Literacy
- Writing to Learn

I have been teaching the literacy narrative to students for more than 20 years now. Over time, I have discovered that the best way to get students to think about literacy is to put aside any preconceived notions I have about any topic and simply encourage students to write about and think about what they love. I have always suspected that if you allow students to write about what they care about, their writing will improve. Even more optimistically, I believe that allowing students to write about what they love will improve their lives as well.



When I was growing up, I thought that literacy meant reading books I didn't want to read. For me, high school English classes were a blur of scarlet letters, angry grapes, flies with questionable rulership ethics, and people with names like Hester, Francis, and Doras. I'm positive that it was a flaw in my own thinking, but I never saw school as relevant to anything in my own life, a life that seemed ruled at the time by impossible to navigate social orders of popularity and expertise. A lot of my attitude came from my father. He absolutely hated school and always liked to brag about times that he got things over on teachers. Because I'm a writing teacher now, one story he often tells sticks with me: He wrote the same report six different times about the same book and got six different grades on that same report. When I was younger, I interpreted the story to be an illustration about the arbitrary nature of school and grades, but when I think about that story now I think it means something more than that, something that suggests that no matter what you are planning on majoring in while you are at college, you should get into the business of writing about what you love.

But before I get to that, I would like to tell you a little bit about the relationship my dad had to literacy. As he explains it, all through school whenever he sat down to read he was unable to comprehend what he read. He understood the words, he'd say, but could not comprehend what he was reading. No matter how hard he tried to concentrate, his mind wandered. He'd realize that he'd read an entire page and didn't understand what he read, so he'd go back to the beginning and read again. After reading a second time, though, he'd get just as lost, so he would try again, but that time with the added frustration of having to do it again. "It was hopeless," he said. He understood the words, but each time he read they would lose more meaning. "These days," he would say when telling me the story, "they would have said that I had a learning disability, but back in the 50s all the teachers told me was that I was a dumbass, that I'd never do anything but dig ditches for a living." He would wait for a laugh, which sometimes he would get, and then continue. "So I had this book report hanging over me, and one day I saw this paperback outside of a bookstore in downtown Roanoke. It was called *Street Rod*, and I had been working on a '51 coupe, and so I thought I could at least relate to this and so I worked my way through parts of the book, enough that I could write a report on it."

My father was not alone in connecting to this book. In the US, Henry Gregor Felsen's books were loved (primarily by boys) all through the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Stephen King named Felsen's *Hot Rod* as one of the most influential books of his childhood and it is also reported that Felsen was once given an award from a librarian's association for having written the most stolen library book by any author. Published in 1953, *Street Rod* was the follow up to *Hot Rod* and would have come out about the time my Dad was 12. Two years before that, my father had bought a lawn mower, so that he could make money mowing lawns. As he tells it, he got paid 50 cents a yard. He had borrowed 63 dollars from his dad for the mower and half of that went to paying off the mower and then the other half he saved. In one summer he had paid off the mower so it was all profit after that. By the time he was 14, he had saved enough to buy a car, a '51 Ford for 395 dollars. When I was a kid, I found the story a little suspicious, just a story that was meant to motivate me to work, but simple math does prove that this was possible at the time. Cars were simpler then, and anyone who had a mind for it and the right opportunities could buy a used car and make it happen.

It was only recently that I read *Street Rod*, and what struck me as I was reading it was how much my dad's life intersects with this book. At the start of the novel its protagonist, Ricky Madison, has no identity without a car. Ricky Madison's first decision, the one

that set the plot's motion forward, is to buy the car without his parent's approval. He does, and gets stuck paying \$75 dollars (50 cash, 25 credit) for a car that was likely only worth \$35. A combination of pride and stupidity forces Ricky to keep the deal, but also gives him a plan: to fix up the car and sell it for a profit. This situation creates in him a drive to succeed, one that goes beyond what would have happened had he not been thrown into this crisis: buy a junker, fix it up, and sell it for a profit.

All through his life, my dad did this kind of thing continually. More than once, my mom liked to tell me, she would go to the parking lot of where she worked and find that the car she had driven to work had been sold and there was another in its place. It became a common enough occurrence that she knew to reach on top of the passenger side front tire for the needed key to get home. And I can confirm that at least once a week there was a different car, or different machine, in the driveway that would be his next project. A WW2 Jeep, A B-Model Mack, An 82 Cutlass body with a 69' 455 Olds engine, a 64 Mustang, A three wheel motorcycle, A Harley-Davidson golf cart, A wood paneled station wagon, many different John Deere tractors, various kinds of construction equipment: bobcats, front end loaders, backhoes. It was always a combination of vehicles or equipment my father needed at the time and something that could be sold at a profit. Unlike Ricky Madison, who would die in the novel's didactic close because of having the fatal flaw of recklessness, my father made a living embodying Ricky's plan, eventually going into the auto parts business but always also working these various side hustles, buying and selling machines.

Dad attempted to create this same drive in me, but it didn't take. I remember when I was a teenager, I bought my first Model R John Deere tractor with money I had made working at my father's auto parts store. It came on the back of a tractor trailer, along with three others that my dad had bought from a farm out in Montana. I worked alongside my dad, doing what he did, and taking his advice on it along the way. The tractor needed a new PTO and the rest of the needed work was mostly cosmetic. After putting in 1200 dollars plus another 400 for parts, I sold the tractor for 3,500 to a farmer in the valley. I remember the farmer pulling a wad of one hundred dollar bills from his pocket and counting them out in my father's hand, and then my father handing the money over to me. All the ventures I did with my dad along these lines were successful, but it never felt like success to me. As much of a privilege as it was, it was borrowed. Though it was becoming clear to me that I was developing a love for words at college, I didn't have what my father had when it came to selling.

But as someone who has decided to give his life to helping other people connect to words, I always wonder whether writing that report on Street Rod played some role in making my father successful. Recently, I became interested in the idea, so I asked my father more questions about it. "What do you mean when you say you turned in the same report 6 times?"

"Well, I never exactly read the whole book through, I would just thumb through the book, come to a part that I found interesting, copy that part down on paper so that I would understand it and then connect that to something I was doing. My teacher didn't even know what a street rod was, so I had to explain some things. I remember I got a C on the first report, a B on the second, a D on the third and then Cs on the last three. Different grades each time."

This would have happened in the mid-50s, long before any teacher would have encouraged students to revise their work, but it seems from my perspective that is what this teacher was doing. Having him revisit the same book, the same report each time. "This would have been around the same time," Dad tells me, "that I was able to trade in my 51 Ford for a 50 Ford that had fewer miles, and I put a Crestliner Strip on the 50 Ford, so there was no other 50 Ford in existence that had that Crestliner Strip on it, so years later I got a great price for that Ford too."

In Street Rod, Ricky Madison wanted to make stock cars special in ways that the everyday person would want to buy them. Even though he doesn't remember any of the details of the book now, he remembers that he chose that book because he could relate to it out of his own experience. Beyond that, I haven't wanted to discuss the issue further. Talking with my Dad about his reading has always been a sensitive subject for both of us. But in my own mind I like to think this teacher was letting him turn in the same report over and over again because she wanted him to revisit the topic, to keep refining it, to keep thinking on it, the same way that my best teachers pushed me on topics once I got to college. I like to think she had tapped into something like that. And I like to think that doing so helped clarify directions in his own life.

So part of the point of this, and why I've told you all of this as a way of having you think about the literacy narrative, is there is more than one way to think about literacy. There is the traditional idea of literacy, the ability to read and write words. You put them in a row. You learn to make them clear, interesting, and relatively free of proofreading errors. Most of that gets taught in school. But

there is a deeper kind of literacy, too. The literacy my father had, knowing what to buy and what to do with it when he bought it. Knowing how to go to someone's garage or someone's farm, see a piece of equipment, offer a price and take that piece of equipment home and do something with it that would make someone want to buy it. It is important to write about what you know, though, because doing so allows you to connect to the kinds of literacy you already have and if you write about those, your writing will get better too. On top of that, your thinking about the thing that you love will get deeper, more refined, throughout the process.

The last time that I taught a course on tutoring writing, I was amazed at the number of students who wanted to research and write about students who are neurodivergent, and one of the pieces that really jumped out at me in their research was this:

Neurodivergent students often talk about reading as something terribly difficult, describing times that they read a book but did not understand a word of it, so they would go back and read again and again until the words got in. On the positive side, though, once they understood a book they could speak on it with detail that went beyond what anyone could do.

That was what writing about Street Rod gave my dad, a topic that made him willing to put in the work and it appears to have played some role in the direction of his life as well

That's what I hope you are able to do when you write your literacy narrative, and I hope it imparts agency way beyond the confines of a single class. I have had students write on topics that I've known nothing about. I remember one student back in 2010 who wanted to write about his experience setting up computers to mine bitcoins. After the class was over, he wrote to me to thank me for being a supportive teacher and for helping him clarify this direction. (He changed his major to computer science that semester). He offered to show me how to set up a few extra computers he saw in a corner of my 4th floor Morrill Hall office to perform repetitive actions within World of Warcraft. These actions would prove valuable enough to players that they would exchange them for bitcoin, which was a fairly obscure kind of cryptocurrency he had just learned about. At the time, bitcoins were worth about 25 dollars a piece. I declined his offer, but was happy to have helped him to find his passion. It's possible that writing the literacy narrative may do the same for you.

## Discussion Questions

1. If you had to write about only one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?
2. Putting all economic circumstances aside, if you were free to study anything you want, what would it be?
3. If you had three lives to dedicate to three different careers, what would they be?
4. Think back to different times in your life where you developed an interest in what you describe in questions 1-3. Freewrite on each question for 10 minutes a piece.
5. Out of all of the free writes in #4, which was the most interesting to you? Which did you care about the most?

## About the author



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3.

## A SHAKESPEAREAN TEACHES NARRATIVE

Dr. Heidi Cephus

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### What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn how to write a narrative that engages your reader and accomplishes your purpose. You will use the framework of theater to think about ways in which you can make your narrative come to life for your audience. By the end of this chapter, you will be ready to construct your own scene, select relevant details, and show your reader the importance of your story.

### Key Terms

The following key terms from the theater world will help you think more deeply about your narrative:

- Plot
- *In Media Res*
- Soliloquy
- Thrust Stage
- Audience / Spectator

## Writing a Narrative that Comes to Life

### What is a Narrative?

In simple terms, a narrative is a story or an account of events. Narratives allow us to identify and explain patterns in the world around us, helping our audience understand our experiences.

The storytelling at the center of a narrative is an act of memory making that responds to a basic human desire to be understood and remembered. Shakespeare captures this desire as Hamlet expresses his dying wish to his friend Horatio: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,” he urges, “draw thy breath [...] / To tell my story” (5.2.349).<sup>1</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda echoes this sentiment as the cast of *Hamilton* sings, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story” at the end of the musical. Researchers across disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, marketing, literature, and rhetoric and writing studies emphasize the importance of storytelling, or narrative, to the human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Storytelling is something that you already do on a daily basis. When you email a professor after missing class or recount the events of your drive to work to explain why you were late to a boss, you use narrative. You also use narrative to describe the events of a party, game, a class to a friend who was unable to attend. And, you consume narrative every day in the conversations you have with friends, the music you listen to, the TV shows you watch, and the media you consume both intentionally and unintentionally.

Because stories are so integral to our everyday lives, you have likely noticed narratives vary in their effectiveness. Have you ever listened to a friend tell a story, only to ask (perhaps silently), “What was the point?” Or, even worse, maybe you thought, “That doesn’t make sense.”

As you construct your own narrative, you need to make sure that you effectively convey events and communicate your purpose. For this chapter, I define **narrative** as *an account of events, organized logically and brought to life for the audience through intentional use of sensory details to accomplish a specific purpose*. This definition lays out the key components of a narrative:

- **An account of events**
- **Logical organization**
- **An intended audience**
- **Use of sensory details**
- **A specific purpose**

1. All references to Shakespeare’s plays in this chapter come from *The Riverside Shakespeare* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). Some spelling has been updated.

2. See, for example: Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Belknap: 2009); Michael Austin, *Useful Fictions: Evolution, Anxiety, and the Origins of Literature* (U of Nebraska Press: 2011); and Leonard Talmy, “Force Dynamics in Language and Cognition,” in Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*, Massachusetts: MIT, vol. I. Ch. 7, 409-470.[3] “Rivals” in this case means something more akin to “partners.” (See “rival, n.2 and adj. 3.” OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. (accessed May 10, 2021).

## Theater and Narrative

Writers often hear the advice: “Show, don’t tell.” And, in the theater, everything is about showing. For this reason, this chapter uses the model of theatrical performance to guide you through the writing of a narrative.

If you’ve ever been to a play (or watched a movie), you’ve seen a story come to life. Embodied characters act out events, which are organized with the intention of eliciting certain reactions or emotions from the audience. The actions on stage, the scenery and props, the sound effects, and the speeches create sensory experiences that help the audience feel like they are part of the action. If a play is successful, at the end you understand why the story was staged. Theater contains all the elements of narrative in an amplified form.

In this chapter, you will learn to use this knowledge to create more compelling narratives. By imagining the sensory experiences of the theater, you can more easily identify the elements that will bring your stories to life on the page.

The theater is especially useful for imagining a narrative come to life for three reasons:

- Because theater happens live, it engages all five senses.
- Because theater includes a live audience, it provides a source of direct feedback.
- Because theater happens in a limited space, it requires careful decisions about what details are essential to the story.

In these three ways, the theater departs from the medium of film. However, if you have not been to the theater, you may find it helpful to imagine a TV show or a movie when thinking about your narrative.

The sections that follow break down the essential parts of a narrative, using examples from the theater to explain each one. Specifically, these sections draw examples from Shakespeare’s drama. Shakespeare wrote for what many scholars have termed “a bare stage.” In other words, he had no elaborate set pieces to help tell the story. Considering the strategies that Shakespeare used can help us become better storytellers.

## An Account of Events

“Come, let’s see the event” – Fabian, *Twelfth Night* (3.4.395)

At the center of any good story are answers to the questions: “What happened?” and “To whom?” In your narrative, you will answer these questions through your plot and characters.

### Plot

The **plot** is *the sequence of events in your narrative*. As the question, “What happened?” implies, one of the most essential elements of the plot is conflict and change. When deciding what event to portray in your narrative, think about a moment or experience in which your circumstances changed.

Focus on the event (or set of events) at the center of this change. Then, use basic plot structure to make sure you have included the relevant events:

- A story starts in **equilibrium**. This is the time before change occurs. In your story, you might give some background information to help the audience better understand your transformation.
- Then a **conflict**, or problem, is introduced, which prompts a change. In a narrative, this conflict might be between two people, two ideas, or two sets of values.
- The conflict produces a reaction, or set of events, called the **rising action**.
- These events build toward the **climax**, or the point of the story in which the outcome is determined.

- The events following the climax are called the *falling action*. This is where all of the things that have been determined in the climax start to fall into place.
- Finally, you reach the *resolution*, or the point at which things settle into a new normal.

Let's look at how these plot elements play out in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

- At the beginning of the play, watchmen observe a ghost who looks like Hamlet's father (equilibrium).
- The conflict begins when the ghost tells Hamlet that he was poisoned by Claudius, Hamlet's uncle (conflict).
- Hamlet wrestles internally with the desire to avenge his father's death and looks for ways to prove Claudius is guilty (rising action).
- The conflict comes to a head once Hamlet believes he has proof (climax).
- Then, Hamlet confronts his mother, accidentally kills Polonius, is banished, and is challenged to a duel (all the falling action, or the consequences of the climax).
- Finally, the play resolves during the duel, as Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup and Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius die when struck by Laertes' poisoned sword (resolution).

Imagine if Hamlet had been a well-adjusted character, his father had lived to old age, and Hamlet had inherited the throne just as expected. I don't think it's far-fetched to suggest Shakespeare's play wouldn't have gained nearly as much popularity.

Even if your own story doesn't have as much drama as a Shakespearean tragedy, you can use the plot structure to establish which events are crucial to your narrative. As you brainstorm your own narrative, answer the following questions:

- What were things like before the events? (equilibrium)
- What happened to create conflict or what prompted a change? (conflict)
- As a result of this conflict, what happened? (rising action)
- When did the problem come to a head? (climax)
- What did you do as a result? (falling action)
- How was everything resolved? And what are things like now? (resolution)

The answers to these questions will provide you with a basic plot outline.

## Characters

Once you've decided what event to portray, you also need to identify the major and minor characters for your narrative. The major characters are the people who are essential to the story. In other words, the story cannot happen without these characters. When writing a personal narrative, you will be the protagonist, the character who is facing the conflict. The minor characters are there for support. They help add dimension to the story, but the story does not revolve around them.

Focus on the main characters. Consider who needs a name and what physical descriptions might help the audience put a face to the name. If you've ever read a play before watching it, you'll notice that many of these descriptions are missing (or imbedded in conversation). Because you will not have the benefit of the stage, you need to create visual elements through your writing.

Imagine that you are staging the episode. Thinking about the people in your story as staged characters will help you identify details that are essential to your understanding of the character and their role in your narrative. How would the character style their hair? What would they be wearing? What would they say and how would they say it? It might even help to identify the actor who would play the character. Ask yourself what about this actor or their past performances makes them a good representative of the person who they are portraying.

Consider the effect of these two versions of the same event:

Version 1: When I was in middle school, my friend brought a cow skull to school for show and tell.

Version 2: Elisabeth's spiral curls bounced as she reached her freckle-covered arm into the black garbage bag to retrieve her show and tell item. I heard gasps from the other students as she pulled out a cow skull.

Version 1 gives the reader basic information but does not tell the audience anything about the characters.

The additional details in Version 2 help establish Elisabeth as a character. Presumably in a longer version, the reader will learn more about her: perhaps that she received the nickname "Frizzy Lizzy" from her friends or that she spent hours outside each day on her parents' farm. The spiral curls and the freckles become small reminders of larger aspects of her character. In this example, "the other students" are the minor characters, who provide context but are not assigned names.

In your narrative, use less details when discussing minor characters. Similar to the above example, Shakespeare assigns names to his major characters—Hamlet, Romeo, Juliet, and Cleopatra, while relegating minor characters to their positions—First Gentleman, Gravedigger, or Page. You might follow a similar model, refer to these characters collectively (for example as "the crowd" or "other customers"), or even choose to exclude minor characters from your narrative altogether. Regardless, make sure all details about your major or minor characters are relevant to the story.

## Logical Organization

"Order gave each thing view." – Duke of Norfolk, *Henry VIII* (1.1.44)

Once you have decided what event(s) to portray and which characters to depict, you must decide on the order of events. While the plot describes the chronological order in which events occur, you may choose to present your story in a different logical order. For example, you might start with the climax of your story and then use flashbacks or dialog to show the reader how you got to that point. Or, you may choose to keep your events in chronological order but skip forward in time, highlighting the most important events.

## Where to Start

Students often struggle with how to start their narrative. From a practical point of view, you probably do not want to start by writing your introduction. Start with the material that comes easiest to you or the part of your story that you are most excited to write. Once you have a draft, you can figure out how to introduce your narrative.

First drafts often begin and end by telling the reader why the experience was significant. Although, as a drafting technique, it might make sense to establish the purpose before you start writing, once you get to the final draft, consider what you want the introduction to accomplish and what the audience needs to know before they continue. Rather than contextualization, the audience needs to get a feel of the characters, setting, and tone of the story.

Place yourself in the audience of a theater. Imagine if you sat down and the play began with a 10-minute explanation of the theme, the characters' backgrounds, and all the events that preceded the action. You would probably be bored, and you might even walk out of the theater.

To grab the audience's attention, plays often start *in media res*, or *in the midst of things*. Here's an example from the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

**Bernardo:** Who's there?

**Francisco:** Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

**Bernardo:** Long live the king!

**Francisco:** Bernardo?

**Bernardo:** He.

**Francisco:** You come most carefully upon your hour.

**Bernardo:** 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

**Francisco:** For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold  
And I am sick at heart.

**Bernardo:** Have you had quiet guard?

**Francisco:** Not a mouse stirring.

**Bernardo:** Well, good night.  
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,  
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Notice how the play starts with a verbal exchange. The play does not provide the audience with background information about the two characters. At the beginning of the scene, the audience doesn't know who Bernardo or Francisco are or even that they are Bernardo and Francisco. We don't know the occasion of their meeting or the significance of it. Instead, Shakespeare drops the audience into the action, as if they have just walked into the middle of a conversation. By the end of this short exchange, however, the audience has learned the two characters' names, that the two characters function as some sort of guards working in shifts, that the night so far has been relatively uneventful, and that Horatio and Marcellus are "rivals."<sup>3</sup>

The tension in the first exchange, created with the short responses suggests the possibility that Francisco and Bernardo are leaving something unsaid, a suspicion confirmed with the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus only a few lines later.

Through this exchange, Shakespeare sets the tone and gives the audience information needed to understand the story. As you are writing your narrative, consider whether you can use a short scene to establish tone and key ideas.

## Past Events

In *Hamlet*, we find out from the Ghost that the rumor that Hamlet's father died when "A serpent stung [him]" is false. The Ghost informs Hamlet (and the audience) that "The serpent that did sting [Hamlet's] father's life / Now wears his crown" (1.5.39-40). In case Hamlet or the audience missed his accusation of his own brother, Claudius, the ghost more clearly articulates, "thy uncle stole, / With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial, / And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment; [...] Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd" (1.5.61-64; 74-75).

This murder happens prior to the actions on stage. By the time the play begins, Hamlet's father is dead, and the ghost already haunts Denmark. The murder is, however, crucial to the events that unfold on stage. Without this accusation, Hamlet would never be driven to "Revenge [his father's] foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). Rather than give the audience this context before the action starts, Shakespeare includes it in the fifth scene. In doing so, he influences audience perception. Already introduced to the skepticism that the other characters have expressed about the ghost, the audience must decide whether to trust this information or disregard it. Their decision affects how they judge Hamlet for the remainder of the play. The introduction of past events at this moment is intentional and provides an organic way to incorporate these details.

In your narrative, you may similarly use dialogue to provide important context for current events. For example, your friend might say, "Remember when we went to Dairy Queen? I forgot my wallet and Clint brought it to me." If Clint is an important character, this story might explain how you first met.

You can also recall past events by using flashbacks or by communicating your internal thoughts. There are many ways to do this. You can use markers like "last year" or "a similar event occurred when I was five." You can also jump back in time (sometimes a space between paragraphs is enough to clue in your reader). Or you can communicate your thoughts through writing that parallels a **soliloquy**, or *the type of speech an actor gives to himself (and the audience), but not the other characters on stage*. Let's say you are pulling up in your friend's driveway. You could use the drive to recall the first time you pulled into that same spot or a moment when you fought with that friend in front of her house.

3. "Rivals" in this case means something more akin to "partners." (See "rival, n.2 and adj. 3." OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. (accessed May 10, 2021).)

## Gaps in Time

When deciding how to organize your narrative, also consider how you will handle the gaps between major events. For example, maybe you had a key experience at 5 that influenced how you dealt with another experience at 18. You won't have time in your narrative to write about everything that happened between 5 and 18. So, you can use that space to strategically connect material.

My favorite example of Shakespeare jumping forward in time happens between Act III and Act IV of *The Winter's Tale*. Act III ends with a detailed scene, where a shepherd and his son find an abandoned infant and observe a shipwreck. Act IV elaborates on the preparations for a sheepshearing festival 16 years later. Time, portrayed by an actor on stage, gives a speech bridging this gap and noting the important events that have happened during this span: the abandoned infant has been raised as a shepherd's daughter, sixteen years have passed, the baby's father has grieved, and a new character (Florizel) has entered the action.

Zoom in on what's important and zoom out on the filler material. In your narrative, consider which events need the stage treatment. In other words, if you were depicting the experience on stage, which actions would you depict, and which would you describe? See the section on **Sensory Details** below for more information on how to bring your events to life.

## An Intended Audience

“Call the noblest to the audience.” – Fortinbras, *Hamlet* (5.2.37)

At the end of *Hamlet*, young Fortinbras issues an order to “call the noblest to the audience,” cultivating a specific audience for the story Horatio intends to tell.

Your instructor may ask you to write for a particular audience. Or, you may have the opportunity to select your readers. Either way, you should keep your audience in mind as you are writing. Consider what the audience knows and how they will react.

Visualizing your audience in a theater (and especially a theater that possesses the characteristics of Shakespeare's stage) will help you identify the characteristics that they possess and the reactions you want to elicit. When you think about the theater, you likely imagine a play in the dark with lighting on the stage. Such lighting helps us follow the action, but distances the audience from events.

Shakespeare's theater was different. There was no barrier between the audience and the stage. The use of a **thrust stage** meant that *the audience surrounded the stage on three sides*. Standing playgoers, known as groundlings, stood for the entirety of the production, jostled for position, and even leaned against the stage.

Because the productions happened during the day, playgoers could see other audience members as clearly as they could see what was happening on stage. If an audience didn't laugh or clap at the right time or if they laughed or clapped at the wrong time, it had a big impact on the production. The actors had to compete for the audience's attention and they did that by improvising, making direct eye contact, and using asides to speak directly to the audience.

Even if the stories you write are not produced on stage, you can still make a meaningful connection with your own audience by translating the power of physical embodiment in the theater into the words that you select for the page. Obviously, you can't look into your audience's eyes, respond to something they've said, or react when their attention fades. But you can still make that connection by considering how they will react. One way to do this is to have someone else read your story. Instead of asking them to edit it, ask them to document when they laughed, smiled, teared up, and so on. Ask them when they felt interested and when their interest waned.

By identifying your audience and seeking feedback, you can adapt your narrative to capture the audience's attention. Consider what terms you might need to define, how much description or explanation the audience will need, and what part of your story will most interest your audience.

## Use of Sensory Details

“Awake your senses.” – Brutus, *Julius Caesar* (3.2.16-17)

The word **audience** comes from the same root word as auditory and *implies that playgoers primary engage with a play through sound*. Sometimes the word **spectators** is used to describe the same group of people. Spectators, from the same root word as spectacles, *implies visual engagement with a play*. Although this chapter primarily uses the word “audience,” considering both terms highlights the way playgoers or even readers engage through multiple senses.

Once you’ve identified your main plot points, decided which parts need the most emphasis, and selected a target audience, you are ready to fill in the details. These details are what transforms your narrative from telling to showing.

While you may be used to plays or movies with elaborate scenery, Shakespeare did not have this luxury when he wrote or directed his plays. In fact, evidence shows that 16th and 17th century public theater performances used very little scenery and few stage pieces. Furthermore, because such performances took place outside in the afternoon, the playwright had little control over the weather or lighting. If a scene took place at night under starry skies, Shakespeare had to figure out a way to communicate that to his audience (characters carried lanterns or candles). And, some of the magic of Shakespeare is that he continues to communicate it to us today. Sometimes when you are writing a narrative, you might feel like you are creating something out of nothing. Imagining Shakespeare’s stage might help you do this.

On the page, your audience cannot see the characters or hear their speeches. That means that you need to paint the scene with words.

The **Logical Organization** section of this chapter briefly mentioned the idea of zooming in and out. Zoom in on what you want the reader to notice. This means deciding which events deserve the stage treatment. In other words, if you were staging this scene, what events would happen on the stage?

Once you decide on these events, consider what is significant about each moment. Significance can come from a moment’s relationship to other events or from symbolic value. Select the details that highlight this significance.

Take a moment to recall a scene from a play, movie, or TV show that particularly resonated with you. Consider all of the details that went into the production of that scene. If the scene was inside a building, what room was it in? What flooring was used? Walls? Lighting? Furniture? What props were present? What colors were used in the scene? Where were the characters positioned? From where did they enter or leave? What did they look like? How was their hair styled? What were they wearing? Consider the auditory components of the scene. Who spoke? What was their voice like? What did they say? What other sounds did you hear?

Now imagine this same scene without each component. How would it be different? What if, for example, all the sounds were taken away? Or you just had a narrator telling you what the characters did, but there was no movement?

By imagining your narrative played out on stage, you can identify details that will show rather than tell your experiences. While your final version will not include every prop, piece of scenery, or physical detail of a character, it should include enough of these for the reader to fill in the rest of the picture. The more essential that object, place, or person is to your story, the more details you need to provide about it. Use the following techniques to incorporate detail.

## The Five Senses

Focus on the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. If you are writing a narrative about your own experiences, think about what you saw, heard, smelled, tasted, or felt. To practice, set a 5-minute timer and write down everything you sense during those 5-minutes. Because we experience things through the senses, the best way to show your experience to the reader is by activating their senses.

## Metaphor

A related way to involve your reader is by incorporating simile or metaphor. What did an object look like, sound like, smell like, taste like, or feel like? For instance, let’s say you are describing a squeaking noise. Is it more like the sound created as a basketball player pivots on the court or the sound created as a teacher drags a sharp piece of chalk down the blackboard? Or is it something else entirely? What feelings do these sounds evoke in your body? Metaphors use the audience’s own memory to help the reader

understand an unfamiliar experience. Great writing will help the reader feel the sensation of the response in their body. Thinking about your own reaction will help you develop effective comparisons.

## Dialogue

Writing dialogue is another way to help drop your reader into your scene. Sometimes students feel intimidated because they can't remember the exact conversation that they had with someone years ago. However, in personal narratives, it is okay to take minor creative liberties to communicate a point. If you remember the gist of the conversation, you can still put it into dialogue.

By using the senses, metaphor, and dialogue, you can paint a picture of characters, scenery, and events to engage your audience at a sensory level.

## A Specific Purpose

“I have spoke to the purpose.” – Hermione, *The Winter's Tale* (1.2.100)

This chapter has asked you to imagine your story as if were to be produced on the stage. As you continue to do so, make sure to write with a clear purpose in mind. Ask yourself:

- Why am I telling this story?
- What do I want the reader to get out of my story?

Deciding on your purpose might take some work. And while it is tempting to just pick an event and then later add in a purpose, that's not going to create the best narrative. A strong narrative starts with purpose.

To explore and identify purpose, consider starting with some journaling work. The following prompts may help you arrive at an idea for your paper and help you understand why it is important to tell that story:

- What keeps you up at night?
- What defines you as a person?
- What do you wish other people knew about you?
- Are you the same person you were 5 years ago? Why or why not?

Sometimes students feel like they don't have a life changing moment to write about. That's okay. Your story might be more subtle. Some of the best narratives start with small moments that seem insignificant. Focusing on the details around these moments and making them come to life will result in a better narrative than a big moment with little relatability.

## Conclusion

Following the advice in this chapter will help you write an engaging narrative that accomplishes a specific purpose. Remember, there are different styles of writing, and Composition I is a great place to try these out. Reading a variety of narratives as you prepare to write your own will help you identify the required components and find a style that works for you.

## Discussion Questions

Use the following questions to further explore the ideas in the chapter and begin brainstorming for your own narrative.

1. Think of a time you used storytelling (i.e. narrative) in your everyday life to persuade or inform someone. Were you effective in achieving your purpose? Why or why not?
2. Think of a narrative that you have recently read, listened to, or watched. Then, answer the following questions:
  - How did it begin? How might switching the order of the narrative switch the outcome or interpretation of the story?
  - Who was the audience for this narrative? How do you know?
  - What was the narrative's purpose? How do you know? What details in the text or story contributed to this purpose?
3. Imagine you are staging an event from your life. Think about the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings that would help this moment come to life. Make a list of details you could add for each of the five senses.

## About the author



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Heidi Cephus holds a PhD in English from the University of North Texas, where she conducted research on the connection between bodies and judgment in Shakespeare's plays. More recently, she has focused on depictions of women's work from Shakespeare to today. In addition to teaching and researching Shakespeare, Dr. Cephus has 13 years of experience teaching composition courses, including 3 years at Oklahoma State. Currently, she is employed as a Choice and Success Advisor at a Colorado high school. In her spare time, Dr. Cephus enjoys playing disc golf, running, and reading detective fiction.

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## A FORMER FIRST-YEAR COMP STUDENT TEACHES NARRATIVE

Dr. Charlotte Hogg

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:  
<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=29#audio-29-1>

*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to the chapter.*

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[AFormerFirstYearCompStudentTeachesNarrative.\\_print](#)

### What You Will Learn in this Chapter

How is writing narrative more than “just” a story? If it’s a personal narrative, how is it more than being self-absorbed, or how can our own story reach other people? You’ll discover in this chapter ways to give your narrative significance or answer the “so what” question for readers: “why should I care?” You’ll learn about the importance of having a “claim of significance,” and how to come to that by finding what Donald Murray calls a “central tension” in a narrative. You’ll read about the importance of revision to best find and bring out the tension and significance. Finally, you’ll get some ideas for how to get words on the screen by being as particular as you can as well as how your openings and endings can help give your narrative more substance and meaning.

### Key Terms

- Claim of Significance (“So what”)
- Central tension
- Allatonicness
- Openings & Endings

## Why and How to Find the “So What?” in Your Narrative

Sometimes we feel like we have nothing to say, and we might feel that even more when we’re given an assignment. When I took first-year composition my first semester of college, we wrote personal narratives the entire semester. I had lots to say—I was homesick, overwhelmed, but also thrilled about the social happenings coming at me. But I still sat stymied in front of the screen, not sure what would make a good story or what was interesting to readers. Brainstorming helped, but I still had to come up with initial ideas. I decided to write about things familiar to me from home, stories I’d told that had gotten good reactions from friends. I wrote about my parents’ car I borrowed in high school that could no longer go in reverse; I wrote about a terrible movie date where my date disappeared from the movie theater—I thought he’d ditched me—only to find out that when he got up to use the restroom during the movie, his leg had fallen asleep. He had to crawl up the aisle and was too embarrassed to come back in to the theater, dark as it was. I wrote about a bridge where my friends and I used to converge.

These were readable, even engaging, according to my instructor, but she kindly pushed me in her feedback to clarify the point or purpose of my essays. To put it not-as-nicely: *so what?* Coming up with an idea may or may not be the hard part—sometimes it’s having an idea that readers can engage with and get into, that has a clear purpose, that’s the hardest part. Narrative can be deceptively simple—I’m just writing a story—but it still should have a purpose. Wendy Belcher calls this purpose a **claim of significance**, which is a piece’s “worthiness or value, emerging from its object of study, approach, argument, or solution.”<sup>1</sup> She’s talking here about drafting an academic article that typically has a clearer, more overt argument than narrative, but it applies just as much here: to “answer readers’ questions of ‘so what?’ That is: ‘what will reading this [piece] do for me? Why does/should your [piece] matter to readers like me?’”<sup>2</sup>

How can we go from an idea, something that sparks our energy or interest that might be a good story—good meaning engaging to readers—to a successful narrative? Largely the revision process helps us get there. Revision means to “re-see.” It doesn’t mean to write to an outline and then “perfect” your points. Outlines can be great to have a foothold and guiding focus, but if it is approached as the answer to get to and not a guide to help us develop our writing, narratives can be limited and not have much of a claim of significance. Rather than, or in addition to, creating an outline, try asking yourself some questions about the moment both when you’re initially drafting or later, when you’re revising.

Donald Murray, a writing teacher and theorist on the writing process, wrote *The Craft of Revision*, and in it he says what I think connects to finding a claim of significance: “Every piece of effective writing will say many different things to individual readers. Good writing has depth and texture, but something should stand out.”<sup>3</sup> He calls this a **central tension**, “what makes the focus dynamic, active, something worth writing and reading. There should be forces at work within the focus: a question, a doubt, a conflict, a contradiction.”<sup>4</sup> This can happen if the piece is humorous, serious, or both. A central tension is more than an idea or topic and gives you as a writer much more to play with, because an idea or topic don’t automatically come with a central tension. Murray shows this well when he describes writing an essay about your mom—that’s a topic or idea, but not a central tension. But here’s one: *My mom’s first love—her third husband*. (My dad introduces my mom—his wife of over 50 years—as his first wife. Embedded in his joke is a central tension meant to be a funny icebreaker when meeting someone new.)

A lack of tension can be why some topics might fall flat: I’ve worked with students writing an argument essay against drunk driving, for instance, but write themselves into a corner when trying to make their argument, since the vast majority of people agree that driving drunk is a poor choice. But an essay on whether or not the legal limit for drunkenness should be lowered is going to bring about differing opinions and give the author more fodder to draw upon.

1. Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. 2nd Ed. U of Chicago P, 2019. p.192

2. Belcher, p. 192

3. Murray, Donald. *The Craft of Revision*. 5th Ed., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013. p. 60

4. Murray, p. 60

So how do you get to the central tension from an idea or topic—how can you have one purposeful idea come across? Questions in the early drafting and revision process can help you get there. Murray offers some great questions to ask of the draft:

- What surprised you?
- What did you expect to read? How was what you read different from your expectations?
- What do you remember most vividly?
- What one thing does a reader need to know?
- What is the single most important detail, quote, fact, idea in the draft?
- What do you itch to explore during revision?
- What single idea may the final draft deliver?<sup>5</sup>

It's through revision—and even if we have a nugget of the “so what” in the initial drafting, it's rare for the claim of significance to be fully discovered, realized, or developed—I came to understand the meaning of the narratives I was writing as a student in my first-year comp class. My funny story about my bad movie date was about the awkwardness and vulnerability of putting myself out there. My essay about this plain, cement bridge was about loving a rural landscape that most people overlook.

Of course, that's not to say the initial drafting doesn't set the stage for unearthing the central tension. It may be more accurate to say the scenes may need to be re-staged through revision. A good way to explain it comes from Bruce Ballenger, a writing theorist and teacher, who draws on Ann Berthoff's idea of “allatonceness” (all-at-once-ness; she was thinking in hashtags before hashtags were a thing). The metaphor she uses is that writing is like learning to ride a bike: you don't separate handlebar skills with pedaling with balancing, but you get on the bike and try to bring these things together.<sup>6</sup> This allatonceness happens because thinking and writing happen simultaneously rather than thinking happening *before* writing.

Let me extend the metaphor a bit. It can be frustrating, falling off and getting back on a bike, and so we might cling to the outline like we do training wheels. And training wheels serve us well up to a point, but we're more limited. Outlines can be a guide, but if we hold too tightly to them, our narrative is constrained and often underdeveloped in its potential complexity. Even more, you as the author may lose interest, and that can make it harder to get and sustain interest from the reader. In short: the outline can be a tool for your writing but can be less helpful as the end goal.

We have an idea, a question, a glimmer toward a possible claim of significance. We know now that writing and thinking together move us forward, but that blank screen might still be intimidating us. How to start?

Try these two things to get moving:

- Start in the middle of a story—meaning a scene or real-time moment—where things are already happening, not so the reader is lost or confused, but where she will want to dive right in to keep up
- Share that story with particulars and specifics to your experience.

Sometimes less-experienced writers think the best way to reach everybody is to be as general as possible so that the broadest possible audience can be reached. Thinking of your audience as everybody is a challenge. You want to have some sense of your audience—a generally educated person that you want to convince of an argument? An empathetic reader you want to connect to or move with your prose? But you'll still want to narrow some. For example, in writing this chapter, I'm making a couple of assumptions: 1) that you're taking a college writing course and 2) that you could have less experience with writing. The first assumption is pretty safe, as I was asked to create a chapter for a book for a writing class. The second assumption could be on the mark but not a sure thing. Maybe you're someone who has come back to college at age 30 and had a full time job that involved writing. Chances are more students are

5. Murray, p. 62

6. Ballenger, Bruce. *The Curious Writer*. 5th Ed. Pearson, 2016. p. 6

the traditional college-aged demographic. As the author I can't know the exact audience, so I have to make some assumptions but must be quite careful in doing so to not resort to stereotypes.

The second issue with trying to be broad to be universal is ripe for pitfalls. The idea that we are all human and that we all have universal experiences—heartache, grief, joy—makes sense, but it doesn't account for our many different identities, experiences, beliefs, upbringings. So my experience of heartbreak at age 18 in a rural town as a white, young adult is likely different than yours.

And yet: writing and stories do allow us to immerse ourselves in other peoples' experiences and realities, and research has shown that learning about others in this way can improve empathy and understanding.

Here's the paradox of particulars: when sharing our narrative, we want to do the opposite of being broad to cast a wide net for the most readers. It is in the particularities that we can best connect to other readers. That isn't to say that they will have the same experience or that we are all the same, but it is much more likely to invite readers to appreciate, if not feel or connect to, the situation of the writer.

For example, if I share with you the story of my heartbreak and first set the scene about my first love in high school, I might reveal a moment from my prom at a high school so small that we didn't need to have dates because we just needed a critical mass to fill up the dance floor. So the guy I was crushing on was there at the prom, but he wasn't my date. Good news, though: he wasn't anyone else's date, either. I might describe him as I saw him, leaning over in his rented tux at one of the tables on the gym stage, looking out at the dance floor, me shadowed by the stage in the white, fitted dress with more dazzle than I'd normally wear (I'd borrowed the dress), peeking up at him while out of his eyesight. But then my favorite song, "If You Leave" by OMD begins playing over the loudspeakers. I feel a compulsion to ask him to dance; *Pretty in Pink* had just come out a couple months before, after all. I do, and he says yes.

Now: you may not have gone to your prom, or you may not be crushing on anyone, or you maybe couldn't reveal a crush for certain reasons, and my assumption is that your prom was not in the 1980s like mine was. But my hope as a writer is that you could still find a way in to that story in a way that connects to your particulars or experiences in some way even if it was vastly different than mine. In other words: as writers we want to try to connect with our readers through our experiences, but that doesn't mean we should assume they have the same experiences or feelings about their experiences.

Keep in mind, then, what Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd say in their book *Good Prose: the Art of Nonfiction*, "A story lives in its particulars, in the individuality of person, place, and time."<sup>7</sup>

After brainstorming and getting distractions out of the way (close browsers, turn over your phone, or better yet, move it), unpack the story that stems from the idea or tension you are pursuing. While doing so, stay in the particulars that come from sensory details or descriptions that can also reveal tension (notice how I was looking up at my crush on the stage from below. True, but also thematically relevant). Later, when I know more about what I'm trying to say (perhaps my essay will be about the realities—versus the 1980s movie versions—of unrequited love), I'll revise to draw out the tension even more through scenes and moments.

Perhaps in that first draft, but more likely during revision, you'll then want to cue readers to that claim of significance—why they are reading about this tension at all. (Are you seeing how important revision is, the part that's often overlooked as we instead put much pressure on ourselves to come up with the perfect idea than instantly and easily translate it from our brain to the screen?)

I want to wrap this chapter by speaking to two key parts of a narrative that people either overlook or stew so much over that it can stop them cold from producing words: the introduction and conclusion. Only I think it's more accurate to call them "openings" and "endings," because the ways introductions and conclusions are usually defined are formulaic and too narrow for the possibilities that come with personal narratives.

As a reader, getting pulled in to an essay that starts with the broadest, most generic sentence possible is tough: "People in society like to have a place to connect with each other." But starting in the middle of the action by opening rather than introducing the piece can bring readers with you: "I approached the Sarben Bridge, turning off my headlights so I didn't block the view of the fireflies and blind my friends who'd arrived before me." Openings invite the reader into your story, and then you can leave a trail that signals the

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7. Kidder, Tracy and Richard Todd. *Good Prose: the Art of Nonfiction*. Random House, 2013. p. 14

claim of significance; in a personal narrative you don't need to state your central tension directly in the first paragraph, though you do want to clue your reader in to where things are headed sooner rather than later (the first page or so, give or take).

Endings: those can be daunting, and with good reason. We've usually been taught that they either re-state everything that's been said or end with a dramatic final thought that magically wraps everything together in a tidy bow for the reader. There's not one right way to end a personal narrative, but rather than thinking summarize or conclude, try leaving the reader with what a lot of writers call resonance, an idea or image that has reverberations beyond the essay by leaving readers thinking. Emily W. Blacker explains this well: "An essay ending 'works' when it clarifies and amplifies the dominant theme or emotional exploration of the piece without hitting the reader over the head with it."<sup>8</sup> This isn't easy to do, but often ending on an image or moment that references or invokes the central tension can do this better than spelling it out. ([Listen to the essay "Repeat After Me,"](#) by David Sedaris for an ending that does this beautifully.<sup>9</sup>)

It can feel like a lot, making all of these elements of personal narrative come together seamlessly. Here's the thing: it doesn't come together seamlessly—it comes together by batting around ideas, drafting and lots of revision that gets more focused when you are clearer what you are really wanting to get across. Usually when I talk with my students—or myself—about writing a piece, I tell them to learn about the genre but not get so caught up that it trips you up while writing. Sit (and put away distractions!) and get to the #allatonceness. (Let's just make it a hashtag!)

Happy drafting! You've got this.

## Discussion Questions

- What experience do you have with revision? What has worked best for you? Why?
- Try this for starting an essay: put the central tension right there in the first paragraph, like talking about a trip to Disney World at age 10 but saying you hated Disney World. Roxane Gay does this in her [New York Times essay](#), "Why the Beach is a Bummer," where she takes the assumption that everyone loves the beach and turns it on its head.<sup>10</sup>
- What are some examples you have from books or movies or podcasts or games that really pulled you in as the audience? What kind of particulars brought you in to the piece, and why? How could you appreciate or connect to the text whether or not it connected to your own experiences?
- Sometimes cutting can be some of the smartest revision we can do. Take a first draft you have and try cutting the current first and last paragraph. What gets lopped off? Have you already said it better somewhere else? Can you move an idea or two from those paragraphs elsewhere? Try and see what happens.

8. Blacker, Emily W. "Ending the Endless: The Art of Ending Personal Essays." *Essay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*. 5.1. <https://www.essayjournal.com/emily-w-blacker-ending-the-endless-the-art-of-ending-personal-essays-51.html>

9. Sedaris, David. "Repeat After Me." *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to Present*. Eds Lex Williford and Michael Martone, Touchstone, 2007: 443-451.

10. Gay, Roxane. "Why the Beach is a Bummer." *New York Times*, July 26 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/why-the-beach-is-a-bummer.html>

## About the author



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Dr. Charlotte Hogg is Professor of English at Texas Christian University where she serves as Director of Composition. She is the author of *From the Garden Club: Rural Women Writing Community* and co-author of *Rural Literacies* with Kim Donehower and Eileen Schell. She co-edited with Donehower and Schell *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy* as well as a special issue of *enculturation: Rhetorics and Literacies of Climate Change*. With Shari J. Stenberg, she co-edited the anthology *Persuasive Acts: Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-first Century*. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *College English*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Peitho*, *Puerto del Sol*, and elsewhere. She teaches women's rhetorics and literacies, creative nonfiction, and composition. Her Twitter handle is @paxtonista.



PART II

# WRITING WITH PRIMARY RESEARCH



5.

# A FEMINIST TEACHES WRITING THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Dr. Anna Sicari

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:  
<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=31#audio-31-1>

*Push play to on the soundbar above to listen to part 1 of the chapter.*



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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=31#audio-31-2>

*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to part 2 of the chapter.*

[AFeministTeachesWritingThroughInstitutionalEthnography.\\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn In this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn about Institutional Ethnography as a research methodology and method of inquiry to investigate a recurring issue you see happening at work, school, any organization you belong to, any “institution” you belong to, where you do work. This chapter gives background on Institutional Ethnography, defines key terms and concepts you need to know and how you can apply this to your own work, explains how IE is relevant to the First-Year Composition classroom and writing more broadly, gives tips on how to get started on a project using IE, and connects IE to feminism and institutional change. This chapter ends with discussion questions to help you talk about IE and primary research with others.

## Key Terms

- Institutional Ethnography
- StandPoint
- Social Coordination and Ruling Relations
- Problematic
- Institutional Discourse (Texts)
- Feminism

## What is Institutional Ethnography?

Did you ever find yourself at work wondering why things are the way they are? For example, perhaps you are working as an intern at a publishing company and you notice that it seems the male-identified interns get more opportunities to work with the editors in working with authors, while the female-identified interns tend to the everyday: answer emails, make copies, run errands. You start wondering if it is “just in your head,” but you have been talking with the female interns who all seem to share similar experiences at this company; they are complaining about doing secretarial work when they wanted the opportunity to work with authors and learn about the editorial process. You want to investigate this experience further—to see if other female identified staff feel this way at this company, possibly at other publishing companies, too. You want to be able to discuss this problem of female staff feeling passed over by their male colleagues with your supervisor, but you want evidence to back up your claims. Clear communication, research with significant findings, and implications for change is necessary for you to make any legitimate case. However, you do not know where to start or begin and you find yourself overwhelmed.

This is where Institutional Ethnography would come in handy and is a useful sociological method of inquiry to know and learn in First Year Composition, as work is a central part of our everyday lives and research shows we learn through writing and talking about writing through and with others. Institutional Ethnography is a critical methodology that studies “how things happen” (Smith 5) through the examination of our work processes and work activities. Work, in IE, can be defined broadly: it can include working at an institution or company, or mothering, or being part of a social organization, such as a sorority or a student group. IE was first developed by sociologist and feminist Dorothy Smith, for “women, and for people,” to better understand how our social relations and working activities are shaped for us. Important for readers to know is that Smith was involved in the 1970s feminist movement, and participated in and learned more about consciousness-raising; this is a process in which women/female-identified people met and shared common issues that occurred in their lives, both as part of a bonding and problem-solving process. This term is credited to feminist activist Anne Forer, when she asked a group of feminists to share how they experienced oppression as women, as she needed it to “raise her own consciousness.” Smith was involved in these programs, learning from women their shared experiences with systems of oppression and power (Ritzer & Stepnisky 560-63). This concept of consciousness-raising and encouraging people, especially women and marginalized people, to speak from their own experiences is key to understanding IE and its aims, as IE asks for people to look up from their everyday experiences to understand how these experiences are linked to the translocal and organizes everyday experiences. The emphasis is on what people do—with work as a broadly conceived notion— and what individuals say and know about their work as experts, that point to larger patterns of shared experiences to uncover institutional organizations of power that influence and shape such experiences.

IE provides tools to examine our work and the institutional forces that shape what we do so that we can have knowledge and insight, from data, to reform and bring intervention to these spaces/institutions. IE draws on data collection methods typical in more traditional forms of ethnography: interviews, case studies, focus groups, textual analysis, discourse analysis, autoethnography, participant observation, and archival research. IE asks its practitioners, however, to “look up from where they are” to map up and

away from just the personal to identify patterns. Two important scholars of IE, Marjorie DeVault and Liza McCoy describe the steps of IE research as this: “a) identify an experience b) identify some of the institutional processes that are shaping that experience, and c) investigate those processes in order to describe analytically how they operate as the grounds of experience” (20). IE is interested in examining how something happens and there are five core concepts, or tools, to understanding IE that this chapter will briefly uncover: standpoint, social coordination, ruling relations, problematic, and institutional discourse (or texts).

## Standpoint

Standpoint is drawn from feminist cultural materialism, and we can see the influence of the feminist consciousness- movement most clearly rooted into his concept. The researcher in an IE project is part of the research experience: that is, they are participating in the work processes that they seek to discover/learn more about. Standpoint makes clear that the uniqueness of an individual shapes their experience, and research narrative; so, for the female-identified intern at the publishing company in the earlier anecdote to this chapter, their experience with the company is different than the male-identified interns, but is similar to the female-identified staff, although their stories, too, are uniquely situated to them as individuals. Those who practice IE do so with the full knowledge that all knowledge is “partial,” grounded in “material experience” (the embodied and everyday work/way we live), and a reflection of social dynamics. Two writing studies scholars write about standpoint in their article, “Institutional Ethnography as Materialist Framework for Writing Program Research and the Faculty-Staff Work Standpoints Project,” “The uniqueness of individual experience—the researcher’s personal experience or knowledge of a site and what has been gleaned from interviewing and observing—provides the guiding perspective for the research narrative produced” (136). In the intern example, the female-identified intern wishes to seek out evidence on the treatment of female staff based on her experience and the discussions she has had and witnessed with her fellow female-identified staff. This research narrative is grounded in her experience, which is partial, embodied, and materially situated—in IE, this is important, as the researcher acknowledges their participation in the research and how their own experiences have shaped their research narrative and project.

## Social Coordination and Ruling Relation

Social Coordination is a unique core component to IE, as it discusses how both institutions and individuals participate in everyday social relations. Institutions are “social entities” (LaFrance) that are created by individuals who take up a similar practice: ie, colleges, universities, hospitals, prisons, businesses. Institutions would not exist without social coordination, and the relations/networks that people create, and yet they also shape the existing realities of relations. For example, the publishing company was created by a network of people who share similar interests in producing texts; in order for the publication of texts to occur, different relations and networks were formed within the company that produces different hierarchies in the company, with interns being on the lower-end of the totem pole (often, intern positions are unpaid with little incentives). Individuals constructed such hierarchies, and yet struggle to understand how to untangle such hierarchies when they become problematic, as certain systems/networks in place have been set up “forever.” Social relations also impact the way a worker might respond to treatment at work. For example, the female-identified staff of interns who have been complaining about their treatment have formed their own network within the larger network of the publishing company; as they complain, many recognize their place within the company, that is, they have very little power or say, as interns. As this publishing company has professional codes and standards, a few of the female-identified staff are afraid to speak out, fearing that this will be seen as causing “trouble” at work. Understanding the complex social relations involved in work processes is important for those wanting to do IE research; how does one give voice to those who feel powerless and marginalized, especially if the researcher is part of that social network? What are the risks that are involved? It is also important to think about how social relations created these conditions in the first place: how does the treatment of women in society, historically and locally, play a role in the treatment of women in the workplace, more specifically the publishing industry, and even more specifically, at this one publishing

industry? How does the national context shape the treatment of female-identified staff? How does the local? And how might this study help other female interns in the future, given the complex web of social coordinations? These are important questions to consider, and examining power dynamics within social relationships and networks is key in IE through the third core concept: ruling relations. Ruling relations are “that extraordinary yet ordinary complex set of relations...that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives” (Smith 10). Ruling relations delineate and draw on complexes of power and authority and put into focus hierarchies within institutions, such as position/rank and expertise; they also reflect ideologies, histories, and social influences. The female-identified intern also observes that many of her supervisors are white, male-identified, although her immediate supervisor is female-identified. She begins to do research on the different positions within her company, and who occupies which position, as she considers the experiences of the female interns and their concerns. Who is being promoted and what social influences might impact who is getting opportunities? How do the male-identified interns feel about their work? IE allows for the researcher to tease out these complex power dynamics and work through the nuances and coordinations of hierarchy.

## Problematic

The problematic is the “cornerstone” to Institutional Ethnography, as it defines the major issue that needs to be researched, or, to quote LaFrance and Nicolas, “is a situated point of entry,” and IE researchers begin with a problematic. A researcher’s problematic “sets out a project of research and discovery that organizes the direction of investigation from the standpoint of those whose experience is its starting point” (Smith 10). A problematic is used to direct attention to a series of questions or concerns that arise from the people’s everyday concerns; it comes from the people on the ground, doing the work for an institution. In the publishing situation, the problematic is investigating the experiences of the female-identified interns at a local publishing company to better understand how their experiences have been shaped by institutional factors. A problematic takes into account that not all individuals will be oriented into a practice/ experience work in the same way, and starts from lived experience that competes with the work discourse to understand why an individual, or group of individuals, experiences at work compete with the workplace discourse. In the publishing company scenario, the company has a mission that it strives for inclusivity and diversity. This mission statement is posted on their website, a copy of it is in the main office, and it is often pasted in individual email messages from supervisors in their signature. The workplace discourse is one that emphasizes inclusivity, and yet the female-identified interns feel as if they are not being treated as their male colleagues in terms of opportunities in the workplace, how they are talked to, and the types of responsibilities placed on them. The people on the ground, who make up the employees of this workplace, do not feel as if they are being included in the work, and feel excluded based on their gender, and perhaps rank. These experiences of the female-identified staff are a site of contest within the larger, professional organization who work under a mission of inclusivity and diversity. While the company literature and discourse might talk about the work under the framing of inclusivity, the people who work for the company, in this case, the particular subset of female-identified interns, talk about the work in much different terms. This is the problematic, and the cornerstone to the project<sup>1</sup>. The problematic points to the direction of the investigation and helps the researcher frame guiding research questions to develop the study, while taking into account core concepts of social coordination and ruling relations. The problematic allows us, too, to understand how the research begins in lived and material experience.”

## Institutional Discourse (or Texts)

Texts, and institutional discourse more broadly, are key and central to any IE project. As IE is interested in the everyday, material

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1. It is important to note, too, that the problematic does not always have to be a problem (although in this example/scenario, it clearly is) to be “fixed.” In IE, it could be more exploratory: for example, the study of professional development for ICU nurses at a research hospital and examining what professional development might look like for these nurses.

world of institutions and work, the texts that socially coordinate people to the work are necessary elements in this methodology. As Michelle LaFrance and Melissa Nicolas write, “Texts are shapers of thinking, language use, and ideology. Usefulness, meaning, purpose, and accountability arise from the reality of the texts” (140). Think about how important and ubiquitous texts are at a workplace. Work documents, such as emails, text on websites, memos, policies, mission statements, coordinate and shape how we talk and think about work—how bosses talk about the work, how they talk about the work to different employees, how people talk about work to each other, how we talk about the work to ourselves. Texts also include the work that we do: medical charts, reports, lesson plans, research, any form of writing that is associated with our work. Social media posts further the importance of texts to our everyday work, as it frames the way work is discussed to so many different audiences (on a global level). These texts make up how the work is communicated to and with different people and audiences. Institutional ethnographers recognize how crucial texts are for research purposes: the work documents, the texts, coordinate activity, coordinate how the work happens, and it is through texts that institutional ethnographers can make visible the relationship between the institution and the embodied individual doing the work. For the female-identified intern wanting to understand gendered behaviors and relations at her workplace, she might also wish to analyze work documents: emails sent out to staff, memos on workplace conduct and professional attire, HR policies on discrimination in the workplace, the job descriptions of interns. These texts shape the social coordination of the workplace and also are key in creating change at an institution. The staff person can use these texts, along with the interviews, to explore how certain people, namely female interns, are being regulated to certain types of work activities and through finding patterns, bring data to the institution, and/or her boss, and discuss their findings.

These five organizing principles of Institutional Ethnography show how this framework asks researchers to approach ethnographic work. However, it is important to emphasize that these principles can be extremely flexible in practice, allowing the researcher to address the locally situated and flexible experience and practice of their particular work situation. Dorothy Smith is objective to any idea on IE becoming an orthodoxy or a sect, as the key to IE is that it is committed to exploration and discovery. And while there are the definite principles this chapter went over, there are many ways of realizing them into practice. A central idea to IE is that, as a methodology, it “challenges the notion that work practices or experiences...are accidents of circumstances or the inevitable product of processes beyond anyone’s control. IE foregrounds the relationships that exist between the material conditions of work practice and choices individuals make as they negotiate their situations” (LaFrance & Nicolas 141). IE recognizes the complexity of work as it encompasses relations, material realities, and how power and talk influences our everyday decisions and choices that we make; it also allows for researchers to start in their own experiences, to map out the many influences and structures that shape these experiences, and to conduct a study that will help us explore how certain things happen. To turn back to our opening anecdote of the female intern, it is important to recognize what a complex and difficult situation she is in at work, and how her experience is both highly situated and individualized, and yet also reflective of larger issues of female discrimination in the workplace (which is absolutely a reality). While IE will not be the answer to this young person’s issues at work, as it is a methodology focused on discovery and situated practice, it will help her understand how these gendered experiences happen to a particular group of workers, interns, at this particular institution, a publishing company. Recognizing the how something happens, how forces of institutional sexism work, is key and central to revising and addressing serious systemic issues of oppression in the workplace.

## Why IE in First-Year Composition and How to Get Started on Your Own Study

Institutional Ethnography, rooted in the personal and material world, is extremely relevant to any writing course, as it helps writers/researchers understand their local realities, and how they are always in relation and coordination with larger discourses and communities. The IE researcher better understands concepts of audience, genre, communication, and relationality—all key concepts that are important to writing. IE asks us to start from the everyday as we understand the problematic, and through this problematic, form guiding research questions; in this way, IE asks us to reflect and write on our experiences first before we form research questions. Textual analysis, too, is vital to an Institutional Ethnographer, as texts (which include interviews and focus groups), help us in finding

patterns and “mapping up.” And it asks researchers to truly think about revision; what is mapping telling us about the institutions and work that we participate in, and how can we use these findings to revise? As writing studies scholar Michelle Miley writes on IE, “The findings...allow us to draw maps, maps of intricate relationships that define our work...These maps can then guide as we advocate [for change]” (Miley).

If interested in getting started on an IE project, take the time to think about your work. This can be work in which you are employed by an institution, paid or unpaid, or this can be work more broadly defined: the work you do as a student, the work you do as a sibling, as a parent, as a member of an organization. Free-write about what a typical day at work looks like—perhaps keep a journal, even. As you write, reread your entries and start reflecting on experiences—are their commonalities or issues you want to explore? What is your problematic, or situated point of entry that you could investigate? Define your problematic. What type of questions can help you discover more about this experience? Start drafting questions and share with other people—perhaps take a visit to the writing center, or share with your friends, your classmates, or the people that you work with. Once you have done this, and revise your questions and have them be your research questions; keep in your mind concepts such as ruling relations and social coordination as you work on these questions. Make sure you are aware of your own standpoint in this research. Then, it will be helpful to then start thinking about methods to help you explore these questions—interviews, surveys, focus groups, autoethnographies, field work—what method is best for your discovery process? This can be several methods, or just one. As you start drafting interview questions, or designing your survey, it will also be helpful for you to think about important texts/documents of your everyday work to analyze. Collect the material and start coding for patterns. Continually reflect and draw notes on your data, and begin the mapping process. If needed, seek more interviews, survey responses, stories that will help systemize your findings<sup>2</sup>. Draft, redraft, revise; this process is recursive and continually evolving; allow yourself to embrace discovery and not fear messiness. Allow yourself to uncover how things happen and enjoy the experience!

## Feminism, IE, and Writing

Institutional Ethnography is grounded in feminist practice and its roots are founded in the 1970s feminist movement; IE encourages those from marginalized positions to speak about their experiences and to use their material world as a starting point for research. What is feminism you might ask—and it is a good question. I will let bell hooks, a renowned feminist and critical race theorist/scholar/activist, answer this question through her simple, yet important, definition: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 18). Feminism asks us to imagine a world in which we can all be who we are, in a world of peace and possibility; and we must work together to fight all forms of oppression. IE asks us to think about ways to reform and reshape our work through the lens of marginalized positions, in order to create more just and equitable spaces. Writing and communication is how we spread ideas and help bring change to the world—from the local to the global; you cannot separate identity from writing. IE is one more tool for you as a writer and researcher to think about ways in which your own writing can lead to reform and change, for the good of everyone.

## Discussion Questions

- How might IE help us in understanding how things happen across institutions and organizations? What concept did we find particularly useful in helping us think about IE as a methodology useful to us?
- IE, as discussed in this chapter, is grounded in feminist research. Thinking about this chapter, and its particular understanding

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2. It's worth mentioning that if you wish to present your work at a conference or to eventually publish your study, and you are working with human subjects, you must first obtain an IRB. It is worth visiting the OSU

of feminism, how can we apply feminist work to our everyday lives? Why is it important to do so?

- Brainstorm a series of issues or concerns you see taking place at a particular institution you work for and/or a member of. Share these issues or concerns with a partner and begin drafting questions that might help you investigate how these issues happen. Can you identify the problematic you wish to explore through IE?
- IE begins with your personal, lived experience. Narrate your experience at work, at this organization, similar to the anecdote in this chapter. After writing your narration, and thinking about the problematic, begin thinking about possible methods you would use to explore the research question in your study. Would you collect documents? Would you interview other people in your position? Would you survey people?
- After reading this chapter, what is your understanding of feminism? Feminism asks us to continually reflect on our ethos and ways of being in this world. How can we make sure we are ethical researchers when we use IE?
- What are potential questions you have with Institutional Ethnography? What are your questions you have with primary research in general?

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6.

## A WRITING STUDIES SCHOLAR TEACHES INTERVIEW-BASED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Dr. Tyler Branson

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:  
<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=32#audio-32-1>

*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to part 1 of the chapter.*



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*Push play on the soundbar above to listen to part 2 of the chapter.*

[AWritingStudiesScholarTeachesInterviewBasedWritingAssignments\\_print](#)

18 min read

### What You Will Learn in This Chapter

In this chapter you will learn some basic principles for conducting personal interviews with other people. You will also learn how to write an essay using this “primary” research as your main source. By the end of this chapter, you should be able to use primary research in combination with secondary research to make a specific claim in response to a research question or problem.

### Key Terms

- Primary Research

- Secondary Research
- Interview
- Writing Studies

## Conducting Interviews as Primary Research

In the humanities and social sciences, one form of primary research (data that the researcher collects themselves) is the personal interview. In college writing classrooms, instructors often assign primary research projects like the interview in combination with secondary research (existing data in the area you're investigating) to shed light on a problem, issue, or topic. This is a challenging writing task because it involves several steps that tap into different writing abilities: First you have to figure out who you want to interview; then you have to decide what questions to ask; then you have to conduct the interview and record their responses in some way; and finally you have to write your report and incorporate their responses into your own writing. Despite the difficulty involved, these techniques are used in several different contexts outside of humanities-based research. For instance, journalists write stories based on personal interviews with influential people and/or experts; police officers interview eye-witnesses and write police reports to document their investigations; an auditor investigating the finances of a company may conduct an "audit interview" with employees to learn more about the financial information of the company. In each case, these professionals use interviews to collect information from specific people, and then use writing to put those interviews into context for specific audiences. According to Dana Lynn Driscoll, interviews "are an excellent way to learn in-depth information from a person." So what are some basic guidelines for conducting an interview for a research paper in college?

## Discovering your Purpose

The first thing you will need to do before conducting an interview is to figure out the purpose of the project. The purpose will vary depending on the assignment instructions, the goal of your project, or the criteria on which you will be evaluated. Nevertheless, there are some basic guidelines for discovering your purpose that apply in almost every scenario. First, you'll need to ask yourself, why do I need to conduct interviews? What am I supposed to find out from my interviews? For example, is your purpose to collect expert testimonies from people who can provide insight into specialized topics? Or, perhaps you are being asked to conduct an interview that profiles an individual person and their day-to-day lives? Other purposes for interviews may simply be to share somebody's story or to shed light on an important topic. According to Irving Seidman, in-depth interviewing ultimately is about trying to understand other human beings through their own interpretations of their experience (9). In other words, interviewing is about discovering how real people understand the meaning behind their behaviors and experiences. As a researcher, then, your goal before you embark on an interview-based project is to discover which human experiences would best help you figure out what you want to learn. So let's try this. See if you can answer the following questions prior to designing an interview-based college writing assignment.

1. According to my instructor, the main goal of this assignment is to \_\_\_\_\_
2. I am being asked to conduct interviews so I can learn more about \_\_\_\_\_
3. In order to learn more about \_\_\_\_\_, I need to learn more about the experiences of \_\_\_\_\_ and how they attach meaning to \_\_\_\_\_

As you can see from the questions, before you do an interview project, you need to be able to articulate the main goal of the assignment, the main learning outcome you're supposed to meet, and the specific people and their experiences that you think will lead you to that outcome.

So, let's say your first-year composition instructor asks you to interview someone who works in your future industry and then

write a paper summarizing the way they write in that field. Let's also say that you're an aspiring mechanical engineer. Your answers to the questions above might be as follows:

1. According to my instructor, the main goal of this assignment is to **interview someone in mechanical engineering and write a paper about their writing practices**
2. I am being asked to conduct interviews so I can learn more about **how writing works in the field of mechanical engineering**
3. In order to learn more about **mechanical engineering**, I need to learn more about the experiences of **working mechanical engineers** and how they attach meaning to **their day-to-day activities.**"

In the above scenario, the student's answers to these questions (in bold) will help them tailor their interview questions to the specific purpose for the project. If you have an interview-based writing assignment, try filling in your own answers and see if it helps the brainstorming process.

## Selecting Participants

After you've discovered the purpose of your interview project, your next step is to decide whom to interview. Part of this is logistical: What do you have time for? Who among your network would be willing to participate in an interview with you? Do you need to interview one person, or multiple? Should it be people you know, or do you need to contact people you've never met before? The answers to these questions all depend on the specific assignment.

Say, for example, your composition instructor asked you to interview an expert in the industry you hope to enter after college. If you are an aspiring high school teacher, for example, it might be best to reach out to a former teacher of yours that you still keep in contact with. However, if your assignment was to interview an expert on an important issue impacting your community, there's a chance you may not know anybody in that field. In that case, you would contact local nonprofits and community activists who specialize in that specific issue, and then email or call to schedule an interview with someone. Whatever you do, it is important you understand the connection between the participants you select and the ultimate goal or learning outcome of the assignment.

## Designing Interview Questions

So let's say you've chosen an interview participant and they have agreed to be interviewed by you. Well done! This kind of logistical work is a challenging part of the writing process, because you need to cultivate your interpersonal skills and display confidence so that your interview subjects feel comfortable. But now, with an interview on the calendar, you need to come up with some questions. The best way to brainstorm questions is to make broader conceptual connections to your overall purpose, in the same way we did above.

So for example, you may remember that the interview is essentially a way to create new insights into a topic using a real live person's quotations as evidence. In that case, your next task is to determine what kinds of questions would help you create specific insights that the assignment is asking for. As you brainstorm, try to come up with answers to the following prompts:

- In order to learn more about \_\_\_\_\_, I am interviewing \_\_\_\_\_
- Some specific experiences I want \_\_\_\_\_ to elaborate on might be \_\_\_\_\_

Notice that these prompts are designed to help you make explicit connections between the interview questions and what specifically you want to learn. So, let's say you have an assignment that asks you to interview a faculty member at your university and write a paper about their research. Here's how you might answer the previous brainstorming questions:

- In order to learn more about **faculty research at my university**, I am interviewing **my American history professor**
- Some specific experiences I want **my professor** to elaborate on might **be what her book is about, how she came to be interested in this topic, and why this topic is important for people to understand**

Again, it's important to notice here that the answers (in bold) are directly tied to the topic you want to learn about. From here, you can design interview questions that are directly relevant and interesting for your participant.

## Interview Questions to Avoid

While the kinds of questions you ask need to be specific to your overall purpose, there are some kinds of questions that won't lead you in the right direction. According to the Purdue OWL, there are five types of questions you want to avoid.

1. **Biased Questions:** You do not want to ask or word your questions in a way that attempts to lead your participant in a certain direction. For example, if you are interviewing an expert about tax reform, you don't want to phrase a question like: "Wouldn't you agree that we need a flat tax rate in this country?" Instead, phrase it as an opportunity to learn about an issue: "What would you say are some of the pros and cons of a 'flax-tax' policy?"
2. **Questions that assume what they ask:** In the field of rhetoric, this is a common fallacy called "Begging the Question," which is essentially stating or presuming something as a fact when you're actually trying to prove or learn more about it in the first place. So for example, let's say you're interviewing a film historian and you say: "Why is Citizen Kane the best movie of all time?" That's begging the question. You can't presume the conclusion of your statement when you're the one actually trying to learn more about it. Instead, ask, "What would you say is one of the best movies of all time?"
3. **Double-Barreled Questions:** A double-barreled question is a kind of clumsy interview technique where you ask multiple questions at the same time. This makes it difficult for participants to answer clearly and effectively. So, for example, let's say you're interviewing your history professor about their research and you say: "How did you become interested in pre-civil war history and what is its main relevance today?" This is "double-barreled" because it asks them to speak on two questions at once. Instead, ask one question at a time, "How did you become interested in pre-Civil War history?" After they answer, you may then choose to follow up with, "What lessons did you see in your studies of pre-civil war history that are applicable today?" or perhaps you can ask a follow-up question specific to their answer.
4. **Confusing or Wordy Questions:** You want to make sure that the questions you ask are worded in such a way that the participant knows exactly how to respond. So for example, let's say you're interviewing a working professional about the kinds of writing they do at their job. They might get confused if you ask them, "What do you think about writing in the workplace?" This is a confusing question because it's so open-ended that they'll likely only provide vague answers. Instead, make sure your question asks about specific things or actions. Try something like, "What are some specific documents you have to produce as part of your day-to-day work as an engineer?"
5. **Questions unrelated to your purpose:** The last kinds of interview questions to avoid, according to Purdue OWL, are questions that are unrelated to what you are trying to learn. When conducting an interview for your writing class, you need to ask yourself if the questions you are asking will help you meet the outcome of the assignment. For example, say you're profiling a director at a nonprofit, and the assignment is to learn more about the issue in the community they're trying to solve. You wouldn't want to ask a question like, "What do you think about the recent election?" While the person's views on this topic might be interesting, the answers are likely not going to help you answer your main research question, and you don't want to waste their time.

## Conducting the Interview

Here are a few more tips about conducting effective interviews.

1. Help your participant feel comfortable. Start with a minute or two of small talk so it doesn't feel like an interrogation. Remember, this is a conversation after all.
2. Ask up front if you can record. It is important that your participant knows they are being recorded, and you don't want to hide it from them or ask them in the middle of your conversation.
3. Please know that it is perfectly OK to go "off script" when you are interviewing. While you may have thought long and hard about your questions, sometimes the interview goes into new directions you didn't anticipate. Don't be so rigid that you can't explore a new opportunity as the conversation develops. This kind of flexibility can help you learn new things you didn't even realize you could learn from an interview.
4. Do your research. Before conducting the interview, try to learn as much as you can about the person you're interviewing. What's been written about them already? Have they given interviews in the past? What kinds of questions have they answered already, and how can you ask new or updated questions? Learn statistics about the broader issue you're investigating so you can show your participant that you are interested and knowledgeable about the subject you are discussing.
5. Know the difference between open-ended and yes/no questions. In other words, you need to make sure the questions you ask can get you where you need to go in the interview. If you ask a question that can be answered in only yes or no, that's where the discussion will end. Sometimes, that's OK. For example, the question, "Do you enjoy your job?" is a closed question. It can be answered simply yes or no, and depending on the purpose of your interview, that may be an important insight you'll want to know. But if you want an in-depth answer, a yes/no question won't work. Instead, ask more open-ended questions that begin with "how" or "why" or "what." These questions give your participant lots of room to explore their thoughts and experiences. For example, instead of "do you enjoy your job," you might ask, "What does it mean to love your job?"

## Transcribing and Coding the Interview

After you have completed the interview, now it's time to transcribe it, which means listening to it and writing out exactly what each person in the interview said. The main reason you should transcribe your interview is so you can provide direct quotes from your participant to use as evidence for claims you make in your essay. This is probably the most time-consuming aspect of your project, so make sure you budget appropriately. Here are three tips for effective transcription:

1. **Listen to the entire interview first.** Listening to the interview all the way through before transcribing can help you identify pauses and the general rhythm of the conversation. It can also help you determine who's talking at any given moment/
2. **Come up with a coding system to help you transcribe quickly.** As you transcribe, it is important to develop a coding system so that when you come back to it later you can quickly identify the quotes that you need. Whenever you or the interviewee speaks, for example, write out their name in all caps in the transcription document so that you don't get mixed up when you are writing your essay. Also, when you're typing the words said by each speaker, put their words into paragraphs, or small chunks, and then whenever they pause or move on to a new thought, start a new paragraph. This will help you keep their points organized so that you know which ones to come back to later. As you're transcribing, you'll also want to use ellipses, or "...", to indicate pauses or breaks in speech. And, after you're done transcribing, highlight important points your participant makes, so that you can focus on them in your essay. For example, if you have been creating new paragraphs in your transcription document every time your participant moves on to a new thought or idea, you can highlight certain topics in specific colors. So for example, if you are doing a profile about a person in your community, you may highlight biographical information they shared with you in red, but use a different color for stories they share about their profession, and so on.

Then, in your essay, if you want to quote from them, you know which colors to look for in your notes to use.

3. **Make strategic decisions about which portions of the interview you transcribe.** You'll need to be strategic about how and whether you transcribe every single utterance they make ("verbatim") or whether you edit their words as you transcribe ("non-verbatim"). For example, when we are just talking to each other out loud, we don't "sound" like we do when we write. Usually when we speak, we use a lot of "ums," or "likes" or "uhs" as we communicate. According to the University of Wisconsin Writing Center, these utterances are normal parts of speech: "We start sentences and then interrupt ourselves and never return to complete those earlier thoughts." But with writing it's different. When we write something down, we get to go back, edit things, refine ideas, and create a more focused train of thought. Therefore, whenever you're representing other people's speech in your writing, you have to decide whether you will transcribe those "ums" or whether you'll edit them out to appear more like written speech. This is the difference between "verbatim transcription" and "non-verbatim transcription." Use verbatim transcription, or writing out exactly what your participant says as they say it (all the filler words, the "likes" and the "uhs") if your assignment has to do with people's individual language choices, or if your essay is analyzing or considering how humans use language, or the implications of certain kinds of words, etc. However, you may want to use non-verbatim transcription if you are simply using someone's experience to make a broader point and you want readers to see a clear and articulate representation of the interviewee's ideas. Whatever you do, the University of Wisconsin Writing Center encourages student writers to "make sure that you are being consistent with this choice across your article, paper, report or essay." Here's an example below of the difference between a verbatim and non-verbatim transcription, again from the University of Wisconsin Writing Center. There is no hard-and-fast rule about which style of transcription is "best." It's all about what you are trying to accomplish with the interview and whether you think it's important the reader knows exactly how they "sounded" or what their ideas are.
  1. Verbatim transcription: Well, you see, I was [pause] the problem, as I saw it, was more of a, a matter of representation, you know? How can I, like, be the one that's just out there just declaring the way things are when I've not even, like, you know, experiencing the whole process for myself?
  2. Non-verbatim Transcription: The problem, as I saw it, was more a matter of representation. How can I be the one that's out there declaring the way things are when I've not even experienced the whole process for myself?

## Using Interview Data in your Essay

The last part of incorporating interview evidence into a college-level writing assignment is to actually write the essay. At this point, the hard part is over: you've brainstormed about the purpose and scope of the interview, you contacted and scheduled an interview with your participant, you've designed questions tailored to the assignment, and you've transcribed the audio of the interview and coded for interesting and worthwhile quotes you hope to use. Now, all you have to do is write up what you discovered. More than likely, your interview assignment will be asking you to make an argument about a topic, or to analyze a particular phenomenon and then support your claims with evidence from your interviews. Even if you're doing a profile of an individual person, for example, your essay still needs to make some kind of claim or have some kind of common theme using the person's life story as evidence. Whatever the purpose of your assignment, you use an interview source the same way you would use any other source in an essay: to back up a claim or a statement that you make. You are the one making the argument, so if you quote from the interview, the quote needs to be in support of a claim you are making, not the other way around. For example, let's say you're doing a profile of a local teacher, and you are describing her background. You should begin by contextualizing her background with a summary, and then move in with a direct quote that adds context to that summary. For instance, you might write something like this:

Stacey first became interested in teaching when she was just a little girl. "One of my earliest memories is teaching my little sister how to tie her shoe," Stacey recollects.

There are two things to notice here. One, the quote isn't just plopped in, forcing the reader to piece together why it is significant. There is a sentence before the quote that makes a specific point about the person. Second, the quotation doesn't just repeat the

statement made before it either. Instead, the quotation provides first-hand evidence in support of the claim you are making about her background. Also notice the verb choice for “recollects” as a way to attribute the quotation. There are lots of phrases for this, like “for example,” “according to,” “she said,” “she described,” etc. Try out a variety of these throughout your essay.

## Conclusion

Incorporating interviews into your writing-based research project is a great way to focus on the experiences of another person and to put someone’s life experiences in the context of broader social and cultural issues. But there is a lot of work that goes into the interview-essay before you can even start writing. First, you need to figure out the purpose of your interview. Then, you need to select participants and design effective questions. After that, you need to actually conduct and then transcribe the interview. And then you can begin writing your essay. By the time you start writing, you will have already spent a considerable amount of time with this subject, which hopefully will help you write and sort through what you want to say.

Moreover, as you write your essay, you need to make specific claims, statements, or interpretations about the subject of your interview, and utilize their words as evidence to back up your claims (much like you would any other academic source). Begin with an introduction, where you introduce the broader topic of the paper in your own words, and then move into separate paragraphs that make specific points about your interviewee or the broader subject your paper is about. Use quotes from your color-coded interview transcript that “back-up” or provide context to the points you are making in those body paragraphs. Make sure the quotes you choose don’t just repeat what you are writing either. The quotes you choose need to extend, support, or clarify your writing.

If you’ve done a good job on your interview-essay, you will come to new ideas, arguments, or insights by putting your own writing in conversation with the quotations of others. Using interview data in your essays can make your writing more exciting and engaging. It can also help you make sense of big topics through the very specific experiences of individual people. And as we saw in the introduction of this chapter, the skills you develop conducting interviews will help you in a vast array of other fields, from journalism to accounting. Using interviews in your writing classes can also help you develop confidence or expand your personal network. At its core, though, conducting interviews for college-level writing assignments is a great way, at least briefly, to walk in somebody else’s shoes. By using writing to see the world through somebody else’s eyes, we can think more critically about our world and the diverse ways everyday people navigate it.

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7.

# INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING INSTRUCTORS TEACH AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Dana Cadman; Dr. Robert Mundy; and Vyshali Manivannan

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- Explain the methodological purpose and value of autoethnography;
- Describe the intersection of creativity and methodological precision associated with this research;
- Analyze autoethnography to understand its political nature and focus on social justice;
- Identify the challenges associated with this genre of writing;
- Review and apply the steps of writing an autoethnography.

## Key Terms:

- Autoethnography:
- Identity Politics:
- Postcolonial Theory:
- Queer Theory:
- Feminist Theory:
- Critical Race Theory:

## Overview

This chapter explores autoethnography as writing that values first-person experience as a means to better understand the self and the complex socioeconomic and sociocultural phenomena that shape/are shaped by our daily interactions. We review the balance required between storytelling and methodological accuracy, consider the political/social justice-based significance of such research, and address the challenges this methodology and writing presents. We next distinguish between multiple autoethnographic genres and conclude with a step-by-step process for its development and craft.

## Personal Narratives to Political Insights

Coined by Hayano (1979), autoethnography is a qualitative research method that originated out of the crisis of representation in the 1980s (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Ellis and Bochner (2016), originators of the method, observe that there is no consensus about its definition, but Ellis (2004) has flexibly described it as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). As Reed-Danahay (1997) points out, in treating the self as a point of departure, autoethnography values self-representation and insider expertise. This contrasts with its progenitor, traditional ethnographic research, in which scholars adopt the traditional stance of anthropologists, presenting themselves as objective observers of a culture foreign to them, implicitly contending that this alleged neutrality grants them greater expertise about that culture’s beliefs, practices, and experiences than cultural members (pp. 2-9). In autoethnographic research, researchers curate, narrate, and analyze their own experiences to improve outsiders’ understanding of a community to which they already belong. The result is an approach that affords writers the opportunity and ability to “examine everyday interpersonal and cultural experiences from the inside out” (Boylan & Orbe, 2014, p. 10), placing a premium on storytelling, theory, experiential knowledge, plurality, and multiplicity. This makes space for “ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3).

Autoethnography meshes creative writing techniques with conventional qualitative research methods to make the argument that, while any review of culture is relative to group dynamics, it can be done, and done well, through an exploration of the self (Chang, 2008). To accomplish this task, individual voice is infused with nuance into local, regional, and global dialogues by striking a balance between “intellectual and methodological rigor...and creativity” (Adams et al., 2015). Accordingly, writers rely on techniques like autobiography, narrative inquiry, narrative analysis, performance art, archival work, and meta-ethnographic research. These approaches provide the freedom to “blur the boundaries between humanities and social sciences [to express] concrete lived experience in novel and literary forms [by] depicting local stories and including author’s critical reflections on their lives and writing process” (Boylan & Orbe, 2014, pp. 9-10). The genre welcomes *all* stories from *all* writers but requires the inclusion of context, detail, depth, and evocativeness sufficient for critical interpretation. Per Denzin (2013), “the emphasis on self, biography, history, and experience must always work back and forth between three concerns: the concerns of performance, of process, and/or of analysis” (p. 129): that is, the tale and its telling, the epiphanies and social forms that organize the project, and the interpretation of the tale and the cultural forms that explain and challenge it. Significantly, while the central story should first resonate with the writer, the topics and issues addressed must be extrapolatable in order to effectively speak to and address a larger contingent of subjects and audiences.

## The Self and Social Justice

As a genre of academic writing that considers the intersection of the lived experience, communal identity, and sociocultural and socioeconomic variables that influence interaction and communication, autoethnography explores “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggle. It is writing and research that strives for social justice... to make life

better” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 2). Issues of social injustice and/or inequity are interrogated through day-to-day occurrences often overlooked or discarded as *normal* or *natural*, that when left unaddressed uphold larger systemic issues related to racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. The genre decolonizes our modes of knowing. Asking whose voices have been “left out,” “erased,” and/or “marginalized” in academic scholarship, along with “whose stories were privileged and why, and which stories are important and why” in academic and public discourses (Chawla & Atay, 2018, p. 3) interrupts hegemonic knowledge structures and legitimizes alternate epistemologies. A self-reflective practice that considers local phenomena within the context of time, space, and actors, autoethnography encourages visceral texts and performances that recenter minoritized bodies and experiences, “shift marginal voices to the center” (Chawla & Atay, 2018, p. 4), and destabilize Western academic knowledge production. This work aligns directly with Critical Race Theory, as it creates room for “cultural intuition” and diverse stories that speak from and interrogate colonial histories, exposes how institutions are shaped by racism, and challenges the privileging of whiteness and Eurocentric, colonialist ideals in these spaces (Martinez, 2016).

This methodological design draws on and overlaps with other academic lenses and paradigms, like feminist, critical race, and queer theories and disability studies. Ettorre (2017) aligned autoethnography with feminist tenets, including its ability to create transitional spaces, actively demonstrating how “the personal is the political,” uphold practices attributed to women, like embodiment, emotion, and the arts, and raise oppositional consciousness through revealing precarity (p. 4). Jones (2016) observed that telling queer stories is about ascribing legitimacy to identities that become unspeakable, and embodying and enacting change, both of which are key to autoethnographic research (p. 8). Additionally, “through its empathic form, autoethnography provides a tool to fashion a ‘non-dualistic ontology’ of the mindful body in which emotions play a central role in human experience and cultural scripts of health and sickness” (Ettorre, 2017, p. 44) and speak back to medical institutions, making it a useful tool for disability justice. Narrative inquiry/analysis illuminate issues of agency that reflect and form political identities, sensibilities, and responsibilities, central work for feminist and queer theory and disability studies to occupy positions of cultural mediation.

Recently published autoethnographies display the depth and breadth of this work in addressing inequity to develop a more just world. Carr (2017) focused on the killing of Michael Brown and the subsequent social and racial unrest related to police brutality to better understand 21st century protest from the perspective of “young people who are experiencing these modes of civil resistance for the first time” (p. 6). Svendby et al. (2018) explored cultural ableism by narrating and analyzing their non-disabled perspectives and experiences to critique and challenge the biomedical lenses through which disabled bodies are perceived by the non-disabled (p. 225). Miheretu and Henward (2020) used Miheretu’s personal experiences to examine mothers of interracial children who identify as Black to understand the experiences of women who cross color lines as couples and parents. And Holt (2003), Johnston and Strong (2008), Wall (2008), Saldana (2014), Forber-Pratt (2015), and Blockmans (2019) have interrogated their experiences as qualitative researchers in academia to make visible academic biases about autoethnography and the author’s social location, which is “always racialized, classed, gendered” (Martinez, 2016, p. 82) and otherwise embodied. These are only some of the ways in which autoethnography has been applied. Our goal in relaying this information isn’t to provide a literature review but rather to show how the method lends itself to writing that explores and challenges prevailing social, cultural, and economic structures.

## Issues of Divulgence and Exposure

Autoethnography is a personally challenging method, necessitating self-awareness, reflexivity, objective distance, and narrative veracity. Researchers must remain vigilant against allowing the self to become overwhelmingly central, marginalizing collective experience. Autoethnography may leave them feeling personally vulnerable, such that they have to quell feelings of defensiveness when faced with scholarly critique (Ellis et al., 2011). They may incur personal and professional costs in writing about their experiences (Dashper, 2015). It can be difficult to get institutional approval for autoethnography since it challenges traditional forms of academic knowledge-making. And its detractors contend that it lacks generalizability and objectivity and is self-indulgent, non-rigorous, unethical, and — due to the fallibility of memory — inaccurate (Holt, 2003, p. 24).

Many of these methodological concerns have been addressed by prominent qualitative researchers. Some autoethnographers insist

autoethnography is about seeking verisimilitude, not precision, and what is generalizable about such research is not the particulars of an experience but how it represents a facet of collective experience. Though it's derided as "navel-gazing," autoethnography is intrinsically collaborative and polyvocal, as the stories we tell about ourselves are co-constructed with people in our lives. Holman Jones (2016) addressed the charge that autoethnography lacks theoretical rigor by suggesting, "theory asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture; story is the mechanism for illustrating and embodying these nuances and happenings. Because theory and story exist in a mutually influential relationship, theory is not an add-on to story" (p. 229). Finally, although issues of relational ethics plague autoethnographic work, other people's identities can be masked without altering the story's meaning, and when masked identities may be discoverable, creating composite characters offers further anonymity (Ellis et al., 2011).

Some of these issues are subjective. Degrees of personal and professional precarity will affect what scholars choose to disclose in their research (Dashper, 2015). Member-checking processes, in which characters are asked to assess the credibility of the research, might be impossible or might be comprehensively conducted with reviewers with whom the autoethnographer is intimately connected (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Doing this research for institutional approval comes with risks, as institutional members might question the project's validity (Holt, 2003; Dashper, 2015). Autoethnographers should consider their personal and professional circumstances when making these determinations.

## Genres of Autoethnographic Writing

A capacious, interdisciplinary methodology, autoethnography contains numerous approaches that might be used independently of one another or in tandem, including (but not limited to) evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, and performance autoethnography, to name a few. Autoethnography is an orientation to research that prioritizes the craft of writing as much as the research. This writing may take a variety of forms with diverse stylistic features, but it always combines the systematic, empirical methodologies of ethnography with the aesthetic elements of storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 67).

Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that many of these methods are different types of evocative autoethnography, rather than equivalent genres (p. 59). In evocative autoethnography, evocation is a fundamental tool to emotionally move audiences and engage questions of race, gender, sexuality, and social injustice. Analytic autoethnography emphasizes theoretical analysis, perhaps to appropriate it into mainstream qualitative research methods. Collaborative autoethnography co-constructs the research story by inviting participant accounts of the experience (Ellis et al., 2018). Performance autoethnography recenters embodiment through reflective performance (Spry, 2001). These are foundational and influential autoethnographic genres, but they are not the only methods available to researchers. Ultimately, researchers must select the mode of inquiry and writing style that seem best suited to their research, weaving theoretical prose with narrative strategies to help outsiders better understand the relational practices, value system, and social logics of the culture through moments that impacted a life trajectory (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography permits a certain freedom in both process and product, but — like all research methodologies — all of its genres adhere to a set of common protocols, regardless of the product's final form. These conventions are delineated below.

## Toward an Autoethnographic Process

### *1) The Personal: Mining Memory & Sculpting Scene*

Begin your writing process by mining your memories for significant personal experiences. How do you choose? What stands out as a moment of transition, change, turning point, or epiphany for you? By choosing a time in your life when you experienced great evolution, you are opening up an opportunity to dig into not only how your own personal identity was sculpted, but universal types

of experiences which are archetypal to all human beings. These moments are likely to resonate with your readers, and will allow you to connect to broader social concerns and conversations.

Now write about your memory and the feelings and beliefs you have associated with it by *freewriting* for 15-30 minutes. Freewriting is a process wherein you write without judgement. Try writing quickly, without stopping to edit or revise. By freewriting, you can achieve a state of *flow* which connects you to your subconscious, and allows writing to become a process of discovery and excavation, through which you find and investigate hidden understandings and wisdom.

After freewriting on your memory, you will have created a powerful, albeit messy, text. It is likely that you ended in a place that you did not anticipate. Now identify some of your surprising insights. Circle or highlight them and consider them treasures from your excavation process. These are not only personal revelations, but cultural ones. Take for example a personal realization about the divisions of labor within your household: how might you connect this conversation to broader concerns about gender, race, and class?

Take this block of text and render it into a *scene*. A scene is a captured moment, played out in real time for your reader to observe. In the exercise above, you will have brought to light many of the compelling ideas and considerations related to your personal experience. By turning these subjects into a scene, you *embody* these ideas. In this way readers can witness these moments for themselves, and thus be allowed to evaluate, be changed by, and feel the weight of that moment. Scene is an important tool in giving your reader this power. Choose a scene that shows you in interaction with the outside world, either through dialogue or action, letting the reader see and understand both your interior and exterior experiences.

## 2) Fieldnotes: Further Excavations, Finding Personal Artifacts

In the field of anthropology, historically, ethnography has relied on fieldnotes to provide evidence for readers. Ethnographic fieldnotes are recordings of what the ethnographer has witnessed. Fieldnotes offer the reader an opportunity to view the world through the gaze and lens of the ethnographer. For this reason, they are subjective evidence, colored by the beliefs, ideas, and views of the writer. This is why ethnographers often collect other evidence of their time “in the field”—to add context and to provide a more objective image and understanding. Sometimes these are other recordings like photographs or video; sometimes objects like money, calendars, receipts, or maps; and sometimes written correspondences that include other voices, like letters, emails, or text messages. At this point, to fulfill the process of member-checking, refer to the Issues of Divulgence and Exposure section.

One of the richest opportunities we have as autoethnographers is the freedom to create multimodal texts. This means that when we research our own lives the evidence we provide can be a fascinating mix of materials which document our realities. In what ways have you recorded your life? What kinds of fieldnotes and evidence might you be able to include in order to give your reader a more detailed view of the world you are situated within?

### a) How to Decide—Evaluating Materials:

Think about the value of the various kinds of fieldnotes you might include, and what additional perspective they offer. In the digital age, we often take for granted how much of our lives is recorded and preserved. Since you have so many to choose from, make choices based on what details and layers you can add to your work that couldn't be achieved otherwise. When you read through your memory scene, what feels like it's missing? Fieldnotes can be a way to add richness to your *setting*.

### b) How to Curate & Organize—Composition of Materials

Now that you have gathered fieldnotes, how will you present them? It's important to consider the significance of the organization of these materials. You may decide to embed them throughout the body of your written work, adding a photograph to the scene you describe, for example. You also might decide to make a collage, grid, template, or map. Think about how these different presentations

impact the experience of your reader. Think of this process as building the scaffolding for an idea. How will the architecture change the way your reader interprets the information?

### 3) Creating a Narrative

You're probably familiar with the traditional plot structure and story arc we all learn in high school: first the rising action, then the climax, then the denouement, and then the resolution. Is this the shape of the story you've told? While all stories are different "shapes," this traditional diagram is helpful for thinking through what keeps readers engaged and satisfied. Look back at your memory, scene, and fieldnotes. What order allows your reader to experience tension and resolution?

### 4) Meaning Making: Reflection and Analysis

Once you have decided how you will present your fieldnotes and the order to your story, it's time to reflect on and analyze your work. Look through and meditate on your materials. What new revelations become apparent? How have initial insights evolved?

### 5) Making it Larger: The Individual to the Universal

Now that you have discovered your own personal story, consider how it connects to the experiences of others. This last part of the process is all about drawing out these connections. Try diagramming, concept mapping, or freewriting to discover this last element. Ask yourself, *if this story were a fable, what would be the lesson?*

## Conclusion

Autoethnography is a process of turning your gaze within and onto the outside world. We have included here one approach and process for writing your own autoethnography, but the nature of this type of writing encourages experimentation. Consider rearranging, playing with, and adding new elements. Most importantly, autoethnography is a genre of *discovery*, of the self, culture, and ideas. There are infinite ways to find oneself and one's voice through writing, and to make that writing significant to a broader cultural context. In order to begin that process, consider the questions below.

## Questions

1. How have personal events affected or shaped your academic writing and research?
  2. What academic opportunities have you been afforded to consider who you are as a person and/or writer, and how those identities are shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors?
  3. What lived experiences have most directly impacted your individual sense of self?
  4. How were these experiences reflective of larger systemic issues?
  5. If you were to write about one of these experiences, why would your story resonate with readers, and how could it possibly affect social change?
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8.

# A WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATOR TEACHES SERVICE LEARNING

Laura Tunningley

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=34#audio-34-1>

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- What service learning is and what it entails.
- The importance of intentional kindness and respect in relationships with community partners.
- What a mutually beneficial and collaborative partnership will look like, as well as being mindful of differences and listening to our diverse partner's perspectives.
- Tips on how to get started on your service learning project.

## Key Terms

- Service Learning
- Intentional Kindness
- Mindfulness of Difference

## What is Service Learning?

Service learning is a way for student assignments and curriculum to become intertwined by working together with community partners, such as K-12 schools, local libraries, and non-profit organizations, in a way that benefits both students and community partners.

As Cushman (1999) states, “When activist fieldwork is a cornerstone of the course, students and community residents can develop

reciprocal and dialogic relations with each other; their relationship is a mutually beneficial give-and-take one” ( p. 330). Some examples might include working with fifth graders on writing narrative and persuasive essays, helping adults work on resumes and job application materials at a local family crisis services center, or working with a local high school to open a writing center.

Service learning gives you the opportunity to fully participate in a project with others in the community, and learn in a hands-on way that you may not otherwise be able to do in a traditional composition classroom. These projects can be very meaningful, since you are building relationships with community members, learning about them and the issues they face, and taking what you learn to help benefit the community and also yourself (Flower, 2008). It is an opportunity to work with and learn from people who may be similar or different from you, and learn from those differences. As Flower (2008) states “In community-based service learning projects, one uses the role of student, mentor, teacher, researcher, or activist to move beyond the academy and form working relationships across differences of race, class, culture, gender, age, status, or discourse” (p. 3). Moving beyond the academy entails learning outside of the college classroom, and being actively involved in the community where we will work side by side with community members.

When utilizing service learning in your first year composition course, your writing and actions inform each other. Actions within the community partnership develop critical thinking skills by forcing you to think more deeply about your writing topic, and your writing helps you process your thoughts and adapt your practices within the partnership to better work with participants. Your writing also has practical applications that you and your community partner can put to use, to continually improve the partnership and ultimately help serve the community participants in increasingly beneficial ways.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will be using the community of Stillwater as an example, and drawing from service learning projects I’ve been involved in with the Oklahoma State University Writing Center, as well as a research project where I interviewed our community partners to get their perspectives on partnerships with the Writing Center and other OSU departments. While we are talking in this chapter about writing as part of your composition class, the examples from the Writing Center are the same types of projects you can participate in as a composition student, and several of the interview excerpts with community partners are also in reference to other OSU partnerships they have, including those with specific classes.

## Important Components of Service Learning

### Intentional Kindness

Another way to think of service learning is as kindness in action. And not just kindness in the sense of being nice to someone, but as Boquet (2015) states, “Kindness, however, is really a habit, an orientation, something we practice and, indeed, can become better at. Kindness is something we practice in relation to community, and some kindnesses are not associated with any one individual but with a sense of collective purpose” (p. 25-26). We can be intentional in our kindness through action in service learning, in making sure we know what the community partner’s goals are, that we are working in a way that benefits those we are working with, and creating that mutual respect with the partners.

Goldblatt (2007) emphasizes another aspect of the importance of intentionality: “And if one pursues a vision of writing or literacy instruction that goes beyond the campus, indeed beyond the curriculum, there is all the more reason to understand that program in its very specific locale, based on the kinds of students in the university, the economic climate of the region, the state of the public and private schools in the area, and many other crucial considerations, both contemporary and historical” (p. 9). As an example using the city of Stillwater, the community has about a third of the population living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau (2019), and about 41% of the children in the local public school district qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (Neal as qtd by Bitton (2018). So in evaluating this, we can think about the program at the children’s museum in town which charges an admission cost, versus the public library, where the programs are free. And even more so, the programs at the actual schools themselves, where students already are and have transportation to and from school.

Another example that one of our interviewees, Joy, gave was that, because time during school is already jam packed with needed

curriculum, and after school programs make it difficult for students who are bus riders, an interested volunteer program instituted a reading buddies program during breakfast time, which is when the bus riders and other early arrivers would be there and before school starts: “There is this little window of time, when they’re eating breakfast... [when] they are able to sit with their reading buddy and read and eat a breakfast. So we really are able to catch those kids because those same kids wouldn’t be able to stay after school most likely” (Joy, interview). So for this particular school in Stillwater, that breakfast time “could be a real avenue to get some of those kiddos that we wouldn’t be able to reach after school” (Joy, interview). If we are being intentional about planning a time when many of the students from lower socioeconomic homes are going to be at school, will work with teacher schedules and not take time from necessary instruction, plus making sure transportation isn’t an issue for students, this breakfast time frame is a way to intentionally plan a service learning project with the school.

## Respect

One of the most important components of service learning is the attitude we have when meeting the community partners, and talking with them about what we will be working on together. Our community partners are immersed in the community and are in touch with both the strengths and needs of the community. They are the community experts, if you will, and fully equal partners. As Flower (2008) states, “teaching ourselves to see and affirm the deep springs of agency in others is a prerequisite to a dialogue” (p. 200). To truly have a productive conversation based in respect, we need to view our community partners as having valuable input and insights.

What I mean by respect not only has to do with our view of the community partners, but in how we interact and treat them, and setting goals with them, rather than for them. We will want to have a meeting with the partners ahead of time to make sure that the plans for the service learning project will be beneficial for everyone. Rousculp (2014), who writes about a rhetoric of respect, says this: “Engaging within a rhetoric of respect draws attention to how we use language in relation with others: how we name and classify, how we collaborate, how we problem-solve. Whereas respect itself may exist as a feeling, a rhetoric of respect requires discursive action” (p. 25). So respect is more than a feeling, and includes us having a conversation between equals, where we actually act on the information and feedback from our community partners.

In an interview with one of our community partners, Earl, he says it this way, in regards to collaboration between the public schools and OSU: “All parent engagement stuff these days tells you that if you really want parents engaged, then you really don’t want them to come to you as you’re the parent, I’m the teacher, you know nothing about your child’s education, I know everything. [Instead] You are going to spend half the day with the child, so you know stuff about your child that I need to know in order to make this work, and I have stuff to share with you that’s going to help. And if we do this as a collaboration between the two of us, and not that I’m the educational god then good things happen. But if you don’t approach it that way, it doesn’t work as smoothly as it should” (Earl, interview). Earl reiterates here what Flower and Rousculp tell us. If we are going to engage in a service learning partnership in our community, we need to treat it as a true collaboration, and listen to our partners with their insights and perspectives, and come to an agreement together on what the service learning components will entail by mediating the relationship through respect.

## Beneficial for Both Researcher and Community Partner

The work you do with the community partner will help you gain a more in depth and meaningful understanding into a community, but it’s also important to keep in mind that the partner institution’s needs are just as important as your learning. Goldblatt (2007) points out, “To partner with schools and community organizations, a postsecondary institution must be clear about its self-interests and the interests of its partners; it must be willing to negotiate with partners over the direction of a project in a way that benefits all participants” (p. 6). And as Royster (1996) states, “It seems to me that the agreement for inquiry and discovery needs to be deliberately reciprocal” (p. 33). In collaborative projects, our ideas and objectives will take shape when we meet and refine them with

the community partners. The project may change somewhat and look different than we initially imagined it, but our definitions of success and achievement need to be from meeting both groups' goals and respecting the needs of all.

Earl put it succinctly when he brought up, "I guess my thought is, when someone wants to do research in the [public] schools, and we don't necessarily always have the best attitudes towards everyone that's at the university either, so everyone needs to have an open mind and sit down and go, what is it that we need to accomplish, what can we do that has a mutual goal, and then accomplish that, whatever that may be" (Earl, interview). One example of a way we can do this is by designing our service learning project goals to intersect with what our community partners are doing as well. So if you're working with fifth graders on writing essays and want to see how effective different strategies are, and the classroom is focused on writing a persuasive essay with evidence, then gearing your strategies around writing a persuasive essay will not only help the fifth graders by having multiple levels of scaffolding, but will also help the teachers by giving students more focused practice on what they are learning in class. Joy said it this way: "I think as much as possible, asking us what will help us too. . . it is a challenge to give up time, so any time we can align what we need with what you all need I think that's the most beneficial" (Joy, interview). This view of reciprocity also directly ties in with intentionality, as tying in with both groups' needs will in turn be beneficial for participants.

## Mindfulness of Difference

Our kindness and listening are only the first steps in this mutually beneficial partnership based on respect. Many times, we may work with people from different backgrounds, countries, cultures, races, etc., than ourselves. Our service learning experience is an opportunity for us to learn from people different from ourselves, about their history, their perspective, and to broaden our own perspectives. Truly interacting with and becoming part of a community includes caring about that community, and becoming invested in work to help change injustices and work for equitable treatment. For example, when working with community members from marginalized groups, such as students of color, Garcia (2017) states that: "in resisting the retrofitting and/or reductionism of students of color, I focus on cultivating a mindfulness of difference by describing the geo, body, and mobile politics of knowledge that students... carry with them. In these ways, listening is functional and operational towards actional and decolonial work" (p. 33). While Garcia is specifically talking about a writing center, this idea very much applies to composition classrooms, as well. What kind of listening can we do with our community partners, and what should we see in our actions as a result of this listening? Part of our intentionality and respect is letting people be themselves, and valuing their experiences, their knowledge, and respecting their right to speak for themselves and what they think instead of what we think they are saying and who we think they are.

As an example, Royster (1996), a Black professor of English, speaks of some of her experiences when partnering with others. She points out some of the disrespectful ways in which she has been treated, and gives us an idea of how our treatment of others may undermine our partnerships: "What am I compelled to ask when veils seem more like walls is who has the privilege of speaking first? How do we negotiate the privilege of interpretation? When I have tried to fulfill my role as negotiator, I have often walked away knowing that I have spoken, but also knowing, as Anna Julia Cooper knew in 1892, that my voice, like her voice, is still a muted one. I speak, but I cannot be heard. Worse, I am heard but I am not believed. Worse yet, I speak but I am not deemed believable" (p. 36). A mindfulness of difference not only includes being respectful of differences, but also being aware of some of the subconscious biases we may have, and being intentional about fully respecting our community partners and participants who may be different than us, and making sure we are actually taking them as an expert and hearing and valuing what they say.

## How a Service Learning Project Works

Writing a Multivoiced Inquiry (Flower, 2008, p. 230-232)

### Frame a Question

Take time to think through what you are interested in learning about and investigating in regards to the people and program you are working with. Look up information about the partner organization before meeting with them so that you have an idea about the population and what types of activities the community partner is engaged in. Meet with the community partner to hear from them, and find out their thoughts on the work they do and the people in their community who they work with. Then you'll be ready to formulate your research questions with the community partner to make sure they are mutually beneficial.

### Bring Multiple Voices to the Table

When planning your project, “design a research plan that collects interpretations and analyses of your problem from at least three different kinds of participants, sources, or perspectives” (Flower, 2008, p. 231). Three is not a fixed number, but the objective is to have multiple voices and perspectives.

With my project, I interviewed people from multiple organizations we partner with, people in diverse positions in those organizations (for example, an administrator, a principal, and a teacher at a local public school). I did not interview parents or students/participants, though, which would be a helpful and valuable perspective. Additionally, I read applicable pieces in composition and rhetoric, as well as writing center studies, on community partnerships and service learning. I supplemented these with personal observations from participating in community engagement projects myself with the OSU Writing Center.

### Reflect Multiple Voices in Your Text

In addition to listening to multiple voices when you are doing your research, make sure to include those various voices in your project. For example, in this text that you are reading, I draw from multiple community partners, service learning and rhetoric scholars, and my experiences.

### Methods for Working with Intercultural Inquiry (Flower, 2008)

For the methods you use for working on your project, Flower suggests utilizing: working with texts, observations, interviews, and dialogues (Flower, 2008, p. 237-240). As an example, for interviews, you will want to think about how you would record the interview, if you want to have a structured or semi-structured interview, and if you would want to transcribe the entire interview or focus on parts that you found most helpful. Another thing to keep in mind is that if you plan to publish or present information about your project at a conference (as well as any project that involves human subjects), you will need to get permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at your institution.

In addition to the practical aspects, we also need to think about how we enact those methods. As Garcia points out, “At the center of this design should be a new, not merely renewed, practice of listening: listening as a form of understanding and action” (p. 51). One way we truly listen to our community partners and participants is by changing our own actions and practices based on what we are learning from our partners. Our methods should be changing as we go about our project, as we work to incorporate those multiple voices, both in our text we create and in the way we are working with our community partners.

As a final note, we need to keep in the forefront of our minds that we are working with actual people, and that our actions can have long term effects. Aja Martinez, a Mexican-American English professor at the University of North Texas, talks about her experiences growing up, and how she was treated/perceived when she was a student, and how those various interactions influenced how she saw

herself. Martinez (2016) recounts how she started out as a child seeing herself as a writer, but later, through interactions with various teachers, began to question that identity, including a professor who gave her a B+++++ but said that because she was a not a native English speaker (which, in fact, Martinez actually is a native English speaker) that she wouldn't be able to write to a certain level.

Our interactions with participants in our service learning project can have a major impact on participants, whether positive or negative, and so we need to keep in mind kindness and a mindfulness of difference, as well as being positive and helping empower participants when we interact. The service learning project you participate in should benefit you as a writer, your community partners, and ultimately, the participants you are working with.

## Tips

- Be aware of deadlines with potential partners, for example, Stillwater's local school district only takes applications twice a year for staff to be involved in IRB research projects with OSU.
- Do some research to see what departments on campus you could collaborate with who already have established community partnerships. This is one way to make sure that those community relationships are consistent even though students come and go.
- Go to the correct contact for the organization – for example, Stillwater Public Schools has a SPS liaison for all OSU partnerships.
- Make sure to prioritize student safety, and let them know they can come to you if any issue arises with the community partner.
- Work with your FYC director to make sure it is approved and the partnerships will continue even when you are no longer teaching comp
- Note: Be ethical/accurate in how you reflect your project and what comes from it. One of the community partners told me before recording the interview, and showed me on a website, of a partner who misquoted the community partners and the quotes painted participants in a negative light. This damaged the community partner's relationship with participants. These community relationships are built on trust, and it's important to not take advantage of that by exaggerating in order to make our projects look better.
- On the other hand, if something negative has happened, you should be honest about that, too. Issues can happen with community partners. If you encounter anything troubling or that makes you uncomfortable, contact your instructor or the FYC director and go from there.
- Always be prepared to revise your goals and plans based on what you are learning as you participate in the project.

## Discussion Questions

- Thinking of Boquet's definition of intentional kindness that "Kindness, however, is really a habit, an orientation, something we practice and, indeed, can become better at. Kindness is something we practice in relation to community, and some kindnesses are not associated with any one individual but with a sense of collective purpose" (p. 25-26), what strategies could you utilize to foster a partnership based on the principles of intentional kindness and mutual respect?
- What steps can we take to cultivate listening with empathy and planning out our service learning project collaboratively with community partners?
- Before meeting with your community partners: Think about your potential partners and what questions you will want to ask in order to gain the information needed to be intentional and create a mutually beneficial partnership. What are other resources you can consult to prepare for the meeting? For example, if you are in Stillwater and planning to work with the public school district, you could look at the Stillwater Public Schools website in advance, and the city of Stillwater's information on the population and demographics as a starting point to learn about the community and population.

- After you've completed your service learning project, reflect on how successful you were on incorporating intentional kindness and listening. What changes would you make for future partnerships?

*Special thanks to Salman Rafique for the thoughtful feedback and productive discussions in writing center sessions for this chapter.*

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9.

# A LITERATURE SCHOLAR TEACHES STRUCTURING PARAGRAPHS IN A RESEARCH ESSAY

Ryan Slesinger

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

This chapter will provide you with a template for structuring effective body paragraphs in a research essay. It will also provide instructions for an easy and organic process to create these paragraphs, and it will discuss the basics of in-text citation for quotations and paraphrases. The goal of this chapter is to help you think about developing your body paragraphs as the primary task of your writing process. Following these instructions will help you think about writing as a process—not a product—and will help you tailor a process-based approach to writing that will work for you throughout college.

## Key Terms

- Modular Approach to writing
- Rhetorical Situation
- Close Reading

In this chapter I will propose a method for organizing paragraphs that is built on the foundation of a **modular approach** to writing essays. By modular approach, I simply mean one that develops the components of the papers as modules, focusing on

content development first and on sequencing later. This new way of writing—and thinking about writing—contrasts the mindset that attempts to write an essay straight through from introduction to conclusion. The “straight through” approach suited our needs in high school, but we will find it unsustainable at the college level. In contrast, our new modular approach can be used to write papers of any length and scope.

In this modular approach, paragraphs develop organically out of the loci of your interest identified in your research. I suggest developing all body paragraphs simultaneously from the prewrite stage through to the final draft by first establishing the topics of your paragraphs, then determining your paragraphs’ informational component, and finally moving on to the rhetorical aspect of your paragraphs. This method of constructing paragraphs is meant to help you develop the five components of every good paragraph:

1. Topic sentence
2. Relate topic back to thesis
3. Observation (Can be multiple sentences)
4. Analysis (Can be multiple sentences)
5. Transition



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## Addressing Our New Rhetorical Situation

In high school, the dominant **rhetorical situation**—the context within which we communicate—that shaped our writing training was the standardized test. When we write for a standardized test, we often create a hasty outline and write straight through the paper from introduction to conclusion. This method suits composition within the time constraints of standardized testing but ultimately sacrifices depth and clarity of elocution as a byproduct. When we make this compromise, we tend to be less satisfied with the work we have created, and sometimes this taints our experience of writing so that we might assume we don’t like to do it. As we shift into a different rhetorical situation—writing research essays in college—we should also shift our approach to fit that new context. The method that I propose here is meant to help us think about the writing process differently, help us organize effective paragraphs in our new rhetorical situation, and—hopefully, as a result—feel more satisfied with our writing.

[Image of a tweet by @legograd student. Lego figure with black hair looking out a window. Captioned Being impressed by scraps of text that he wrote and hated months ago, the grad student questions whether desperation is lowering his standards.](#)

We can more easily develop an effective body paragraph if we don't try to write it all at once, straight through from first sentence to last. Effective body paragraphs are constructed so that each component fulfills one of a variety of objectives. As we have seen, there are five primary components that each paragraph should contain. Each of these should achieve its own objective. Our task becomes cumbersome if we try to switch between these five different mindsets continually while we work through our paper from first word to last. Instead, I suggest focusing on one task at a time. The first task of writing any paragraph is to choose what your paragraph will be about. This ordinarily begins with identifying evidence and developing ideas while in the research stage. By writing down this evidence and your ideas you begin to create the informational component of your body paragraphs.

## Informational Component

When we write a paragraph, we need to break our overarching task into its constitutive elements. To do so, begin by developing the informational component of your paragraph before moving on to the rhetorical components. The informational component of your paragraph can be broken down into two subcategories: **1. The observation**, and **2. The analysis**. First, we will address the observational aspect. This observation can be either an original idea, a quotation from the text, or a paraphrase of information found in the text. The process I will outline here is general and meant to apply to paragraphs that include quotations as well as those that do not. Remember that we are building paragraphs from the inside out, so once your body paragraph is completed, this observation (written first) will be found towards the middle of the paragraph. When we build paragraphs from the inside out, around the key observation that you have made, we ensconce that observation at the center of the paragraph.

With my students I like to use a rather silly mixed metaphor to convey this point. Think of your observation, quote, or paraphrase as a beautiful jewel ensconced in an opulent setting. One cannot immediately or easily remove the jewel and make sense of the setting on its own. This contrasts to the sloppy and haphazard way we sometimes add a quote to a paragraph as an afterthought: like a pepperoni slapped onto a frozen cheese pizza. The cheese does little to prevent us from removing the topping and, though delicious, the pizza still makes sense without the pepperoni. We want to create paragraphs that are like diamond rings and not pepperoni pizzas. I did mention it was a silly comparison, but it conveys the notion that is important here: build your paragraphs around the information that is essential to your paragraph and to your thesis. When we think about it this way, it just makes sense to compose that information (your observation) first. —RS

As mentioned above, the informational component is best developed organically out of prewriting and then outlining. This doesn't need to be a formal pre-write, but rather a sketch of the loci of your interests identified while researching your topic. When we pay attention to our thoughts, we can notate the ideas that arise organically as we follow the path of our interests through our attention to the material we are studying. Eventually, we will realize our thesis organically by observing the thoughts we think while researching our topic. We can also identify quotations that buttress the ideas we are developing. Documenting both of these categories—1. Our original ideas and 2. Useful quotations/concepts to paraphrase—on our pre-write determines the kernels of our future paragraphs and saves a ton of time in the long run. The time I refer to here is that dreaded time spent staring at a blank page with a flashing cursor. Using this method, one should never have to waste time staring at a blank page with a flashing cursor again.

Now that you've sketched out your pre-write, including your thoughts and evidence gathered from the text, I suggest transcribing your observations one at a time into a fresh word document. After each transcribed idea, quotation, or paraphrase, hit enter four or five times. You now have the skeleton of your paper, around which you will develop your paragraphs. Technically, you have created an outline out of your pre-write, but using this method it feels more like an organic evolution than an artificial construction. Starting in this way ensures that each paragraph is organized around one idea. This fresh word document is the foundation of your entire paper. You will notice that working this way entirely circumvents the loathsome blank page with flashing cursor. Write your observation or paraphrase into complete sentences or transcribe your quotation precisely and you have completed your body paragraph's observational component. Save your word document (here, throughout, and frequently) and step away from your computer for some relaxation. When you return to your computer you will approach your next task, the analytical component of your body paragraphs. We will turn to the analytical component in a moment, but first, let's address the formal expectations for including a quote or paraphrase as your observation.

### A note on embedding quotations and paraphrases: the basics

When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own. To do so, we use a **signal phrase** that shows your audience that the following idea isn't yours. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to introduce the creator of that idea. Though this is only necessary in a paragraph that includes a quotation or paraphrase, in those instances it is essential to extend this professional courtesy to the originator of the idea you are discussing. Each quote or paraphrase also needs to include an embedded citation. In the current MLA citation style, that takes the form of a parenthetical citation after the close of the quotation marks—or at the end of the paraphrase—but before the closing punctuation. If you choose not to introduce the originator of the idea you're quoting, you must include their last name in the parenthesis, along with the page number of the quote. If you have introduced the author, you may omit their name and only include the page number in your parenthesis. Below is an example using the first sentence of this paragraph:

As Ryan Slesinger writes in "A Literature Scholar Teaches Structuring Paragraphs in a Research Essay," "When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own" (#).

There are different formatting requirements if you choose to include a longer quotation: more than four lines of prose or three lines of poetry. At that length, you would format your quotation as a **block quote**. To do so, write out your quotation in its entirety, then highlight it and indent it ½ inch from the left margin. The quote remains double spaced like the rest of your essay. Your parenthetical citation occurs outside of the final punctuation in this case. See the below example:

As Ryan Slesinger writes in, "A Literature Scholar Teaches Structuring Paragraphs in a Research Essay,"

When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own. To do so, we use a **signal phrase** that shows your audience that the following idea isn't yours. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to introduce the creator of that idea. (#)

Be judicious about your quote selection and try to limit your block quote inclusions. Remember that your audience is more interested in what you have to say about your topic than what your sources have to say. These basics of in-text citation should suffice for the purpose of your composition classes, but there is a lot more to learn about appropriate

citation methods, including several other styles in addition to MLA. The Purdue OWL website is the go-to resource for all citation styles. If you need more clarification, **owl.purdue.edu** should be your first stop.

## Analytical Component

The next step is to add your analytical component to each observation. Where the observation in each paragraph anchors that paragraph to the text in question, the analytical component provides commentary on why you’ve chosen to include the observation to support your thesis. Often when studying a text, this analytical component will take the form of what we in literary studies call a “close reading.” Close readings pay special attention to the literary elements of a text, including the word choice, imagery, tone, etc. Depending on the field and focus of your research you should create appropriate analyses. For instance, if you have provided a statistic, perhaps your analytical component will interpret the statistic for a general (non-specialist) audience. Regardless of which field you’re working in, the pattern is the same. The informational aspect of a paragraph is composed of your observation and analysis. No paragraph is complete without both. The proportion of both is important as well.

Our analytical component is the most important part of any body paragraph. But sometimes as writers we assume that our readers are on a wavelength with us and they intuitively understand why we’ve chosen to include our evidence/observation. This is not always the case. As a teacher of first year writing over the last fifteen years, I’ve seen many students fall into this trap. Remember that your audience (and in college, your instructor) cannot read your mind, and is ultimately most interested in what you have to say about your topic. So, when you’re choosing a quote, it should provide important information for your argument, but should not stand alone within the context of your essay. Each paragraph should contain at least as much analysis as observation, and analysis should frequently outweigh observation in each paragraph. These are quantitative measures, but you should try to balance your paragraphs between analysis and observation. If an imbalance occurs, make sure that the scale tilts towards an excess of analysis. Your analysis is really the meat of your paragraph, and thus the meat of your essay.

DO 🍷 NOT 🍷 FOLLOW 🍷 SOMEONE 🍷 WHO 🍷 HATES 🍷 YOU 🍷 INTO 🍷 THE 🍷 WINE 🍷 CELLAR 🍷 ON  
🍷 THE 🍷 PROMISE 🍷 OF 🍷 A 🍷 FINE 🍷 VINTAGE 🍷

— SparkNotes (@SparkNotes) [April 9, 2019](#)

Fortunately, our new modular method of composition creates a failsafe that helps us avoid the temptation of dropping in stand-alone quotes: those pepperonis slapped on top of a frozen pizza. When we finished gathering our observational component of the essay, we created a document that serves as the backbone of our essay, including each observation/quote/paraphrase with four to five spaces in between. Our task now is to add our own commentary to that evidence. Move through the outline document adding your original, analytical thoughts to each of your observations, and before you know it, your analytical component will be complete.

Because each observational component is standing alone in this outline document, it is easy to make sure we add analysis to each quotation/paraphrase, and it is easy to make sure our analysis is balanced with—or outweighs—our observational component of each paragraph. We will also find that, since we are focusing on each type of task independently, and we have already completed our research and observations, our analytical thoughts come to us quicker. All we must do is write them down. Once you have added your own original thoughts to each observational component, you have completed the analytical component, and composed the

informational component of your body paragraphs. Save the draft and walk away from the computer for a bit. When you return, we will switch gears entirely to the **rhetorical component** of each paragraph.

## Rhetorical Component

Once you've added analytical comments to each observation, you have written most of each paragraph. That is, you have covered the informational component. Now it's time to turn to the rhetorical component. The rhetorical component frames your informational component and serves to contextualize the observations and analysis you have chosen to present to your audience. As you might expect from my phrase "framing," the rhetorical component goes before and after the informational. You have **three rhetorical tasks** to complete in every paragraph:

1. Introduce your topic
2. Relate topic back to thesis
3. Transition to next paragraph

Once composed, the first two rhetorical aspects will be positioned before your informational component and the third will conclude each paragraph. One might notice that these tasks are relatively simple and easy to compose in contrast to the informational component of the paragraphs. However, the rhetorical tasks are crucial for your argument. Think of it this way: the informational component tells what you have to say, and the rhetorical elements tell us why what you're saying is important for your argument.



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When working in our modular system, composing the rhetorical element of body paragraphs is even more accelerated than adding analysis to your observations. Again, I recommend going through these three components one at a time and saving your developing document after each one. First, go to each pairing of observation + analysis and add a topic sentence that informs the reader of the topic being discussed in that pairing. Do this for each paragraph. Then, go through and write sentences that connect that topic to your thesis and suggests its importance. Once you've done this your paper is basically written. Put your paragraphs into the order that they will appear in your final draft. Once you've done this, your final rhetorical task is simple: add a sentence to the end of each paragraph that creates a transition to the topic discussed in the next paragraph. With these tasks completed, all that's left to do is compose your introduction, conclusion, revise, and submit your essay.

## Conclusion

By clarifying the many constitutive steps that make up the overarching writing process, we find that each step is easier to complete. Focusing on one step at a time, we watch as our essays develop out of our research before our eyes. This method takes the strain out of the way we write and helps us have a more fulfilling experience while composing. You'll notice that when you inhabit one type of thinking at a time, your thoughts arrive clearer, and your transmission of those thoughts to the page is sharper. The method I've

presented here is not the only way you might split up the tasks of the writing process but trying it out is a good place to start. Each student is at liberty to follow their own thought process and writing habits to tailor this method to their own needs. We find that with a little discipline and time management we can make the once-dreaded writing assignment a pleasant and fulfilling task. Happy writing!

## Discussion Questions

1. What are your current writing habits? Do you prefer to multitask, or split up tasks?
2. What is your existing strategy for organizing paragraphs?
3. What are some of the benefits to a modular, process-based approach to writing?

### About the author



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Ryan Slesinger is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Oklahoma State University where he enjoys teaching a variety of literature and writing courses. Recently taught courses include, “American Road Narratives,” “Literature of the American Counterculture,” and “Race, Borders, & Intersectional American Identities.” He has published articles on John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, and the Grateful Dead, and his current book project addresses the importance of mysticism in the works of twentieth century American novelists Steinbeck, Kerouac, Anaya, Silko, and Morrison.



PART III

# ANALYZING WRITING



10.

# A MODERNIST TEACHES ANALYSIS

Dr. Rafael Hernandez



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[AModernistTeachesAnalysis.\\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, we focus on analyzing literature. Here, you will learn what analysis is, both as a way of approaching literature and as a practice you can adopt in your argumentative essays. You will learn the steps towards literary analysis, which will serve as guidelines to get you started with literary analysis and some strategies for analyzing writing beyond just interpretation. By the end of this chapter, you will have a better understanding of what proper literary analysis looks like and how to conduct analysis yourself.

## Key Terms

Below are some key terms from the field of literary criticism that should help you when conducting your own analysis:

- Meaning
- Function
- Interpretation

When I was studying literature in college, my professors would often write on my papers in bright red ink: *Needs More Analysis*. Teachers had explained to me that to prove an idea I had to (1) make a claim, (2) provide evidence, (3) and analyze. This confused me, since I thought I had proven my points fine enough with evidence alone—after all, offering evidence is how we show our ideas are correct. If I want to prove that it’s raining outside, all I need to do is draw the curtain and show you; surely, I don’t need to “analyze” the way the drops are falling on the pavement outside, do I?

What I later learned is that even though this is true for a lot of scenarios, it isn't always true when we're dealing with language. Language isn't concrete—it's mutable, contingent, ever-changing, and ever-evolving. Language is contextual and changes based on who is speaking, who is listening, and what, where, when, why, and how words are spoken. For this reason, language needs investigation, it needs unpacking, it needs thoughtful consideration—in other words: it needs analysis.

Throughout this chapter, we'll look at some examples of successful analysis as well as occasions where analysis falls a bit short of its goal. And by focusing on literary writing, we'll see language in some of its most creative forms. As you'll shortly see, creative works can sometimes trick us into thinking we've analyzed when all we've really done is interpret. Interpreting in order to understand writing is immensely important, but when we then properly analyze it, we get an even richer array of interesting insight and meaning from the literature we read.

## Defining Literary Analysis

Analysis is the process of breaking down something complex into its most basic parts to better understand it in its entirety. In other words, analysis is the act of dissecting, scrutinizing closely, and then building back up—but this time, with the new knowledge we have about that thing. If I handed you a Rubik's cube, for instance, and asked you to tell me how it works, you might say something like, “the sides rotate and spin in different ways to allow you to line up the color-coded squares.” This is technically true, but it answers *what* a Rubik's cube does, not *how* it works. To see *how* it works, you'd be better off opening it up and seeing the internal mechanisms. Break it down, scrutinize it, and then build it back up.

When we analyze literature, we're really asking the same question: *how does this work?* As we'll see later in this chapter, sometimes we get caught up in what a work of literature *is*—or what it *means*—and neglect to consider how it functions, which is the ultimate goal of literary analysis. Let's take a book a lot of us have read, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and consider one of its most memorable images, the green light across the water. A perennial question that plagues readers of *The Great Gatsby* is “what does the green light mean?” to which perhaps the most common answer is “the American Dream.” This is certainly true, but when we expand our inquiry to ask “and how does it function in the novel?” we get much more interesting answers. Here, we might say something like, “the light's distance and Gatsby's longing for it serve to critique the illusion of social mobility and the rhetoric of the American Dream. Gatsby can always see the light, but it is always out of reach.” This insight is far richer and more interesting than merely pointing out the symbolic meaning of the light, and it represents an example of great literary analysis.

Analysis is also, of course, a thing. In its noun form, *an analysis* can be your argument, your ideas, your essay, your paragraph, etc. In your own writing, you will likely have sections that you consider “analysis” sections—passages of your own writing dedicated to the work of unpacking and scrutinizing the literature you're exploring. These pieces supplement and complement the other pieces of your writing, like your thesis statements, summaries, evidentiary support, and such.

Like many things, there is no right or wrong way to get to an analysis of writing. In fact, sometimes the most unique approaches can result in the sharpest analysis. That said, a few steps to keep in mind will help when approaching and conducting your analysis.

To conduct analysis and present it in your own work, you should:

1. Describe or summarize what you see.
2. Locate and point out important details (evidence).
3. Discuss those details and show valuable insights.

The most effective thing you can do in a literary analysis is point out how one element of the work has the potential to change our overall understanding of it as a whole. In literary scholarship, we call this close reading, and it's the process of rigorous, tightly-focused analysis—sometimes of just a phrase or a few lines—that newly shapes our understanding of the piece of literature. A great section of analysis in an essay will summarize or gesture towards specific passages or moments from the text. Then, the writer will narrow in

on specific details that they think have the potential to contribute to their insight. Finally, those details will be carefully scrutinized for how they contribute to the text's larger purpose.

For instance, in the *Great Gatsby* example from above, we might say that our analysis of the green light as an indictment of the illusion of social mobility changes our overall understanding of the novel and its characters. Now, every time we see Gatsby staring at the green light, we know not only is he longing for what it represents, but the scene is now tinged with a cruel irony, as we know the larger function of the light. We don't just see a man longing for success, we see a man longing for success within the context of a society in the throes of economic crisis.

## The Problem of "Meaning"

A lot of the time, we are told that the point of analyzing literature is to "find the meaning." The search for meaning in literature and art has long been a part of how people approach them when they encounter a text with a critical or scholarly eye. This search for meaning tends to come when literature seems foreign to us, when something about the writing we encounter feels opaque or almost impenetrable. For example, when reading the works from the distant past, contemporary readers like ourselves can often feel alienated by the language. On top of that, throw in poetic and highly stylized writing and the first problem we encounter with literature is quite simply an inability to comprehend what is going on. So, we search for understanding and for meaning.

In literature from the modernist period (roughly 1890-1945), in particular, writers were really interested in how the mundane could also be thought of as hugely consequential (T. S. Eliot famously wrote "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"). Because of this, some of the greatest literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are impenetrable precisely because they are so mundane. Take Ernest Hemingway's famous short story, "Hills Like White Elephants," which is about four pages long and almost entirely dialogue. In this story, we readers are like strangers eavesdropping a conversation two people are having with no context and very few clues to the topic of their veiled discussion. In this story, we readers search for meaning simply because Hemingway seemingly withholds all of it from us on purpose.

But where is the meaning? Is it in the text itself? Is what a story or a poem "means" always already inside the words on the page? If so, then our job is to uncover it, to draw it out, mine it from the difficult passages of the text at hand. But what if meaning is elsewhere? What if, rather than being always already in the pages, meaning is created while we read—or, to be more precise, while we interpret and analyze?

When my copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* sits on my bookshelf, for instance, the shapes made of ink on the pages made of paper are no more "meaningful" than the wood the shelf is made from or the screws holding it together. But when I pick that book up and read it, suddenly I'm bringing to life opportunities for meaning and insight. I'm the one who interprets and analyzes when I interact with a work of literature; but it isn't a passive practice of opening up and absorbing the work, it's an active and dynamic relationship between your critical eye and the raw material of the book you're reading.

There's nothing wrong with searching for meaning in literature; it's a wonderful and productive practice. The problem comes only when we stop short of fully-fledged analysis. If we try so hard to figure out what a piece of fiction *means*, we might be reticent to continue our investigation into how it *works*. Here, we need to keep our energy going and move from interpretation into analysis.

## Analysis vs. Interpretation

When we analyze writing—especially poetic, literary works—we run the risk of merely "translating" the writing into something more intelligible or familiar. This is useful, especially when the literature seems foreign to us. Sometimes it seems like we need to take a deeply analytical approach just to break down the language just to better understand what's going on. This is all well and good, but when we do this, we don't actually draw any unique meaning from the piece of writing, we just translate it into a different set of terms that are more familiar to us.

In these moments, we confuse analysis with *interpretation*. Though related, and useful when utilized in conjunction with one

another, these concepts are distinct. Failing to recognize the differences can lead to an “analysis” that really isn’t. Here, we ought to focus not on the *what*, but on the *how* and *why*.

Sometimes, it’s useful to strip the allure of interpretation away almost entirely to better focus on analysis. This is why modernist literature in particular is a useful field to study for this purpose. Modernist writers wanted to “Make It New,” as Ezra Pound once declared, and so they often experimented with *how* they wrote, even when they often wrote about universal human experiences like love, loss, personal growth and art. Because they focused so much on the *form* of their work, it allows us to more closely analyze its *function*. A useful example here is the very experimental poetry of Gertrude Stein. Here’s a segment from one of her more famously experimental poems, “If I Told Him.”

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.      Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon  
would would he like it.

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would  
he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he  
like it would he like it if I told him.

In this opening section to her poem, Stein uses words with meanings attached to them, sure—but in her experimental play, we are encouraged to think about things like the poem’s incessant repetition, the musicality of the poem, and the sensation that the formal aspects of the poem evoke in us. This passage is easier to analyze, in a way, because we can more clearly see what Stein is *trying to do* than what she might be *trying to say*. So, in this case, analysis comes more easily. For example, we might say that the repetition of the “if” and the way it’s associated with an action “told him” serves to show the speaker’s anxiety about committing to something. Asking “would he like it” evokes a fear that what the speaker is going to “tell” Napoleon is precarious, that he may like it or he may not. If we replaced all the “Napoleon” references with another name, it might change the meaning of the poem slightly, but the *way* these words are working within the poem wouldn’t change that much. Remember, *how* and *why*, not always only *what*.

## Putting Analysis into Practice

Let’s turn now to another famous work of modernist writing. Take the following lines from T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as example:

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker

One way of analyzing this passage would be to determine what Eliot means by “the eternal Footman.” A quick bit of research informs us that this is a classic—if a bit opaque—reference to death, personified. Because we now know that death is often referred to as “the eternal Footman,” we can conclude our analysis by stating the following:

In this passage, the speaker in Eliot’s poem reveals he is afraid of death. His “greatness flicker[s],” which recalls a candle at risk of blowing out, symbolizing the end of light, or darkness. Additionally, by referencing “the eternal Footman,” which is a euphemism for death itself, the speaker further shows his anxieties about dying.

This is perfectly satisfactory prose, and it serves as great background for analysis in an essay. But let’s take some time to critique it as well. Are there moments here where we get any new insight into the speaker of the poem? Or does the analysis merely reframe and repeat the content of the poem itself? The analysis draws interesting insight from Eliot’s choice to use the word “flicker.” Here, the analysis is sharp, since it contributes new ideas to the poem that Eliot hints at or gestures to, but doesn’t say outright. But the second part, as you might have guessed, is merely translation disguised as analysis. It tells me what a word or phrase means, and then moves on.

Let’s try to analyze this passage again, this time employing more analytical skills while trying to avoid the trap of translation. For this, we’ll think more seriously about the context of the passage and see if there is something more important to latch onto. Throughout “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the speaker is constantly bombarded with his anxiety, self-doubt, confusion,

procrastination, and insecurity—and he masks his insecurities with nice clothes. So, knowing at least one aspect of the greater context of the poem, what else in this passage strikes you as potentially important?

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker

As scholars of literature, we tend to fixate on big-picture human issues—love, death, memory, etc. But in this instance, it might be the more mundane elements that are the most significant. In this passage, let's analyze closely not what “the eternal Footman” represents (death personified), but what he does and his role in this passage. Here's another example analysis:

In this passage, the speaker of Eliot's poem relates his insecurities and self-conscious nature to a sense of finality and death. Relating his “greatness” to the “flicker” of a candle suggests he is aware it can be extinguished at any moment. When “the eternal Footman,” or the figure of death, holds him by the coat and “snickers,” Eliot argues that even death can penetrate the speaker's most prized armor—the clothing he puts on to protect his ego. Here, death mocks his paltry attempts to defend himself from the cruel and judgmental eyes of the world.

In this analysis, we've taken the material Eliot gives us and drawn some greater meaning from it. Rather than merely communicating what the passage “means,” we observed and identified details, summarized their appearance in the text, and discussed their significance to the writer's greater artistic project.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what everyday scenarios are we interpreting a situation versus scenarios where we analyze a situation?
2. What formal properties in the Gertrude Stein poem, “If I Told Him,” can we highlight and begin to investigate? How do they change our understanding of the poem? And what does it contribute?
3. What questions can we ask ourselves when analyzing literature to help us go beyond interpretation and into the realm of analysis? (For example: “what does this mean?” can become “how does this change our understanding of the work?”) What other questions can help us arrive at analysis?

## About the author



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Dr. Rafael Hernandez is an English professor at Oklahoma State University where he teaches courses in literature and writing. He studies British writers from the early twentieth century, focusing on how modernism helped writers and their audiences better understand the rapidly changing world they lived in. At Oklahoma State, Dr. Hernandez teaches classes in first year composition, surveys of literature, and upper-division themed courses in literature and literary theory.

## 11.

# CREATIVE WRITERS TEACH TECHNIQUES FOR ANALYZING ANY TEXT

## Techniques for Analyzing any Text

Lisa Wright and Natasha Tinsley



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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=38#audio-38-1>

*Push play on the sound bar above to listen to the chapter.*

14 minute read

[Creative Writers Teach Techniques Analyzing Any Text. \\_print](#)

To become a good writer, it is important to analyze other texts by looking closely at specific details to explain or interpret the author's intended meaning and purpose. This analysis is crucial in helping students develop and improve their own writing by reflecting and drawing on the techniques implemented by other writers. This chapter explores Kiese Laymon's essay "[Mississippi: A Poem in Days](#)" to show how audience, argument, evidence, and stance are relevant tools used to decipher an author's text. Instructors and students should be aware that the writer uses racially explicit language.

## Audience

When a person hits share on an Instagram post a lot of thought probably has gone into the picture. Before posting that one photo, more than likely, the person has taken several pictures, reviewed the lighting, colors, angle, and even the items in the background of each picture. They've thought about who would gravitate toward this particular picture, who would like it, respond with a comment to spark conversation within a community, or even share the photograph with other like minds. In other words, they've selected the particular photo with a specific audience in mind. An audience is an individual or group of people who share similar ideas, beliefs, situations, and struggles.

Though some steps may vary, writers make similar decisions before publishing their writing. For instance, a nonfiction writer will determine which portions of their lives to share in a story. A college professor who writes an essay about the impact of Covid-19 on their class instruction, will probably include different details than if they were composing an essay about their experiences as a mother while working, during the Covid-19 pandemic. If only writing about being a professor during Covid they may discuss how different it feels to teach solely online, the challenges of community building, or the strangeness of teaching to black boxes when students don't turn their cameras on. Other educators who share similar experiences would be drawn to an essay that has these particular details.

If this same professor decides to write about being a mother and a professor she might write about managing her own and their children's Zoom schedules, chronicles of recording content with her children in the house, attending meetings, or presenting at

conferences while still being responsible for the health and well-being of her children. Though the essence of the essay is about a professor, the added layer of motherhood invites another audience.

One might argue that the readers of the two essays mentioned above could overlap, and while I agree that this is true, what makes one essay distinct from another is the details the writer decides to include in the essay. Just like the details in the photograph the Instagrammer selected were tailored or will naturally connect to particular audiences, the word choices, images, tone of voice, and parts of their lives that a writer decides to elaborate deeply on will connect to particular audiences. I don't want to insinuate that all writers or Instagrammers purposely burden themselves with curating or composing their art hoping that specific audiences will engage with their material. What I'm trying to make clear is that the topics selected for the material will draw the attention of particular readers.

As an example, by day two of Laymon's essay readers understand that he is unsure if he should travel during the coronavirus due to his Grandmama's health, yet he affirms, "These are the events where I make most of my money." Here Laymon is in conversation with an audience of working people who are caretakers of elderly and were facing similar difficult decisions surrounding finances. Like the Covid pandemic, Laymon's audience is layered. Though he begins his essay with a broad conversation about working people who are also caretakers, by day six, Laymon's audience becomes more finite with the statement, "I never assumed it would take my students." He shares his experience as a mourning educator, and therefore serves as a voice to amplify the fears of other educators.

Laymon's student doesn't die as a result of being at school, yet mentioning her death is still important for this essay. Her death invites readers to ponder how schools handled the Covid pandemic. In doing so Laymon's audience expands to include not only parents, but students, and educators who were also navigating the pandemic, and further extends the conversation to include government officials and school administrator's handling of the pandemic.

The death of a student due to Covid is a teacher's fear. Laymon's mention of the death of his student invites readers to gain insight into the thoughts of a teacher. In the opening sections of this essay, Laymon's immediate concern is about the elderly and people with compromised immune systems. Laymon simultaneously broadens the conversation to educators, while also narrowing the conversation to include the lives of students. The author's details about himself as a caretaker of the elderly, as a person who needs to work, and a teacher are specific details he includes to relate to and grab the attention of his audiences.

## Activity

For each day of the essay use a graphic organizer to document Laymon's intended audience. Work with a partner.

## Argument

Argument is one of those terms that some people run from because it seems synonymous with aggression and hostility. There's also the fear of being "wrong," which carries the unfounded connotation of ignorance. On the contrary, the ability to argue merely means one can support conclusions and interpretations with logical reasoning and evidence. This signifies the ability to not only think for oneself but process and weed out illogical views and ideas. Regarding being wrong, it's important to understand that an argument is an opinion. As such, like people, opinions should be developing, growing, changing, and evolving as knowledge and experience

increase. In short, an argument is a personal and/or logical claim/belief that is justified through the interpretation of evidence. Keep in mind, the phrasing of the argument will vary from reader to reader. However, if the author does their job, mirroring themes and ideas will appear.

For example, in the Mississippi essay, Laymon consistently references racial descriptions to set up the racial discrimination that Laymon wants the reader to process. He starts off by implying the impact this racial awareness has on his interpretation of himself, as well as how he perceives others interpret him. For example, the author writes, “White people treat Black people who smell like old cauliflower like Black People.” Scientifically, cooked cauliflower gives off a sulfuric odor that has been described as overpowering and unpleasant. The author suggests that white people who view certain Black people as disagreeable see it fitting to avoid or remove them in some way. The addition of the cauliflower also provides the negative connotation desired with the repetition of the phrase “Black people,” helping the reader see the issue with treating Black people like Black people. Laymon goes on to connect everyday practices and beliefs such as these to larger acts of discrimination with Tate Reeves’s college and current political acts. These kinds of references and allusions appear throughout the work from the racial description of the driver to the color of Laymon’s own clothes.

Time is also used to support the racial argument. It’s important to note the length of time these beliefs and ideas have spanned, taking note of the narrator’s recollections from college all the way to the present day. The time lapse is reinforced in the quote with the inclusion of the word “old.” A simple term but telling since it takes time for something to become “old.” Color and time are consistent motifs that are utilized to connect racial disparities and/or attacks. Ultimately, his constant awareness of his own physical identity and the identity of others is crucial to his argument. The time references establish how deeply the information has been embedded in the narrator and society. This awareness and time coupled with the negative connotation attached to only Black people and the acts of society and politicians is meant to insinuate much larger cultural and social disparities. Specifically, Laymon wants the reader to understand that the longevity and practice of racism is so rooted in America that violence and discrimination against Black people is an acceptable and routine practice. Essentially, this norming of violence and disrespect has allowed these disparaging ideas and beliefs to become as natural as breathing, blinding society to the true impact of racism.

## Activity

In a Tweet no more than 140 characters, find an alternative argument supported in the essay. Share Tweets on Twitter and tag the author @KieseLaymon

## Evidence

Evidence is one of those terms that, intellectually, we understand. It’s only when we try to define it that the word begins to bleed into other ideas and concepts, becoming a literary tie dye. But, like everything in an English Composition class, the definition is not as important as the identification of the concept or the execution of the skill. That being said, it’s always good to have a working definition. The one this chapter will use is anything such as direct and indirect quotes, paraphrases, statistics, facts, figures, and personal stories that qualifies as credible. Now, in order for something to be credible, it has to logically and intelligently support the information in the essay. That ranges from supporting the argument, the stance, or the audience. Keep in mind, you can have as many facts and figures and stats as you want. It means nothing if it doesn’t support the essay’s components. Also know that evidence doesn’t have to be lifeless numbers or charts. Vivid language, dynamic stories, and even personal interpretations can qualify

as evidence. If the connections are executed successfully, the reader can consciously and/or unconsciously follow the author's logic and reasoning, thus finding cohesion and comprehension.

This section will focus on Laymon's argument to demonstrate how evidence functions efficiently. Specifically, he utilizes personal stories and a careful attention to word choice to show how both Black and non-Black people have accepted that racial violence and discrimination are understood and acceptable everyday practices. For example, Laymon includes the story of his experiences with the future Governor Tate when they were both college students. He states,

I have never written about the heartbreak of seeing the future governor of Mississippi in that group of white boys, proudly representing the Kappa Alpha fraternity and its confederate commitment to Black suffering...it hurt my feelings to see Tate doing what white boys who pledged their identities to the Old South ideologies were supposed to do.

Laymon outlines the persistence of racism through the connotations of the words incorporated. He starts off by establishing his argument with the phrase "supposed to do," insinuating that racial violence and discrimination are expected experiences Black people must learn to navigate through. He builds on that idea with the inclusion of the fraternity. Through this word, the reader is brought back to college life and students. For many, college students are seen as vulnerable and impressionable, though still capable of rational and logical decision making, using college as a way to transition into adulthood. Furthermore, fraternities can be associated with youthful experimentation, the creation of life-long connections, and the development of personal identities. It is through these references the reader is led to understand how racial ideas are passed down, and thus embed themselves throughout history.

Laymon further achieves the necessary connections by including "the Old South ideologies" and "confederate commitment," bringing the reader back to slavery days. Even though history has taught that neither the North nor the South were concerned with the wellbeing of enslaved Black beyond their monetary value, slaves were known to run to the North because of the heightened cruelty endured in the South. This phrase combined with the assumptions surrounding fraternity life solidifies the author's reasoning that racial disparities are engraved in the everyday lives of people. Through his language, Laymon establishes how the racist past has infiltrated impressionable minds and ensured its continued existence. Tate being a member of a fraternity which "proudly represent[s]...its confederate commitment to Black suffering" shows the reader the longevity of these ideas. This longevity is what has made these practices and ideas a regular fixture in the foundation of America.

## Activity

Partner with a peer. Then find at least 3-4 pieces of evidence to support the argument your partner Tweeted.

## Stance

Just as the details that an author decides to include in a text will speak to a specific audience, so will an author's voice. Authors often adjust their voice to express and align with their viewpoints. Within a text, an author's viewpoint is called a stance or the position taken, or the beliefs held about an argument, usually conveyed through tone, evidence selection, argument formation, and information organized for a specific/intended audience.

In this chapter, we have discussed Laymon's selection of specific details to converse with an audience of people who are caregivers, educators, Black themselves, and others who are concerned with the safety of Black lives. Laymon is not simply speaking to a specific audience, he is a member of the groups for which he speaks. His membership shapes his stance, and it is his decision to use personal

anecdotes as evidence for his argument, which centers his identity as a part of his stance. Laymon's word choices, and the space he gives to various topics within the essay including race, education, and the coronavirus, help us pinpoint his stance.

Within Laymon's essay, clear and bold statements are anchored down by a tone of fear. To profess, "I am forever a fat Black boy from Jackson Mississippi," calls attention to Laymon's size, racial identity, and geography. In just one sentence, readers are given the context surrounding Laymon's writing. By bringing attention to details of his personal body, and his position in the world as a writer who is from Mississippi, Laymon escalates his locality. Due to historical violence against Black bodies, present day racist offences including the fact that "thirty-two percent of the state's African Americans live in poverty," [Jesmyn Ward](#) says that "racism is built into the very bones of Mississippi." Thus by calling out his state, Laymon brings our attention to the history of Black people in Mississippi and signals the longevity and normality of racism in America.

This fact that this essay was written just weeks after Breonna Taylor's death deepens who we understand Laymon to be. We know Taylor's death and other recent Black deaths are on his mind and kindles the fear that fuels Laymon's thoughts as he writes. In day five's section we are clear that Laymon is aware and disturbed by American's racial history. Through plain images which recall recent ways Blacks have been killed we gain an understanding of the impact these deaths have on Laymon's mental state, his anger and fear for his own life. He states,

I sit in this house, once the site of a confederate mansion, alone, afraid to go outside, afraid to let anyone outside see me. I am afraid of being killed while dreaming. Driving while Black. Jogging while Black. Dreaming while Black. Fighting while Black. Loving while Black.

Thus by calling out his state, and writing about present day violences against Black people, Laymon brings our attention to the history of Black people in Mississippi and throughout the US, which signals the longevity and normality of racism in America. In doing so, Laymon expresses himself as a Black man who is aware of the racial tension in America and its impact upon himself and other Black people. With these specific details Laymon reflects a stance of a writer who fears for his life because he could suffer simply because of his location and his race.

## Activity

Choose three or four images that you would post to an Instagram page to reflect Laymon's stance. Provide a brief caption for each image.

## Discussion Questions

- Pick a specific audience and explain what details or information the author could have included to reach that audience. How might these new details impact the essay?
- Explain how the coronavirus is significant to Laymon's argument.
- Explain how "Day 9" supports or detracts from Laymon's argument.
- Examine a text that you plan to analyze, make a list of word choices the author uses that show stance.

## About the authors



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Natasha Tinsley is an Assistant Professor and the Writing Center Coordinator at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She is a two-time graduate from Oklahoma State University, where she earned a Bachelors in English and an MFA in Fiction. She also holds a Master's in Education from Cameron University. Her research and written works focus on African American people and culture, including but not limited to ideologies surrounding identity, gender roles, and motherhood. Natasha has also presented at several writing center conferences themed around racial injustice, as well as published academic pieces and poetry in The Writing Center Journal and Arcturus. She uses her academic and creative skills to offer truths she hopes will provide to others the same catharsis and enjoyment she receives.

## 12.

# APPLIED LINGUISTS TEACH ANALYZING WRITING

Sara Nezami Nav and Dr. Stephanie Link

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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=39#audio-39-1>

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[AppliedLinguistsTeachAnalyzingWriting.\\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, we will teach you how to analyze the language and structure of common writing tasks by showing you strategies for effectively communicating to specific audiences for specific purposes. We demonstrate how to analyze writing through an example genre—a job application cover letter. Here, we will start by introducing the concept of “genre” and proceed to teaching you what steps to take in order to translate knowledge of reading the genre to writing it. More specifically, you will learn a) what makes job applications a genre, b) how to recognize the genre features of cover letters by analyzing a sample text, and c) how to implement the knowledge you gain from the analysis of the genre into your own writing process. By the end of this chapter, you should develop a deeper appreciation of the concept of genre, genre analysis, and genre writing.

## Key Terms

- Genre
- Moves and Steps
- Lexicogrammatical Features

For almost every university graduate, one future step is to apply for and obtain a job that fits one’s interest, knowledge, skills, and/or degree. Therefore, any student that graduates from university needs to learn how to approach such an important step in life. Most

university undergraduate students apply for entry-level positions for which the application process is new to them. Consequently, learning what materials to prepare and what genres to write in order to initiate the job application process is of utmost importance. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to introduce one of the most important components of a job application packet that is often needed to land a first job after university—a job application letter, also known as a cover letter.

It would be helpful to start with an analogy that simplifies the communicative purpose and importance of the application letter genre; these letters are meant to “sell” you to someone that wants to “hire “ you. Yes! You have guessed it right! Job application letters seem to serve a similar function as promoting products, however, what they promote or sell are your knowledge and skills. We think this analogy is helpful to set the background for you for what follows. In this chapter, we will first introduce the concept of “genre”, and then, we will introduce the concepts of moves and strategies by providing an analysis of a sample job letter. Here, the aim would be to also show you how the analysis of lexico-grammatical features can provide us with tools to understand what moves and strategies are included in a job application letter. Finally, we will ask you to transfer the knowledge you will learn from our sample analysis in this chapter in your own writing by discussing a set of guided questions at the end.

## The Concept of Genre

Here, we define genre as a class or a type of spoken or written texts that indicate similarities in their purpose, content, form and/or context (Hyon, 2018). A genre in this sense is a tool that facilitates communication of people around a certain communicative purpose that both producers and receivers of a genre are aware of. Moreover, for a genre to be successful in delivering the appropriate and intended messages of producers, they must adhere to some genre creation norms that make the genre and its intentions identifiable by receivers of the genre. To understand this concept better, pay attention to the excerpts of text in table 1.

Table 1

Two Examples of the Letter Genre

Example 1	Example 2
<p>(1) Dear Mr. Smith</p> <p>(2) Since you're one of our important customers who appreciates convenience and value, I am writing to share an opportunity to enjoy both!</p> <p>(3) For example, would you like to choose \$60 worth of Innovations merchandise- absolutely FREE?</p> <p>(4) And could you benefit from a very convenient credit card- one that offers you a free Rewards program, unsurpassed card protection, free PhotoCard, free Purchase Cover, personal customer service- and is accepted at over 400,000 locations in Australia, more than 14 million establishments worldwide and gives you cash access at over 341,000 ATMs? (Yunxia, 2000, p. 489)</p>	<p>(1) Dear Mr. X:</p> <p>(2) I would like to be considered as a candidate for the teaching assistant position advertised in the Jordan Times on the 2nd of January 2000.</p> <p>(3) I have finished my degree in English for specific purposes (ESP) with an average 'excellent'. I have taken all the ESP courses offered in the department; thus, I have solid background knowledge in ESP teaching.</p> <p>(4) My knowledge of ESP course materials goes beyond my formal classroom education. For the past two years I have worked part-time in Jordan broadcasting and TV, where I have gained experience in teaching mass media courses. Also on my own initiative, I designed a teaching programme for the radio and developed a TV course (Al-Ali, 2004. P. 8)</p>

The examples in Table 1 showcase two letters. We identify these examples as belonging to the mother genre of “letters” due to similarities in how they are formatted. In other words, both letters in (1) provide a greeting typical of letter genres, in (2) state the purpose of the letter, in (3) offer the main services and in (4) detail the benefits. The ordering of information in both genres seem to indicate that the genres follow relatively the same sequence of information to eventually offer something valuable to the addressee. However, when analyzed with relation to context and purpose, the two letters can be distinguished into separate letter

genres as what they promote is different and the producers and receivers of the genre seem to belong to rather various communities that use the genre. To put it more clearly, Example 1 promotes a merchandise service to a customer while Example 2 promotes a job applicant's qualifications to a hiring manager. The first letter is a letter genre typical of business communication by business community members while the second letter is typical of job application processes. Thus, what defines genres as belonging to more specific categories are a combination of their information structuring, purposes and community of users. Now that you have learned the concept of genre, we will proceed to elaborate the job application genre more by analyzing the genre's moves and steps.

# Moves and Steps in Job Application Letter Genre

To introduce the makeup and structure of the job application letter, we will use the terms “moves” and “steps” that are typical of genre analysis in ESP (English for specific Purposes) tradition developed by Swales (1990, 2004). Swales defines a move as a “discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse” (Swales, 2004, p. 228-9). To simplify the definition, a move refers to those text segments that form and shape the overall organization and structure of a genre and help the user of the genre realize its goal. To realize the overall goal of a genre, “each move has its own communicative purpose, which, together with other moves, contributes to the general communicative purpose of the text” (Pho, 2009, p. 17). Steps, then refer to various ways through which some moves are realized. To provide a better understanding, we will follow the move structure of the job application letter proposed by Bhatia (2014) to analyse a sample letter for you to show you how to approach the genre analysis task. Table 2 includes the important moves and steps as proposed by Bhatia (2014) within a sample letter that we borrow from Alred, Brusaw and Oliu (2019, P. 40).

Table 2  
Move/Step Genre Analysis of a Job Application Letter

Letter Content	Moves and Steps
Dear Ms. Smathers (1):	
During the recent NOMAD convention in Washington, Karen Jarrett, Director of Operations, informed me of an opening at Aerospace Technologies for a manager of new product development (2).	(1) Salutation
My extensive background in engineering exhibit design and Management makes me an ideal candidate for this position (3).	(2) Introducing Candidature
I have been manager of the Exhibit Design Lab at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base for the past seven years (3-a). During that time, I received two Congressional Commendations for models of a space station laboratory and a docking/repair port (3-b). My experience in advanced exhibit design would enable me to help develop AT's wind tunnel and aerospace models (4). Further, I have just learned this week that my exhibit design presented at NOMAD received a “Best of Show” Award (3-b).	(3) Establishing Credentials (3-a) Essential Detailing of Candidature (3-b) Indicating Value of Candidature
As described on the enclosed résumé (5), I not only have workplace management experience but also have recently received an M.B.A. from the University of Dayton (3-a). As a student in the M.B.A. program,	(4) Offering Incentives (5) Enclosing Documents
I won the Luson Scholarship to complete my coursework as well as the Jonas Outstanding Student Award (3-b).	(6) Using Pressure Tactics
I would be happy to discuss my qualifications in an interview at your convenience (6). Please contact me at (937) 255-4137 or at <a href="mailto:mand@juno.com">mand@juno.com</a> (7). I look forward to speaking with you (8).	(7) Soliciting Response
Sincerely (8), Robert Mandillo	(8) Ending Politely
Enclosure: Résumé (5)	

Interestingly, the sample job application letter included all the eight moves that Bhatia (2014) had introduced for job application

letters. But how do we determine each move and step? To determine the necessary moves and steps for inclusion within a genre, we need to pay attention to how they are written and identify their lexicogrammatical features.

## Lexicogrammatical Features of the Sample

Let us discuss how various lexicogrammatical features of our sample letter helps us identify the moves and steps and the information structuring in the sample. In move 1, usually to introduce the purpose which is the candidature for the job, job applicants refer to how they have found out about the job vacancy and opening. Hence, the words such as opening are used to refer to the job and are used to show how they were notified of that and their willingness to apply for it. Using positive and boosting adjectives such as extensive and ideal show us that the candidate is establishing credentials. For detailing the essential information such as education and job, the candidate simply lists the type of job or degree such as manager of the exhibit design lab and the length of each such as the past 7 years. It is common to use verbs and nouns to show further values such as won and received along with awards and scholarship. Phrases such as I look forward to discussing my qualifications in an interview can have a pressure impact by persuading the hiring team further to call the candidate to the interview table. Next, contact information is a way to solicit a response by inviting the employers to contact the candidate. Moreover, a polite tone usually depends on what words are used to end the letter such as I look forward to or sincerely that enables a candidate to end the letter on a polite and warm note. Candidates must always enclose materials and at times refer back to the enclosed resume as the most important accompanying component of the job application letter.

The analysis above helps us understand how we can observe the sample language used in the job application or any other desired genre to draw on the communicative purpose of the text and learn from it. In other words, the analysis of lexicogrammatical features enables us to identify the necessary moves and steps of a genre and the possible ways of organizing those in our own writing.

## Implementing Genre Analysis Observations in Your Writing

To implement the knowledge you gain from the analysis of sample job application letters, you need to become familiar with the process of how to do so. Here, we introduce an efficient three-step process that goes from analysis of the rhetorical situation of the job application letter, to using the proposed moves and steps in outlining the letter to drafting your letter. Let us expand these in the following sections.

### Analyze the Rhetorical Situation of the Job Application Letter

To write any genre, it is of utmost importance to understand why you are writing the genre and for what communicative purposes as well as to whom you are writing. While the intention of job application letters is to highlight your abilities and qualifications for the hiring party, the hiring party, or your audience, is various depending on the jobs that you would apply for. We strongly suggest that you analyze the job posting or the requirements of the job you are applying for and also to know who the hiring committee is and what their specific needs are before drafting your letter. After gaining a good grasp of the rhetorical situation of your application letter, you can then start outlining and drafting your letter accordingly.

### Outlining the Job Application Letter

To approach drafting the job application letter, we advise you first outline the draft by taking into consideration the identified moves and steps introduced in the previous section. Outlining helps you develop the ideas by identifying the very important and main qualifications that you would want to bring to the fore without getting bogged down by details of the letter. Moreover, outlining

clears up your vision of the connections between the qualifications you would want to highlight and the main requirements of the position as well as the mission of the hiring party. To simplify the outlining for you, we suggest you create a table similar to Table 3 here.

Table 3

## Outlining the Job Application Letter

Moves and Steps	Main Points	Rough Draft
	-To Ms. ....	
Salutation	-To Hiring Committee at ....  -My name	Dear Ms. Edmonds,
Introducing Candidature	-My current job and company -Found job in Indeed.com -Willingness to apply for the position  -my university degrees	My name is .... I am a teaching adjunct at ..... I came across your job posting for the teaching assistant position advertised on indeed.com. I am very interested in this position and would like to apply for it.
Establishing Credentials	-my current position as the .... in ...company  -offering the skills in...  -successfully carrying out ...	I hold a....degree from .... . Currently, I work as a teaching adjunct for ...where I carry out teaching duties. I teach..... . Moreover, I perform....duties for .... .
Indicating Value of Candidature	-certified in working with population with disability -won awards for...  -enclosing resume	I am skillful at classroom management and see my role as a facilitator in a student-centered classroom. In my current position, I have successfully managed my teaching duties by holding constant meetings with program directors and administrators. I am certified in working with students with disabilities and can offer a wealth of knowledge and expectations in that area to your institution. I have also won the best teaching award for ... in .... .
Enclosing Documents	-Enclosing reference contacts	My resume and the referenced contacts are enclosed for your consideration.
Soliciting Response	-My contact info	Please contact me at (phone) or (email). I look forward to hearing from you.

In the first column of the table, place the necessary moves and steps that you want to organize your letter around. In the central column, include the very main points that you would want to include and emphasize in your application letter. A very important

point to consider after completing this section is to gauge the relevance of the main points to the job posting requirements before drafting the points in paragraphs. In our imaginary example in Table 3, the candidate expresses the value of candidature by having their certification in working with students with disability as one of the main points. This point would bear a very important and major relevance to the job posting if the job had listed this quality as required by the position.

## Drafting the Job Application Letter

Then the candidate can move to the third column by drafting the complete paragraphs and adding extra details to the description of main points. Please notice the reversed procedure involved in how you move from the analysis of samples to drafting your own sample of the genre. When drafting the complete paragraphs, it would be important to learn from the sample's lexicogrammatical features that we had also highlighted in Table 2. These features can act as starting points for when you draft the letter genre for the very first time. As you gain experience writing letters and encountering more examples, you will develop a repertoire of the useful lexicogrammatical features to be included in the different moves and steps of this genre.

In this chapter, we introduced the concept of genre, genre moves and steps as well as lexicogrammatical features using the practical genre of job application letter as our genre sample. We hope that the chapter was helpful in providing you with the necessary steps in how to implement your genre knowledge in your own writing by taking a reverse outlining procedure.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is a genre? What are the elements that make up the rhetorical situation of the genre?
2. What are job application letters? How are they organized? Provide some examples of the lexicogrammatical features commonly used within the organization of the job application letters?
3. Do you think the knowledge you have gained from the concepts introduced in this chapter as well as the reverse outlining procedure can help you in writing similar other genres?

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13.

## A POET TEACHES ANALYSIS

Beth Devore

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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:  
<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=40#audio-40-1>

*Push play on the sound bar above to listen to the chapter.*

18 minute read

[APoetTeachesAnalysis.\\_print](#)

### What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this essay, you'll learn how analyzing a poem can help you build skills for analyzing other types of texts and rhetorical situations. In poetry, authors make very intentional choices in language, punctuation, and structure to convey meaning; this essay will focus on how learning to notice those choices in poetry can help us become more critical of the choices made by writers of other genres as well as become more intentional in our choices in writing.

### Key Terms

- Diction
- Syntax
- Form

Somewhere between the time we first read Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and the time we enter a first-year composition classroom, poetry transforms from a fun, playful read to a frustrating, mysterious genre. Poems are deceptive. They use few words, often containing only a sentence, but despite looking simple, they contain layers of meaning.

Poetry is a genre of noticing and capturing moments and of rendering the abstract concrete. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser (alongside Scottish painter Mark Gilbert) worked with third-year medical students at the University of Nebraska to provide

“lessons in looking.” During these lessons, the medical students were asked to record observations, either in writing or by sketching, about the standardized patients, or actors pretending to “suffer from various ailments. The visual cues they provide, like the slumped posture and lack of expression that could signal depression, are easy to overlook in a hurried examination—but they become more obvious when the medical student borrows a page from the painter’s easel or the poet’s notebook” (Mangun) <sup>1</sup>. Kooser noted that while one can look at a list of symptoms and make a diagnosis, when doctors really observe their patients, they may come to a different conclusion. Kooser suggests that rather than burying themselves in charts and test results, “the doctor should take a close look at the patient, paying attention to body language” (Mangun). Students in the program found that the close observation required by poetry and sketching helped them to be aware of each patient’s individuality and come up with more accurate diagnoses and treatment plans.

Just as the practice of writing poetry can help medical students gain skills for diagnosing patients, analysis of poetry can help readers gain critical reading and writing skills through “lessons in looking.” Writing an analysis essay involves breaking down all of the pieces of the text to understand how they work together to create the whole text. When analyzing a text, we often get into a routine. Class discussion of a text frequently follows the same format as we pick out the main points of an article, discuss an author’s credentials for writing a piece, and look for numbers as evidence of logical appeals or personal anecdotes meant to evoke emotions. After a few class periods of these types of discussions, we may find ourselves skimming the text looking for specific features without really even reading the text; just like the medical students fell into a routine of looking at a list of symptoms rather than looking at an individual patient, we fall into a routine of looking at a list of features rather than individual texts. Poems break us out of that routine by requiring us to pay closer attention to the choices the writer has made. When there are no studies cited within the text or there is no data to prove the writer’s point, we’re forced to look at the text from a new angle.

Poems, more than most other genres, place exaggerated attention on diction, syntax, and form. This makes them an ideal genre for practicing analysis and transferring those skills into our own academic writing. When James M. Lang, author of “Distracted: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet,” visited Kathleen Fisher’s introductory theology class, he observed her students completing an exercise drawing on “the ancient tradition of Torah study, in which practitioners slowly read the sacred scriptures of Judaism aloud to one another, pausing and discussing and questioning at every turn.”<sup>2</sup> During a 20-minute exercise, students were asked to examine individual words and phrases while engaging with each other to question and discuss the words and images in a passage from the Book of Genesis. Lang observed that the activity opened “a striking new lens onto [a text] a student has encountered many times before” (Lang). Poetry’s insistence that every word, every punctuation mark, and every line break add meaning to the text makes it an ideal genre for this type of close analysis; as readers, we must slow down and examine each choice the writer has made to understand how all of the elements of the poem come together to create meaning.

**Diction** is a person’s word choice or language. Different types of communication call for different types of diction. With our friends and family, we may use a more casual, conversational diction. We might use more professional diction in communication with our boss. In academic writing, we use more formal, polished language. When we think of poetry, we often think of flowery, “high falutin’” language; however, poetry makes use of any available language and spans the spectrum of language from ordinary, everyday language to scientific language to elevated, sublime language. Some poems combine multiple levels of diction as Jericho Brown does in [“The Tradition”](#) where he uses the scientific genus names of flowers, such as aster, nasturtium, and delphinium, alongside common names of flowers, like foxglove and baby’s breath, as well as everyday words like dirt and planted.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between this language forces us to stop and question why Brown combines these different levels of diction: why are some flowers referred to with their Latinate scientific genus name while using the common name for others? why use dirt instead of the more elevated soil? why use planted instead of sowed?

1. Mangun, Katherine. “Learning to See, in Order to Heal.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 53, no. 26, 2 Mar. 2007, [www.chronicle.com/article/learning-to-see-in-order-to-heal/](http://www.chronicle.com/article/learning-to-see-in-order-to-heal/).

2. Lang, James M. “Distracted Minds: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Dec. 2021, [www.chronicle.com/article/distracted-minds-why-you-should-teach-like-a-poet](http://www.chronicle.com/article/distracted-minds-why-you-should-teach-like-a-poet).

3. Brown, Jericho. “The Tradition.” *Poets.org*. Academy of American Poets, [www.poets.org/poem/tradition](http://www.poets.org/poem/tradition).

Because of the short nature of a poem, every word counts and poets select words carefully to craft meaning in the poem. Brown's word choices require us to consider not only the denotations, or dictionary definitions of the words, but also the connotations, or the associations, emotional reactions, and other meanings that are attached to a word. If we consider Brown's choice of the word *dirt* rather than *soil* using the denotations, we might come to the conclusion that *soil* is fertile and provides a place for plants to thrive; *dirt*, on the other hand, is less desirable for planting and lacks the nutrients for plants to grow. Choosing this word at the beginning of the poem alongside the scientific plant names suggests infertile, inhospitable conditions for growth and sets up Brown's final line: "*John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.*" This message of inhospitable landscapes deepens when we consider the connotations of *dirt*. *Dirt* may bring up associations of the grave as we consider images of *dirt* being tossed on top of a coffin, which further emphasizes the deaths of the men Brown lists in the final line of the poem. *Dirt* also carries connotations of the racist notion of whiteness being associated with cleanliness while Blackness is associated with dirtiness. The interactions between the varying levels of diction allow Brown to craft a complex message about race, identity, life, and death in just fourteen lines.

In addition to forcing readers to examine individual words, poetry also requires readers to rethink conventions of grammar and mechanics. While academic and professional writing make use of Standard English, poetry frequently breaks from the conventions of standard punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure to create new layers of meaning in the poem. For example, in "[Homage to H & the Speedway Diner](#)," Bernadette Mayer does not use standard punctuation or capitalization:

h's wife thinks he spends too much time there (which he does)  
so she started calling him by their dog's name, peaches  
h is a big fan of northern exposure, oh & i  
forgot to mention the biscuits & gravy. (lines 22-25)<sup>4</sup>

Rather than seeing the lack of periods at the ends of sentences, the comma splice after *exposure*, and the lack of capitalization for proper nouns as mistakes, readers must question why Mayer made the choice to stray from standard conventions for writing: what effect does the lack of punctuation have on the way we read the poem? why has Mayer included some punctuation like the parentheses and a few commas (including what would normally be seen as a comma error)? what does Mayer achieve by refusing to capitalize *Peaches*, *Northern Exposure*, or *I*?

The opening line of "[Homage to H & the Speedway Diner](#)" establishes that the diner is "like a cave full of pictures" and Mayer continues to build the informal atmosphere of the diner with images of the steak tartare that is instead called "just raw hamburger with an egg yoke" and sells for \$2.25 and a waiter "who kneels when he takes your order." When combined with these images, the informal use of punctuation and capitalization highlights the diner's lack of pretension and builds a conversational voice that makes readers feel welcome in this setting. Allowing the speaker of the poem to praise the diner without the use of periods to break up ideas emphasizes the speaker's admiration for H and the diner by allowing the praise to spill out without pause.

Similarly, poets also use **syntax**, or word order, to add to the meaning of the text. The most common syntactical pattern in English is subject-verb-object, but poets often invert this syntax. When Emily Dickinson describes an encounter with a snake in "[A narrow Fellow in the Grass](#)," she writes, "His notice instant is—" with the verb coming at the end of the sentence to create a rhythm and repetition of sound that mimics the hiss of a snake in a way traditional syntax would not.<sup>5</sup> Robert Frost's "[Mending Wall](#)" starts with a similar technique: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."<sup>6</sup> This unexpected word order causes us to pause and to wonder in a way that the more direct "There is something that doesn't love a wall" would not. Frost carries this sense of wonder and curiosity throughout the poem as the speaker questions the need for a fence between two plots of land that contain only trees while his neighbor insists on maintaining the wall: "My apple trees will never get across / and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. / He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'" By starting with inverted syntax, Frost places the emphasis on the word "something" and

4. Mayer, Bernadette. "Homage to H & the Speedway Diner." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49757/homage-to-h-the-speedway-diner](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49757/homage-to-h-the-speedway-diner).

5. Dickinson, Emily. "A narrow Fellow in the Grass (1096)." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49909/a-narrow-fellow-in-the-grass-1096](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49909/a-narrow-fellow-in-the-grass-1096).

6. Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall).

calls readers to question what that something that doesn't love walls may be; when the curiosity evoked by the first line is combined with the neighbor's repetition of "Good fences make good neighbors," Frost asks readers to reevaluate the role these barriers play in our relationships and whether they are as positive as the neighbor suggests.

Poetry can also take many **forms** that dictate strict organization of ideas and of language. An abecedarian is a 26-line poem with the first line of the poem starting with the letter A and all of the following lines working through the alphabet until the final line begins with the letter Z.<sup>7</sup> A sestina is a 36-39-line poem that repeats the same 6 words in various patterns in each stanza.<sup>8</sup> An English-language haiku is a 3-line poem of 17 syllables.<sup>9</sup> In a concrete poem, the shape and appearance of the poem contribute to meaning as much as the words do.<sup>10</sup> Although academic writing may not have the same complex rules for repetition and syllable counts as formal poetry, analysis of poetry forces readers to question how ideas are put together and why the poet has chosen a specific form to convey their ideas, which in turn teaches us to question how other texts, from magazine articles to academic journals to print and television ads, are structured.

The villanelle form is composed of six stanzas: five tercets (three-line stanzas) and one quatrain (a four-line stanza). The form makes use of refrains by repeating the first and third lines of the first stanza in a specific pattern throughout the poem. The repetition of full lines allows poets to explore themes of obsession; these repeated lines turn into images that we cannot get out of our minds as we read and they can feel a bit haunting. In Maria Hummel's "[Letter to My Blackout](#)," the first tercet sets readers up for a lively, fun house party full of excess: "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound: / beneath the house, the kegs roll in; / the party flips its switches down."<sup>11</sup> The lines "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound" and "the party flips its switches down" become the refrains for the poem, and the repetition at first serves to emphasize the excess of alcohol consumed at the party. However, the repetition also allows Hummel to switch the tone of the poem halfway through; what starts as a joyful party where the speaker dances with a stranger becomes a terrifying and traumatic moment by the fourth and fifth tercets:

*Let's go, he says, upstairs now.  
My cup spills. My shirt is skin.  
Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound,*

*I won't. Get lucky. Get found. (Hummel, lines 10-13)*

The repetition of "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound" emphasizes the danger the speaker is in; because of the amount of alcohol those in attendance at the party have consumed, there is no one who will find her upstairs. In addition to using repetition to create haunting images, the villanelle (and other forms focused on repetition) also accommodates a conversational style of writing. In conversation, we often circle back to ideas and repeat ourselves. This creates the feeling that the speaker of the poem is speaking directly to the reader and builds a level of intimacy between speaker and reader. The repetition also creates a logical process for reading as we come to expect certain lines in specific places and draws our attention to the lines that do not repeat as well as to lines where the refrain is varied.

Other forms, like prose poetry, challenge our understanding of other genres. For example, on the surface, a prose poem looks like prose in the form of sentences and paragraphs without traditional line breaks and stanzas. When we look at prose, we have a set of expectations for the genre, such as a clearly defined subject, linear progression of ideas, and a sense of closure at the end; however, a prose poem dissolves the boundaries of genres and breaks down the rules and limits we've assigned to genres by combining the visual form of prose with poetic devices such as figurative language, alliteration, and repetition. Rather than providing linear organization and developed ideas, prose poetry is often elliptical and fragmentary. For example, Joy Harjo's poem "[Invisible Fish](#)," places images

7. For an example of an abecedarian, see Natalie Diaz's "[Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation](#)."

8. For an example of a sestina, see Elizabeth Bishop's "[Sestina](#)."

9. For an example of an English haiku, see Chinaka Hodge's "[Small Poems for Big](#)," which is comprised of twenty-four haiku honoring The Notorious B.I.G.

10. For an example of a concrete poem, see Marilyn Nelson's "[Fingers Remember](#)."

11. Hummel, Maria. "Letter to My Blackout." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150043/letter-to-my-blackout](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150043/letter-to-my-blackout).

of evolving fish learning to walk alongside images of humans coming ashore to “paint dreams on the dying stone” followed by images of Chevy trucks on the ocean floor.<sup>12</sup> The placement of these distinct images within the same paragraph causes readers to pause and consider how ancient images of hieroglyphics and modern images of automobiles relate to one another as well as how those human artifacts fit in with the images of the evolving fish. Harjo’s poem forces readers to reexamine the rules of genre by creating surprise in the narrative structure with the attention to language and the overlap of time periods. The prose poem also provides readers with a familiar framework, the sentence and the paragraph, that can be used to discuss abstract topics. When looking at “The Invisible Fish,” we do not have to analyze Harjo’s decisions regarding line breaks or rhyme schemes; instead, we can focus on the way the poem explores the interconnectedness of past and present, human and nonhuman.

During a panel on poetry and protest, Jericho Brown suggested that form creates an architecture for emotion.<sup>13</sup> The rules for a villanelle, haiku, sonnet, or any other form provide a structure for writers to explore topics that other genres often try to strip of emotion in a quest for objectivity; however, emotion is an important part of understanding the complexity of topics like race, gender, and sexuality. Because poets write using a different set of tools than scholars or journalists use, the analysis of poetry can help us look at topics from new angles. In “The Tradition,” Brown draws a parallel between flowers and John Crawford, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown and forces us to look at their deaths differently than a news article, a legal document, or a scholarly journal would. Similarly, Hummel’s “Letter to My Blackout” takes readers to a house party where a rape occurs and uses the villanelle’s repetition to create the loss of control, the fear, and the helplessness that are not captured in other genres.

When looking at longer texts, such as articles or books, we may not be able to give each individual word as much attention as we can when analyzing a 14-line poem; however, by embracing poetry’s lessons in looking, we can gain new ways of analyzing other texts. By learning to pay attention to diction, we can identify when writers of articles are using language intentionally to make our stomachs turn, our skin crawl, our blood boil. We can also learn to be more intentional with our own word choice in writing to create similar effects on our readers. Poetry teaches us to see deviations from Standard English—in language, grammar, and mechanics—as choices rather than mistakes; this lens allows us to look more critically at the use of language, grammar, and mechanics in other genres to understand how the authors are creating effects by straying from Standard English’s rules. This also provides us with new possibilities for our own writing by giving us permission to break from Standard English when the standard’s rules place limitations on our ability to communicate ideas effectively.

While poetry’s form often differs significantly from other genres, by learning to question why a poet chose a villanelle over an abecedarian or a prose poem instead of a haiku, we can learn to question how writers of other genres forge relationships between ideas through their choices in organization. As writers, we also become more conscious of our own choices in how we put ideas together. The analysis of poetry helps us become better critical readers, which in turn helps us become better critical writers. Academic writing can often be seen as formulaic and dry, but through analyzing poetry, we can learn to be more intentional in how we create meaning in any genre of writing.

## Discussion Questions

- Poetry is often seen as a genre of emotion. We usually don’t get much information about the author’s credentials and the majority of poems don’t include statistics or other data, so we’re forced to think about persuasion and rhetorical appeals in new ways. When research isn’t clearly cited or we know nothing about the author, what does credibility look like? Does credibility even matter in this genre of writing? When there is no data, what does an appeal to logic or reason look like?
- Poets like Bernadette Mayer often omit punctuation rather than following the rules of Standard English in order to create certain effects for the reader. Similarly, poets also add punctuation that goes against the rules of Standard English. For example,

12. Harjo, Joy. “Invisible Fish.” Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/101674/invisible-fish-swim-this-ghost-ocean](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/101674/invisible-fish-swim-this-ghost-ocean).

13. Brown, Jericho, Philip Metres, and Barbara Jane Reyes, panelists. “Poetry & Protest.” Literary Cleveland Inkubator Online Writing Conference, 16 July 2020.

in “The Tradition,” Jericho Brown uses periods rather than commas to separate items in a list in the lines: “Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium.” and “John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.” Similarly, in “Letter to My Blackout,” Hummel breaks up the first line of the fifth tercet with periods: “I won’t. Get lucky. Get found.” How do those choices affect the way we read those lines? How would we read them differently if Brown had chosen to use commas in the list instead or if Hummel had eliminated the periods after won’t and lucky?

- Form has been said to provide a structure for emotion; form is one way of making the abstract concrete. Read a sestina, such as Raych Jackson’s [“A sestina for a black girl who does not know how to braid hair,”](#) Randall Mann’s [“The Mortician in San Francisco,”](#) or William Meredith’s [“The Jain Bird Hospital in Delhi.”](#) What do you notice about the form? How does the meaning of individual words change with each repetition? How does the repetition affect the way you engage with the subject of the poem? What emotions come through in these poems?

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## PART IV

# EVALUATING WRITING



14.

# A SOCIOLINGUIST TEACHES EVALUATING LANGUAGE

Dr. Ho'omana Nathan Horton



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=42#audio-42-1>

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17 minute read

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn how to develop evaluative criteria for a piece of language (e.g. what makes a piece of writing “clear,” “engaging,” “convincing,” etc.). You’ll also learn how to use those criteria to support your evaluation of a piece of language. We’ll talk about evaluating language from the perspective of *sociolinguistics*, or the study of how society and language interact. By the end of this chapter, you’ll be ready to look at some language (a piece of writing), develop some criteria to evaluate it (is it good or bad, do I like it or not?), and write an evaluation which explains to your audience why you feel this way about this piece of language.

## Key Terms

Here are some terms from sociolinguistics that will help us to think about how and why we evaluate language:

- Language attitudes
- Stigmatized languages/dialects

In addition to these terms, you’ll see some in-text citations in this chapter. These indicate a reference to another piece of written work. Some common reasons these references are used in academic writing are to reference research that supports a claim (as in the first three citations below), or to give credit to the author of an excerpt included in the text (as with the excerpt from Young later in the

chapter). These typically look like the last name of the author(s) and the year of publication, both inside parentheses (an information-prominent citation), or the year of publication in parentheses after the author's name in the text (an author-prominent citation).

## Evaluating language

### Analyzing vs evaluating language

Research tells us that children as young as four years old can make a guess about where a speaker is from based on the way they talk (McCullough, Clopper, & Wagner, 2017). This is an example of **analyzing** language (see the previous section); we hear people speaking a certain way and learn or are told that those people are from a certain region. When we have enough examples of this, we hear someone speak, analyze the way they sound, and make a guess about where they might be from based on other people who sound like them.

But we don't just learn to analyze language from a very young age; **evaluating** language, especially spoken language, is a social practice that we learn from as early as four years old as well. Day (1980, 1982) and others have demonstrated that children as young as four develop and express positive or negative **language attitudes** about their own language, and the language of others. This means that they're not just saying "this speaker sounds like they come from that region," they're saying "this speaker sounds like they come from that region, AND that means that they sound good/bad, intelligent/unintelligent, lazy/hardworking, etc." This is an incredible cognitive ability to learn at such a young age!

However, it's crucial to know that there's nothing at all about any language or dialect that is naturally good/bad, intelligent/unintelligent, lazy/hardworking, or any other evaluation. From a linguistic perspective, all languages are equally useful for human communication, and any evaluations we make about languages or dialects are social judgments of the people who use those languages or dialects. But when a dominant group holds and expresses an evaluation of a group and the language they use, their language or dialect may become **stigmatized**, meaning that it's viewed as worse/less intelligent/lazier, etc. than other varieties.

Let's take a look at an example of a really useful feature of several American dialects that is also stigmatized. In "Standard American English," (in quotes because this is very hard to define as a variety, but typically refers to the language used predominantly by white Americans), the singular and plural version of the second-person pronoun are both *you*. So if I say to a classroom full of students "You forgot to turn in your homework," it's not clear whether I'm talking to one particular student, or to the whole class.

To clear up this ambiguity, many speakers of American English, especially users of African-American English and speakers from the Southern US, use the second-person plural pronoun *y'all*. To compare with the example above, "Y'all forgot to turn in your homework" makes it much clearer that I'm referring to more than one person. As you likely know, this is a pretty salient (well-known) marker of the speech of someone who's from the South. This means that if someone hears a speaker say *y'all*, they're likely to extrapolate that this person is from the Southern United States. This is a pretty reasonable **analysis**, especially if they notice other features of Southern English.

However, many listeners (especially if they're not from this region) may hear this feature, recognize it as Southern English, and make an **evaluation** about that speaker. Recall that evaluations of a speaker's language are always an evaluation of the speaker. In the United States, evaluations of Southern English tend to be negative and associated with slower speech and thought, ignorance, and less education, although interestingly, these features (and thus their speakers) are also commonly associated with being humble and polite (Hayes, 2013).

This example has hopefully helped you to see the difference between the **analysis** that a speaker who uses *y'all* may be from the South, and a positive/negative **evaluation** about the word *y'all* and, by extension, the speaker (or writer) and their group/region of origin. With this distinction in mind, we'll move on to how we can first develop concrete criteria for evaluating language (especially writing), and then how we can apply these criteria to a piece of writing and share our evaluation with an audience.

## Developing criteria for evaluation

Let's return to our *y'all* example for a minute. Despite being associated with lazy thinking and speaking, *y'all* actually fills a "hole" in the grammatical system of "Standard English" pronouns, and can help reduce ambiguity. Thus, we can see that a negative evaluation of *y'all* and other Southern American English features probably isn't based on the criterion of linguistic "usefulness". If anything, *y'all* can make one's speaking and writing clearer! Before we start developing criteria for evaluating a piece of writing, let's think about evaluations that we might already make about language, and what the criteria are for those evaluations.

We'll stick with *y'all*: if you read the following sentence in an academic essay, would you say it was an example of "good" writing or "bad" writing? Would you say it's "clear"? Would you say it's "appropriate" in this context? Why or why not? Take a look at the sentence, then take a minute to brainstorm some adjectives you might use to describe this sentence and, importantly, think about **why** you'd choose those adjectives to describe the sentence.

Although Standard American English is implicitly expected by many in academia, *y'all* do have a right to use your own variety of English in writing assignments for this course and beyond.

You may have had an immediate reaction to this sentence, especially to the word *y'all* in an academic essay, and this is completely expected; remember that we learn at a very young age to both analyze and evaluate language. Just like you have an immediate reaction to this sentence, you have similar reactions to other things that you hear and read. We like some things that we read, and we don't like others. We describe some writing as good, and some as bad. The goal of this chapter is to first acknowledge that evaluations we make about language are subjective, meaning that not everyone will evaluate language in the same way, or based on the same criteria, and then to articulate the criteria that we use to evaluate pieces of writing.

In this chapter, we'll focus on evaluating "academic writing," which I put in quotes because this is a very broad category which could include such diverse genres as lab reports, annotated bibliographies, argumentative essays, and research writing. However, for this chapter, we'll consider these categories together, as pieces of writing which share similar communicative goals, namely, to communicate a process, concept, or argument in a clear, detailed way, to a specific audience.

## Evaluating academic writing

Before we can evaluate a piece of academic writing, we'll need to consider what a piece of academic writing **should** do, and the strategies that can be used to accomplish this goal. To put it another way, you'll use what you've learned in the excellent chapters about **analyzing** writing to clearly describe what strategies are used in a piece of writing and whether those strategies accomplish the goals of the author. In order to make this exercise easier, I'll give you three terms you can use to evaluate a piece of academic writing, although you could certainly evaluate academic writing through many other perspectives as well. Is this piece of academic writing:

1. Clear?
2. Engaging?
3. Convincing?

It's important to note that you can define these terms however you'd like. That's the subjective element of evaluating a piece of writing. It's also crucial to remember that different audiences may evaluate academic writing differently. For example, a piece of writing that's clear, engaging, and convincing to someone working in Molecular Biology may not be any of those things to a person working in Art History. This is why it's essential to keep in mind the audience of the piece of writing.

What might make a piece of academic writing clear? What makes it engaging? What makes it convincing? Let's try applying these terms to the example sentence above containing *y'all*. Is the sentence clear? Why or why not? Does the use of features of a stigmatized dialect of English affect the clarity (positively or negatively)? Is the sentence engaging? Does it make you interested in the argument and want to keep reading the piece? Does the sentence help to convince you of the author's argument?

Again, these are all questions which have no right answer: you may feel that the sentence is unclear, uninteresting, and

unconvincing, but it's crucial that you be able to explain to your audience **why** you feel this way, using the criteria that you develop for what makes a piece of academic writing clear, engaging, and convincing.

Before moving on to the next section, go ahead and develop, then write down a few criteria for what makes a piece of academic writing clear, engaging, and convincing. In your opinion, what kind of strategies do academic authors use who write clear, engaging, and convincing work? If you have some academic writing you've recently read that you feel meets those criteria, you may want to take a look at that for inspiration as you develop your list of criteria.

## Applying criteria for evaluation

Now that you've had some practice developing criteria to evaluate a piece of academic writing, let's try applying it to something longer than a sentence. Below is an excerpt from an academic essay by professor and scholar Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010) entitled "Should Writers Use They Own English?" In this essay, Young is responding to an article by cultural critic Dr. Stanley Fish (2009), who had written an article entitled "What Should Colleges Teach." The opening quote from Young's article comes from Fish's article (note the in-text citation).

"If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, 'I have a right to my own language,' reply, 'Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I'm here to teach you another one.' (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it." (Fish "Part 3")

Besides encouraging teachers to be snide and patronizing, Fish flat out confusin (I would say he lyin, but Momma say be nice). You cant start off sayin, "disabuse yo'self of the notion that students have a right to they dialect" and then say to tell students: "Y'all do have a right." That be hypocritical. It further disingenuous of Fish to ask: "Who could object to learning a second language?" What he really mean by this rhetorical question is that the "multiculturals" should be thrilled to leave they own dialect and learn another one, the one he promote. If he meant everybody should be thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldnt everybody be learnin everybody's dialect? Wouldnt we all become multidialectal and pluralingual? And that's my exact argument, that we all should know everybody's dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication.

See, dont nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mix the dialect they learn at home with whateva other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That's how we understand accents; that's how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It's how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago or any other regional background. We hear that background in they speech, and it's often expressed in they writin too. It's natural. (Young, 2010)

It's likely that this piece of academic writing looks quite different from others that you've read, and it's also likely that you had some immediate reaction about whether this writing is clear, engaging, or convincing. However, remember that if we want our own evaluation to be clear, engaging, and convincing, it's important to not just react, but to articulate our evaluation based on clearly-defined criteria. Let's apply the criteria you developed for the three terms on which we're evaluating this piece.

## Clear

Is Young's writing clear? Are you able to understand what he's saying? Why or why not? How do the features of a variety of English (with which you may or may not be familiar) affect your ability to follow his argument? How about the structure of his argument? Does it progress in a way that's understandable to you?

## Engaging

Is Young's writing engaging? If so, what about is it is engaging? Does the use of his own variety of English in academic writing make it more engaging, or make you less interested in reading the piece? How about the way he responds to Fish?

## Convincing

What is Young's main argument here? Are you convinced by Young's argument? What strategies does he use to try and convince the audience? What lower-level strategies does he use (e.g. specific words, punctuation, grammar)? What broader argumentative strategies does he use?

Although this is a useful practice for evaluating writing, you can develop other criteria for evaluating any piece of writing you'd like! For example, you might evaluate whether a piece of fiction is well-written, entertaining, and interesting. The important thing to remember is that what constitutes each of those terms is subjective (up to you), and that you can and should develop specific criteria for what makes a piece of writing each of those things.

## Writing up your evaluation

Now you've had the chance to develop criteria for evaluating writing, and to apply those criteria to a piece of writing. In this final section, I'll discuss a few strategies for writing up your evaluation of a piece of writing. First, it's important to keep in mind that your criteria are subjective. What's clear, engaging, and convincing for one audience may be the opposite for another if they have different criteria. Your goal in writing up your evaluation is to express to your readers why you feel that this piece of writing is (or is not) interesting, effective, etc.

In order to express your evaluation to your readers, it's crucial that you clearly define how you're evaluating the writing and the criteria you're applying. One successful organizational strategy is to use an introductory paragraph where you tell the audience the terms you're using to evaluate a piece of writing. Then, devote each following paragraph to one of those terms and, before diving into the evaluation, explain to your audience the criteria you used.

Another crucial strategy for supporting your evaluation is to use direct examples of the language to explain your evaluation. Let's go back to the example of the word *y'all*. I may make the claim that the use of the second-person plural pronoun *y'all* is clearer than the use of the less-stigmatized *you*. In order to demonstrate this, I've shown a sentence where the less-stigmatized variant leaves some ambiguity that *y'all* may not as in the example "**you** forgot to turn in your homework" vs "**y'all** forgot to turn in your homework."

Similarly, when you evaluate a piece of writing, you'll want to include examples from the text that support your evaluation. For example, if you argue that Young's (2010) essay above is not clear because his use of African-American English is hard to follow for those unfamiliar with the variety, you may include a sentence which uses features from this variety that were particularly challenging for you to follow.

One final strategy for writing a successful and convincing evaluation is to write confidently about your evaluation. Although your evaluation is subjective, when you have well-defined criteria and use evidence from the piece of writing to support your evaluation, you can write your evaluation boldly. For example, a common tendency for new academic writers is to "hedge" their evaluation by saying things like "I think that Young's article is unclear because." Because you're the author, we know that this is your opinion, and because you've given us the criteria by which you're evaluating, we know that this is your claim. A more confident way to word this evaluation might be "Young's article is unclear because of his use of..."

## Conclusion

Throughout your academic career, whether or not you are assigned an evaluative writing assignment, you will be evaluating language,

both spoken and written. Remember that in fact, all of us learn to analyze and evaluate language from as early as the age of four! Evaluating language is a central part of understanding the language and the people that we read and hear. What this chapter has aimed to do is give you the skills to develop specific criteria for evaluating language, and to express your evaluation in a way that helps you and others to better understand and communicate with one another.

## Discussion Questions

- Think of a time when you evaluated someone's language use, or when your own language use was evaluated. This could be spoken language, informal communication like a text message, or a piece of classroom writing.
    - What was the analysis that led to that evaluation?
    - What were the criteria for the evaluation?
    - How did the audience and communicative goals affect the evaluation?
  - In this chapter, we talked about evaluating academic writing in terms of whether it's "clear, engaging, and convincing."
    - Try coming up with three more ways in which we could evaluate academic writing.
    - Try coming up with three terms you could use to evaluate another type of writing with which you're familiar (e.g. fiction, news writing, emails, etc.).
  - Once you've identified the three ways you'd like to evaluate a piece of writing, try using the following questions (substituting your own terms) to come up with criteria:
    - I believe a piece of writing being clear means...
    - I believe an engaging piece of writing has...
    - I believe a convincing piece of writing is...
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15.

# A FILM SCHOLAR TEACHES EVALUATIVE WRITING

Graig Uhlin

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[AFilmScholarTeachesEvaluativeWriting.\\_print](#)

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

Evaluation is a common practice in media consumption. We routinely judge, rank, and rate films, television shows, and other media as good or bad, as worth watching or not. In this chapter, we will consider strategies for evaluating film that go beyond the subjective opinions of the viewer. This involves an approach to media that is object-oriented (emphasizing textual meaning) rather than viewer-oriented (emphasizing personal reactions). The chapter introduces the critical practice of identifying textual functions as a means of understanding the expressive aims of a film. It then stresses the importance of considering form when evaluating media and offers a comparative example of one particular formal element of film, known as *mise en scène*. On reading this chapter, students are invited to consider standards of evaluation that extend beyond like and dislike.

## Key Terms

- Function
- Convention
- *Mise en scène*

Did you like the movie? We've all heard this question, uttered as people leave a theater or close Netflix. Much of our interaction with media is structured around liking things. Are the thumbs up or down? Is the tomato fresh or rotten? Like, comment, subscribe! Netflix, YouTube, and other streaming services are continually modifying their recommendation algorithms so that they better

deliver content they think you will like. In fact, the entire media industry is devoted to being able to predict whether audiences will like something or not.

The likability standard is a common one, then, when evaluating film – or other types of moving-image media such as television, video games, and social media – but is it a useful one? It has its limitations. First, one’s personal taste is, by definition, subjective. Just because you liked something does not mean that I will. You might want a film to tell a compelling story; I might be more interested in its visuals. You might need the film to be realistic; I might prefer more fantastical material. Our definitions of what constitutes a “good” movie, therefore, might be quite far apart, with no way to arbitrate this difference. No wonder Netflix allows for multiple profiles on the same account!

The problem with using enjoyment as our metric is that saying you liked something ultimately tells us more about you than it does about the media object itself. It tells us what you find interesting, suspenseful, scary, or boring, but those are labels that you attach to a film, not some intrinsic property of it. Nothing is inherently boring; it is always boring *to someone*.

A second limitation of the likability standard is that it privileges the familiar. What we have liked in the past we will continue to like, and these repeated consumption habits can overlook content that is different or challenging. Like or dislike are poor metrics for the variety of media texts, which may be intentionally uncomfortable, informative, intriguing, ambiguous, complex, objectionable, or obscure. A critic must be attuned and open to what responses the text wants to provoke or experiences it wants to express.

How do we evaluate film, if we want to move past liking and enjoyment as our criteria? Valuable criticism means engaging with a film on its own terms. It is generally not viewer-oriented (emphasizing personal reactions) but object-oriented (emphasizing textual meaning). The goal is to make sense of the media text you’ve just watched, even if you find it unpleasurable or confusing.

Film studies has developed useful concepts for evaluating moving-image texts, two of which I will discuss in this chapter. The first is textual function, which Russian formalist critics introduced in the early 20th century for the study of literature. An emphasis on function, which describes the intended effect of a textual device, keeps our focus on the text rather than on the responses of viewers. The second is the formal element of *mise en scène*, which refers to the non-cinematographic aspects of staging a scene. We will consider *mise en scène* as part of a broader demonstration of how to critically evaluate a film.

#### FUNCTION: What a Film Does

To understand the concept of textual function, let’s consider a specific example. In the opening scene of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Vivre sa Vie/My Life to Live* (1962), the protagonist, Nana, sits with her husband at the counter of a Paris café as she tells him that she is leaving him to become an actress. In filming this scene, Godard places the camera behind his actors, so we only see the backs of their heads. This should strike us as unusual. The beginning of a film typically introduces its main character, but here we are prevented from seeing her face throughout the scene. What is the purpose of this atypical choice of framing? In other words, what is its function? Function names what a textual element, such as this specific camera placement, *does* rather than necessarily what it *means*. It is what justifies the presence of a textual device. Does it provide us with story information or reveal something about a character? Does it develop a theme or convey a mood? In our example from Godard’s film, the function of his camera placement is to forestall the viewer’s identification with the character. Rather than losing ourselves in the fiction, we are reminded of the artifice of filmmaking, since the unexpected position of the camera reminds us of its presence. Godard instructs the viewer not to approach Nana as a “realistic” character, but one who will be inscrutable; it will be difficult to figure out what motivates her or what she is thinking.



We can imagine some viewer dismissing this formal choice as “bad” filmmaking. You can’t see the actress’s face! Viewers have come to expect that a film will foster identification with the main character. We want characters to be “relatable.” However, if the intention is to prevent this identification with the character, then it hardly makes sense to find a film like *Vivre sa Vie* lacking on this account. Evaluative criticism, in other words, needs to meet a film on its own terms. Rather than imposing our own expectations about what a film should do, we must be receptive to its intentions and consider how well it achieves those aims.

Learning to recognize functions reorients your attention to commonly used formal techniques. When a textual device is consistently associated with a specific function, this is what we call a convention, or, when it becomes overused, a cliché. Some conventions are so widely used that they are simply accepted as part of the vocabulary of filmmaking; for example, a dissolve between two shots indicates a lapse of time. That an actor should face the camera is such a fundamental convention that perhaps we did not even perceive it as one until Godard violated it.

Conventions develop as creative practitioners – directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, actors, etc. – not only borrow from previous films but also innovate new forms. Consider, for example, the convention of parallel editing, where the film alternates between two spatially separate events that the viewer understands as happening at the same time. Before this convention trained audiences to see successive actions as temporally simultaneous, films used other formal strategies that look strange to contemporary viewers. The early silent film *Life of an American Fireman* (Edwin Porter, 1903) repeated the same story event twice from different perspectives. In one shot, filmed from the smoke-filled interior of a burning building, we see a rescue ladder appear in the window and a fireman enter to carry a mother and child to safety. In the next shot, we see the same action again, but this time from a point of view outside of the building. The filmmaker repeated the event because it was assumed that audiences would be confused by alternating between both perspectives.

Parallel editing addresses simultaneous actions in a different way, by cutting between them. This technique has become a standard feature of film narration, which means filmmakers can rely on viewers’ knowledge of the conventional meaning and innovate different uses of it. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), the director utilizes parallel editing for a scene that depicts an FBI raid on the presumed location of the serial killer Buffalo Bill. Demme alternates between shots inside the house where Bill silences his female captive and outside the house as the agents surround the location. When Bill opens the front door, however, he finds only FBI agent Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster). The other agents were raiding the wrong house. Demme has played with our assumptions, using a familiar convention to lead us astray and then surprise us with an unexpected conclusion. Therefore, beyond simply enjoying the trick, a knowledgeable viewer will recognize how Demme utilizes a familiar convention in a new way.

The evaluation of film often requires us to consider how conventions change over time. When we judge a film as artistically praiseworthy or formally innovative, we do so with an awareness of how it modifies established conventions. Professional critics, for instance, see a lot of movies, and this makes them better equipped to contextualize a film’s formal choices within a director’s other work or other films in the same genre, or within the broader narrational modes and formal strategies that appear across the history of the medium.

To summarize, evaluative criticism is a critical engagement with media that is not limited to determinations of good or bad, like or

dislike. An object-oriented criticism takes its cues from the film itself as to its intended functions, and it seeks criteria for evaluation that are not based in the personal reactions of viewers. What criteria might this include?

- **Effectivity:** What are the intended effects of a scene or of a film generally? How efficiently and effectively does it achieve those aims? We might find good reason to criticize an action film with unimaginative action set pieces or a musical with substandard musical numbers. Although viewers may disagree about what is frightening and what is not, we can still evaluate how competently a horror film achieves its scares.
- **Originality:** Does a film carry out its textual functions in a unique or unexpected way? Does the film utilize unconventional expressive means for its intended effects? We can evaluate a film in part based on the degree to which it breaks existing conventions or creates new ones.
- **Complexity:** Does the film produce textual devices that carry out multiple functions? Does the film create ambiguity, allowing for differing interpretations of the story? Does the film layer meaning, as for example, when an actor's line delivery or subtle gestures suggest something other than the explicit meaning of their dialogue? A complex film will create a density of meaning that often rewards multiple viewings.

Let's note that, while these criteria help us to move past a viewer-oriented criticism, they are not universally applicable. Take for example a film like Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998). This film is a shot-for-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock's famous thriller *Psycho* (1960). Van Sant cast new actors and shot in color, but except for these and a few other changes, his film is a nearly identical recreation of the earlier version. Is this film original? Nope! Originality as a standard for evaluation doesn't work for this creative act of imitation. The film divided critics, many of whom could not see the point of Van Sant's copying, but by confronting that question of *why*, object-oriented criticism can meet a film on its own terms and potentially expand our understanding of the artistic medium.



To cite another example, consider Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964). The film is an 8-hour shot of the Empire State Building from dusk to the early hours of the night. Apart from the lights of the building switching on, nothing happens. There are no characters or story, the camera never moves, and the shot never changes. Is this film complex? Definitely not! But complexity is not relevant to Warhol's provocative gesture of confronting his viewer with an unchanging image for hours. Why would he create such a purposefully boring movie? This is what criticism can tell us if it is open to the idea that the art of film is dedicated to more than just enjoyment. Evaluative criticism needs to apply standards of evaluation that fit the object under scrutiny.

#### *MISE EN SCÈNE*: Considering Form

If tasked with evaluating a film, then, where does one begin? Casual viewers, including undergraduates in a composition class, tend to focus on narrative. Was the story engaging? Were the characters interesting? This attention to story, however, often causes us to overlook form. If narrative refers to the *what* of the story, then form refers to the *how*.

To achieve any textual function, a filmmaker must determine the means of expression. Should the conversation between two characters be presented in a single take or through an edited sequence of separate shots? Should the camera move in this scene, and if so, in what way? A film is nothing more than the end-result of thousands of decisions about what form it should take depending on what meanings it intends to express. Different choices lead to different effects. Moreover, film has properties that are unique to it as an artistic medium which distinguish it from literature, theater, or any other artform. When evaluating film form, we should ask to

what extent and in what manner a film is making use of these formal elements, including editing, cinematography, and sound-image relations.

Let's focus on one specific formal element: *mise en scène*. *Mise en scène* is a term that French film critics borrowed from theater, and it is now widely used in film studies. Literally meaning "to place onto the stage," it is used to refer to all those components of a film image (called a "shot") that are physically present when staging a scene. This would include the sets, costumes and makeup, props, lighting, staging (the arrangement of actors within the frame), and performance (the vocal and gestural aspects of acting). It does not include cinematographic elements such as framing, camera movement, or editing. If you were standing next to the camera during filming, all components of the *mise en scène* would be visible to you, but optical effects like a dissolve would not be. *Mise en scène* is one of the tools for conveying meaning available to filmmakers, and we can evaluate films based on the effectivity, originality, and complexity (or other standards!) of their use of this formal element.

A film's *mise en scène* is unique to it, so direct comparisons can be tricky, but as an illustrative example, let's examine how two directors stage the same scene between an original film and its remake. The scene in question comes from the film *Imitation of Life*, which was first adapted from Fannie Hurst's novel by director John Stahl in 1934 and then again by director Douglas Sirk in 1959. The story features a young Black woman (named Peola in the 1934 film and Sarah Jane in the 1959 version) whose light skin tone allows her to pass as white. By passing, she can pursue professional opportunities and personal relationships that would otherwise be prohibited to her because of her race. However, doing so also requires that she renounce her mother (Delilah, then Annie) whose presence "outs" her as Black. This is what happens in our chosen scene: Peola/Sarah Jane has secured a job but has not told her mother. Looking for her, her mother shows up at her place of employment, causing her to lose her job once her racial identity is revealed. By examining how each director stages the same story event, we can evaluate their use of *mise en scène* to express meaning.

A full analysis is not possible in this short chapter, so let's focus on a few revealing differences. In the 1934 version, Peola works as a hostess at a restaurant. Positioned behind a sale counter, she is conservatively dressed. Her facial expressions and body language indicate a friendly demeanor until Delilah enters the establishment. In the 1959 film, Sarah Jane has a different occupation. Though she told her mother that she had a "respectable job" at the library, she actually works as a lounge singer in a seedy club. The scene presents her scantily clad on a small stage performing a song for male customers shown staring at her lasciviously. Whereas the lighting in the restaurant was even, brightly lighting the interior, the lighting in the club has deep shadows. In both versions, the young woman denies knowing her mother and pretends that the woman must be "crazy."



What conclusions can we draw from these changes in the setting, costuming, and lighting? Sirk's staging, we might argue, better develops the film's theme of racial passing, since the visual presentation of Sarah Jane's job as a showgirl (as opposed to Peola's) depends on soliciting male attention through the visual display of her (seemingly white) body. In the Stahl film, it is only the fact of Peola having a job at issue, so the staging plays a minimal role thematically, but in the Sirk version, it is more clearly established how Sarah Jane's desire for social advancement depends on her ability to appear as a white woman. There are moral implications to this staging as well. Sirk's version raises the stakes of Sarah Jane's renunciation of her mother by suggesting the moral depravity of the world into which she has escaped.



Another significant contrast concerns each scene's depiction of Delilah/Annie. In both versions, this maternal figure is caring and virtuous, but in Stahl's version Delilah lacks agency. When Peola denies knowing her, Delilah says nothing and lowers her head in painful suffering from the insult. She is accompanied to the restaurant by her employer Beatrice Pullman, and it is this woman who reproaches Peola for her denial of her mother. In the Sirk film, Annie confronts Sarah Jane herself, and rather than being silent, proudly and assertively claims her daughter as her own. Moreover, Sirk utilizes aspects of the setting to visually express the shifting dramatic conflict of the scene. Slated screens separate characters in the frame. Annie is first shown watching Sarah Jane's performance through one, and when she announces herself as her mother, a screen is used to divide Sarah Jane from her male companion. This visible dividing line reinforces the viewer's perception that this interracial romance is now over.

The important point to emphasize is that Sirk's subtle and thoughtful use of *mise en scène* amplifies the underlying meaning of the scene. By means of the choices he makes, Sirk revises the racial politics of the earlier film. Peola's racial passing is a narrative of tragic suffering, but the 1959 film's depiction of Sarah Jane assists in its criticism of a racially segregated society. The same story expressed in a different form can result in radically different meanings. Evaluative criticism, therefore, benefits from a close attention to film's formal elements.

As this chapter has emphasized, evaluation is closely related to the analysis or interpretation of texts. Evaluation involves the identification of standards or criteria for determining the relative quality of a film or other media text, but it derives those standards not from the personal taste of the viewer. Instead, evaluation considers the intended aims of the film (its textual functions) and judges how it utilizes the formal properties of the medium to achieve those aims. It seeks to understand how a film's use of form fits within established conventions to assess its originality and inventiveness.

## Discussion Questions

- What are possible criteria, apart from like or dislike, by which viewers can assess the quality of a film?
- What are some basic formal conventions in film that you are familiar with from your own viewing? What is an example of a film that modifies, breaks, or uses a convention in a unique way?
- What is an example of a significant or noteworthy use of *mise en scène* from a film?

## About the author



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16.

# A LIBRARIAN TEACHES EVALUATING INFORMATION

Holly Reiter

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- How to distinguish between different types of web sources
- Strategies for fact-checking popular information sources found on the web
- Ways to evaluate information for bias, scope, and relevancy

## Key Terms

- Popular information sources
- Mis/disinformation
- Confirmation bias

## Popular information sources

The ways that information is packaged and shared online is constantly evolving. Social media as we understand it today (like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat) did not exist 20 years ago. Today, we are bombarded with information in so many formats that it can quickly become overwhelming and impossible to keep up with. As you are reading this chapter, there may be new forms of information being developed and shared that didn't exist yet when we were writing it. Much (though not all) of what you encounter on the web daily are what we call *popular information sources*, i.e., information written for a general, popular audience. They are intended to be easily accessed and understood by anyone who might happen across them. While the web is made up of websites term “websites” is too broad for what we want you to think about when you evaluate information. Information can be found on government sites, organizational sites, blogs, social media, apps, news organizations, retailers, and many more. When you are online,

it is important to pay attention to *what kind* of website you are visiting, especially when fact-checking, as that can tell you a lot about the intention, expertise, and credibility of the information being presented. In the past, when information had to be accessed in print forms (like a physical copy of newspaper, or a pamphlet from a charity organization), it was easier to tell what type of source you were looking at. On the web, we have lost a lot of the visual clues that help us identify information source types. That is why when fact-checking and evaluating information, it is important to look at more than just the package it comes in (and yes, that includes looking beyond .com, .org, and .gov).

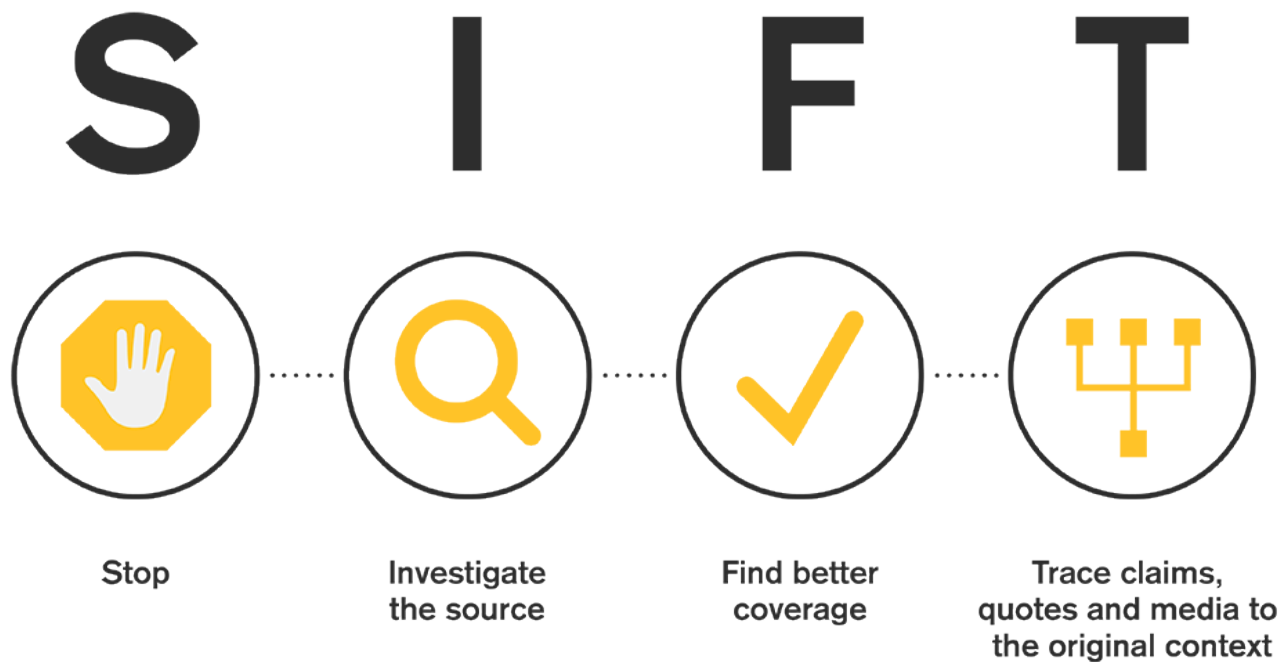
## Fact-checking information

In recent years, the topic of “fake news” has been widely talked about. The term “fake news” is used in many different contexts, and it’s meaning often shifts depending on who is using it. It is not a concept that can be easily defined. Instead of calling something “fake news,” we should look at terms that more specifically define what kind of information we’re looking at, and how or why it is misleading.

The most common types of false or inaccurate information we see on the web falls under one of two headings: *misinformation* or *disinformation*. Misinformation is used to describe information that is unintentionally false, such as a mistaken statistic or if someone takes a satirical story seriously. While the information may be inaccurate, the person creating or sharing that information was not intentionally trying to mislead people. Disinformation, on the other hand, is false information that was intended to mislead, manipulate, or lie. Both terms can refer to information that is completely made up, or information that is edited or changed, such as manipulated photos or videos.

When confronted with potentially false or misleading information, we want to develop habits and skills to evaluate what we’re seeing and determine if we can trust it or not. To do that, we’re going to go over a method of fact-checking called SIFT.

SIFT is a series of moves developed by Mike Caulfield to critically examine information on the web for accuracy and reliability. The letters stand for Stop; Investigate the source; Find trusted coverage; and Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original source.



We will go through each of these moves in detail, and share tools and tricks you can use in your fact-checking process. Before we do that, however, we want to make it clear that this is not a checklist approach like you may have encountered before. Information is a lot more complicated than that. You won't always go through each move in the same order every time, and you may circle around and repeat moves in your fact-checking process.

## Move 1: Stop

Much of the mis/disinformation you encounter online is designed to play into your emotions: people want you to get angry, sad, or happy, because that means you're more likely to interact with that information in some way, such as commenting or responding on a post, or by sharing the story online or talking about it with friends and family. That's why the first move is to stop. When you encounter new information online, stop and pay attention to several things:

- What kind of emotional you are having, if any
- Where this information is being shared, and by whom
- The context around the information, such as what form the information takes (i.e., a tweet, a news story, a blog post), if images or videos are also present, and if people are already interacting with it and how
- What kind of bias you are bringing to the information

Stopping in this way lets you do several things. First, it allows you to resist the temptation to immediately share or repeat something based on an immediate emotional response. Second, it gives you a chance to consider the source of the information: is it someone you trust to share good information, or is it on a website you've never been to? Third, it encourages you to pay attention to the context in addition to the information itself. For example, if it is a Twitter post, you know that it is going to have to meet their character limit—which means that by nature it has to be short and succinct, and may not contain all the relevant information. You might also notice if it has been shared a lot and by whom, or if people have commented on it and what they have to say. Finally, you take the time to consider your own biases: do you want to accept or reject that information because of your own preexisting beliefs? Or because it confirms or differs from your own opinion?

All of these things force you to slow down and not accept what you see at face value. It also gives you a chance to make note of things that are worth investigating further as you progress with your fact-checking.

## Move 2: Investigate the source

The next step you might take is to investigate the source. From the previous move, you should have stopped and paid attention to where the information was posted or share, and who was doing it. It's possible you already know something about the source, such as if it is a trusted website or a writer known for sharing hyper-partisan content. If that's the case, you can use your previous knowledge and experience to determine if and how you should use the information. On the web, though, it is common to end up an unfamiliar or new website. In this case, you will want to dig in to learn more about that website, news organization, or person, etc.

One great way to do this is to use Wikipedia to learn more about the source. To do this, you simply type the name of the person, website, or organization into Google or another search engine, and add the term "wikipedia" to the end of your search. For example, you might type "Vox wikipedia" or "Washington Post wikipedia" (without the quotation marks).

You can then use the Wikipedia page to look for details about the source. If it is a person, look for things like education, employment, publications, and if they're affiliated with groups, movements, or organizations. If it is a website, news site, or other type of organization, look for things like how they are funded, if there is a history of controversy or questionable practices, and if they are known to have a bias.

Finding out more information about *where* or *who* information is coming from enables you to make a more informed choice about what to do: whether that means to trust that information, try to find information somewhere else, or keep digging. Remember, too,

that just because information has a perceivable bias does not automatically make it *bad*. Knowing what that bias is simply helps you determine how to interpret that information, and if it is appropriate for your needs.

### Move 3: Find trusted coverage

When you want to determine if information you have found online is trustworthy, one of the best steps you can take is to verify that information in multiple sources—better yet if those sources are independent of each other (meaning they are not just citing the same source). You will want to see if you can find multiple places that report the same thing, and be sure to check places you are familiar with and know are trustworthy, like major news organizations such as NPR, New York Times, or CNN. Look for a consensus across multiple sources, a history of the issue or claim, and any additional context that will help you better understand the information.

Many people and organizations today are tracking mis/disinformation, so you can also check fact-checking websites like [Snopes](#), [PolitiFact](#), and [FactCheck.org](#) to see if someone else has already done the work of investigating the information.

### Move 4: Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original source

With the ease of creating and spreading information online, a lot of what we see is taken out of context: a photo pulled from a Google image search without knowing the details of where it was taken or uploaded, a clip from an interview missing important details, or a image of a social media post that never actually existed are all examples of ways that different kind of media and quotes can be used to show false evidence and lend credibility to mis/disinformation stories. A lot of the tools you already use on a daily basis can be used to trace media. For example, you can paste a link for a photo into a [reverse Google Image](#) search or upload a photo to [TinEye](#) to look for the same or similar photos. This is a great way to find where an image originated or where it has been used. To look for videos, use apps like [Youtube](#). And of course, you can look for original social media posts on the sites where they came from, but it is always possible that posts have been deleted. To look for older versions of websites, you can use the [Wayback Machine](#), a website that archives pages on the web.

## Bias, scope, and relevancy

### Bias

In the previous section, we mentioned the word “bias” multiple times. The term bias, like “fake news” is used a lot, and people don’t always mean the same thing when they talk about bias. In this case, we want you to think of bias as the experiences, beliefs, and purpose of a creator or source that could influence what they write, create, or share. *Everyone* has bias, and bias on it’s own is not inherently a bad thing. It is when that bias is used *against* other people or ideas that it becomes a problem. When our own biases lead us to automatically believe information that supports our pre-existing beliefs, or to reject information that contradicts our beliefs, that is what is called *confirmation bias*. This is why the first move in our fact-checking, listed above, is to stop and pay attention to the biases of people who wrote or shared the information, and to our own biases. Just because a source (or you!) have a bias does not automatically make it bad. Consider, for example, the fact that Barilla, a company that makes pasta, [funded research](#) that [news organizations claimed](#) proved that eating more pasta could help you lose weight. It is quite possible that the science behind the research is sound, but you would still want to know if this potential bias existed.

### Scope

Another key thing to examine when evaluating any information source is the scope. The scope of a source refers to what kind of and how much information it is trying to impart. This is influenced most heavily by the format a source takes. Consider how much longer

books are than news articles. A book's scope is much broader—it can cover a lot more detail than a news article, which is trying to be succinct and convey the most important information. Now think about the difference between a news article and a tweet. Social media platforms in general are not designed for a lot of detail, so even regardless of a user's intention, they are going to be limited in what they are able to convey in that format.

## Relevancy

One final aspect to examine when evaluating information is the relevancy. If an information source has passed all the moves from your fact-checking, some final questions to ask yourself are:

- What perspective is being presented?
- What does this information add to your knowledge and understanding of the topic?
- How can you use it to demonstrate or prove your points?

## Discussion Questions

- Locate a web source that is relevant to your writing topic, or find a social media post that makes some kind of claim or assertion. Evaluate it using the SIFT steps. Describe your process of completing each step. When you have completed your evaluation, reflect on the entire process: which parts were easy or challenging? What is your final assessment of the source you found?
- What kind of “information bias” do you have? Are you more likely to access, consume, or believe content made available through certain websites or organizations? Do your preferences change depending what information you need or what you need to use it for? How so? Do you feel that your preferences are justified, or do you think you should seek out other sources of information? Explain your reasoning.
- How do you feel about using information that you find through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media? How could you determine the authority of an author who posts something online through social media?

## About the author



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17.

# A SPORTS RHETORICIAN TEACHES EVALUATION

Dr. Josiah Meints

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter you will learn about the process of developing criteria and how we need to pay attention to both communal and personal expectations about a topic. All evaluation is guided by a set of criteria or expectations, and many of those expectations are created by the community that engages with a topic. However, it is up to the evaluator to revise, apply, and explain those criteria in a way that is clear to the audience, even if the audience ends up disagreeing with the evaluator.

## Key Terms

- Criteria
- Secondary sources

## Evaluation

### Criteria

In sports fandom, there are a lot of debates. Debates about which team is playing better, which player deserves what award, how rules should be applied or changed, what a team's uniforms should look like, and countless others. Sometimes these debates can be

resolved easily or can achieve a sort of consensus among fans, but more often than not, fans will continue to disagree on what they think about their teams or sports.

One less serious debate that rarely reaches a consensus is about which athlete is the Greatest of All Time in their sport or even in all sports. The Greatest of All Time or GOAT conversation rarely resolves because fans typically don't value the same things. Some fans watch sports for the excitement of a close game, while some want their team to crush every opponent and the outcome of the game is never in doubt. Some fans track stats while others respond more to well-structured narratives. In GOAT discussions, Fans have a tough time agreeing because they have different expectations of what a GOAT should be. In fact, more often than not, the GOAT debate is usually just as much about the *criteria* we use to define the GOAT as it is about who fits that *criteria*. This is true of other similar debates about the best album of the year, best restaurant in town, or best video game console. Creating good criteria for these conversations is almost a bigger task than deciding which person, album, restaurant, or console fulfills them.

So if criteria are so important to these conversations, what exactly are they?

When we talk about criteria, we often think about them as strict rules, and sometimes they are. For example, if an individual WNBA player scores the most total points across all games during the regular season, they win the "Scoring Title." The same is true for players in the NBA. The criteria are simple: score more points than any other player that season. Or when trying to make a particular grade in a class, a student will usually need to earn a certain number of points to get an A or B. However, criteria are typically not this simple.

Criteria are more like expectations. What do we expect from the album of the year? What do we expect from the greatest basketball player of all time? What do we expect from a frozen waffle we reheated in a toaster or microwave? These expectations are usually formed collaboratively between individuals and the communities that care about whatever the criteria is about. So, in the case of athletics: fans, sports media, coaches, athletes, academics, owners, and others involved in a sport are the ones who have some control over what we expect from an athlete. Each person provides input in some way into what they think is important and then eventually a general set of expectations takes root.

But how can we tell what those general expectations are, especially if we're new to a topic?

## Criteria are communal

One of the key ways to discover criteria is to *listen*. We say listening here, we're not just talking about what you hear, but of purposefully being aware of what people say, writer, or do about a topic.

For example, if you wanted to figure out what people generally expect from a good romantic comedy, you might start by watching a bunch of romantic comedies. By watching the trends and repeated tropes in these movies, you can start to see what people expect from these films in an indirect way. You can formulate a lot of useful ideas from examining these *primary sources*, or the actual subjects of the conversation, but it might be a slower process at understanding what fans of romantic comedies think is important. To get to that idea more directly, you need to go to *secondary sources*, or look at what people say about or in response to romantic comedies. You could read reviews, watch videos that present their top 10 romantic comedies of all times, or even engage in direct conversation with fans of the genre. Regardless of where you start, you want to figuratively cast a wide net and get a lot of different perspectives to really get a sense of what fans think makes a good romantic comedy and what makes a bad one.

In a similar sense, if you wanted to figure out with men's basketball player is the greatest of all time, you could watch video of professional players since the creation of the NBA, but this would be a slow process and might still not give you as direct of a picture of what fans think makes a player the GOAT. So you would again need to turn to secondary sources and read articles, listen to sports commentators and analysts debate, talk to fans from different teams, etc. Through this process you would begin to see a clearer picture about what fans value and what they don't. As you dig into secondary sources for any topic, you will want to watch for common trends. What ideas or people are mentioned frequently and which ones aren't? What are common expectations and which ones are less frequent?

If you examined sources in 2021 about who the GOAT of men's basketball is, you would at this moment see names like Michael

Jordan, LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Wilt Chamberlain mentioned more commonly than other players with Michael Jordan and LeBron James being the most common. Ideas that would typically come up are how many points each players scored, how many times they won Most Valuable Player, how many championships they won, and how much they changed the trajectory of each team they were on. Reputation can sometimes point you to what fans value about players, but it can also create blind spots. After all, most sports were not integrated for much of their history, so some of the best non-white players have not received the same amount of exposure even if they were superior to their more popular white counterparts. Because these non-white athletes played in non-white leagues or non-white teams that were largely ignored by the press, their reputations are less developed even though they may fit the criteria for being a great player. Many women's teams still don't received the same level of accolades or praise that their male counterparts received. For example, women were playing American football in the 1930s and 40s and leagues were beginning to form as the men's sport was asserting itself; however, some administrators and politicians found the sport to be "too masculine" for women and shut down or banned women from playing the game. Even now as women's leagues and sports are slowly gaining public sports, women's football is largely unaccepted because of generally held values by fans of the sport and the United States about which sports men and women should play. There are many other instances of athletes being ignored due to their activism, their politics, or because a handful of powerful people decided they didn't like the athlete/team/sport. So while paying attention to trends and commonly brought up names and talking points can give you a sense of expectations, these expectations and criteria are not neutral or formed in neutral environment. No set of communally formed criteria will be without some of the bias and historical prejudice of the community that forms it.

Secondary sources and community expectations can be an incredibly useful step in developing criteria, but they can have limitations which means we must also shape criteria from our own personal experience and analysis.

## Criteria are personal

Even though criteria are formed collaboratively with others, we still need to personally decide how we want to use those expectations and where we want to change them or insert our own. As we discussed above, sometimes the criteria created by a community has prejudices or unfair expectations built into it which can mean following those criteria exactly would continue those prejudices. While criteria naturally update over time, we can also change them intentionally though we still have to be able to articulate why these new criteria are good ones to use.

For example, let's return to the conversation about the GOAT of men's basketball. As we discussed above, when reading sources, you will come across common names like Micheal Jordan and common requirements like championships. However, you still need to determine and explore how to approach those criteria and if you think they are being applied correctly. For example, Michael Jordan played for a team called the Chicago Bulls and after he joined the team, the Bulls had gone from losing most of their games to winning most of their games, and starting in 1990 Jordan and the Bulls won 6 of the next 8 NBA championships. LeBron James, on the other hand, has led 3 different teams to 4 championships, including the Cleveland Cavaliers whose only championship in their 51 year existence came as a direct result of James's presence on the team. Kobe Bryant won 5 championships though he played for the Los Angeles Lakers, who had an established history of success. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (6 championships) and Wilt Chamberlain (2 championships) also played for the Lakers for a significant part of their careers, but they helped establish the success of that team for players like Kobe Bryant to take advantage of in later years. However, if you base your discussion solely off of championships won, none of these players would even be considered as the GOAT. Instead, this would go to Bill Russell who won 11 NBA titles or Sam Jones who was on the same team as Russell and won 10. Both of these players should be considered in that conversation, but they are often overlooked because of how long ago they played (1950s & 60s) compared to players like Michael Jordan (1980s-00s) or LeBron James (2000s-20s). Thus, even this simple set of criteria conflicts in some ways from the common conversation around the issue.

You could stop there and consider only championships and numerical measures like wins and losses, but that would likely give you an incomplete picture of who is the GOAT. After all, an excellent player can lose a lot in a team sport while still being one of the best players of all time. Someone like US gymnast Simone Biles could fall short of winning a team gold medal at the Olympics

because her teammates may have struggled to record high enough scores to win gold, but Biles could still win individual gold and be individually incredible. Or in sports like American football or soccer where teams are much bigger and require synergy between even more players than gymnastics or basketball, many of the players with the record setting individual statistics have only won few if any championships at the professional and college level. However, in an individual sport like tennis, wins and titles can be more representative of individual greatness. Tennis player Serena Williams has won more Grand Slam tournaments, the most competitive and difficult tournaments to win, than any other tennis player in the last 45 years. It doesn't mean that another individual player could not have beaten her or even been better than her at times, but we can read her statistics a little differently than we would someone like Michael Jordan or Simone Biles who had to depend on teammates for some of their success. Thus we would need to figure out how to balance team accomplishments vs. individual accomplishments as we consider who the greatest men's basketball player of all time is.

While all of these examples come from sports, these questions and concerns can apply to evaluating other things, even something as ubiquitous as fast food. Instead of considering teams vs individuals we might think of brand reputation vs specific locations or meals. How much does the reputation of a chain restaurant like McDonald's effect how much we enjoy their food on a single occasion? Or In-and-Out? Or Whataburger? Or Starbucks? How much loyalty do we have to certain brands and how much does that make us excuse the shortcomings of their products? Does it matter more that our phones and computers all run the same operating system or that they all work exactly how we want them to individually? These and other similar questions are one we will need to grapple with as we create our criteria for anything, especially if we are going to argue that our criteria is reasonable. How much were communal criteria decided on by people who don't share our experiences or needs? What do other people say about this topic, and how does that fit with what I see or experience? And alternatively, how much does my own personal taste change my criteria and where is there room for disagreement?

To form a clear set of criteria for even something as low stakes as the GOAT of men's basketball, we would need to dissect and consider this and many other questions about what criteria to use in this debate. Even in instances where we take up the common criteria used by most people, our specific application of those criteria will require us to make choices about how to apply those criteria and how to explain that application to our audience.

## Building criteria

When building criteria, you need to be able to clearly articulate what your reasons are for the criteria you have. You may never include all of those reasons in your writing, but having a clear vision of your criteria makes composing more straightforward. It can be much easier to compose an evaluation if you understand your criteria in advance as opposed to figuring them out as you go. Let's take a look at one example of what that might look like.

To deviate a little from the sports metaphors, let's instead talk about how we would determine the best pizza in town. You can approach this from a lot of different directions, but if we're going to focus primarily on the food itself, usually the areas we would assess are: crust, sauce, toppings, and cheese. But those 4 areas aren't criteria yet since they don't give us an expectations yet, so we'll need to determine what expectations we have for a good pizza in those 4 categories.

In the category of crust, people tend to prefer many different styles of crust, so making criteria like "crust needs to be thin and crispy" or "crust needs to be thick with air pockets like bread" would make the assessment too narrow. Instead, we should discuss a quality that can be assessed, something like flavor. Something like "crust should have a light flavor but not be tasteless" might work better for our purposes because it gives us a scale to work on. If the crust flavor is overpowering or absent, something has gone wrong and we can notice that fairly easily while eating a wide variety of pizzas.

We could use a similar format for the other 3 categories where instead of prescribing a particular kind of pizza, we look for qualities that extend across most types. We could assess how much sauce there is and if the sauce has a good balance of sweet and savory, we could ask if there is enough cheese to blanket the sauce and if it has enough flavor to be good without any other toppings, and we

could check on if the toppings are fresh and mesh well with the other components of the pizza. Now our criteria have gone from the 4 categories of crust, sauce, cheese, and toppings to:

1. Crust should have a light flavor but not be tasteless.
2. Sauce should cover entire pizza but not be so much that it makes eating the pizza difficult. Sauce should have a good balance of sweet and savory.
3. Cheese should cover entire middle of pizza and have enough flavor to stand on its own without any other toppings.
4. Toppings of any kind should be fresh and should work well with other ingredients.

You can, of course, disagree with these criteria, but we can see how these criteria came into existence and how you could begin to apply them. You can also notice from the criteria how much they privilege balance and cohesion in the way the pizza is made. Nothing in these 4 areas should overpower or overshadow anything else so drastically that it distracts, but they all unify into a single concept, but you could make a good argument that pizzas shouldn't be balanced in every area but should have toppings be the star. You might also give each criteria a certain weight, so a pizza with bland crust wouldn't be that important if it excels in the other 3 criteria, but maybe a pizza with bad toppings would be awful no matter how good the other 3 components are. You could also add more criteria that's more specific around texture, aesthetics, innovative use of ingredients, pizza boxes, cooking method, and countless other areas related to the experience of eating a pizza.

However you build the criteria for a pizza or any other topic, you need to make sure you clearly outline what your expectations are in a way your reader can understand, even if they will ultimately disagree with you. Or, to return to the GOAT debate around men's basketball, your friends may not agree with you that Dennis Rodman is the GOAT, but they will at least understand why you think that.

## Discussion Questions

1. Pick one of your hobbies or things you do that isn't academic. What are some of the expectations/criteria you have for that hobby/topic? How do they differ from other people's criteria about that topic? Why do think that is?
2. When curating criteria, it's important to listen to a wide variety of secondary sources. How would you go about finding and determining which sources to read and take seriously, specifically about the topic you described in Q1 above?
3. Find a source you disagree with and briefly describe what causes you to disagree with it. Are the criteria they are using poorly explained or somehow not the best for the topic? Do you disagree with how they apply their own criteria?

## About the author



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Dr. Josiah Meints is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies and the Assistant Director of the Cowboy Concurrent Composition program at Oklahoma State University. His research primarily focuses on the multimodal composition and the rhetoric of video games and college athletics. His scholarship on video games has appeared in *Gamevironments* and *G/A/M/E: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*.

# USING PRESSBOOKS

Dr. Kathy Essmiller



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=6#audio-6-1>

*Push play on the sound bar above to listen to the chapter.*

Friends, I have included this chapter as an example of the instructions provided the authors of this text as we began the project. It has been customized for this project, and for #OpenOKState, but you are welcome to take whatever parts of it are useful! ~Kathy Essmiller

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

This chapter will serve as a quick-start guide for authors creating content in **ENGL 1113 Draft**. You will discover the chapter template provided for your chapter, explore how to create content within the provided template, and will have the opportunity to practice adding images and other media to your chapter.

Key Terms

Attribution

Dashboard

Media Library

## Quick-Start Overview

Your presence here indicates you have successfully authenticated and signed into your [OpenOKState Pressbooks](#) account and navigated to the dashboard of **ENGL 1113\_Draft**. If you got here by accident, or aren't sure that you can replicate your navigation, feel free to email [kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu](mailto:kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu) or text Kathy at 405-641-2401. The library's goal is to partner our resources and

competencies with your scholarly expertise so that you can share your work with others. If the platform is frustrating AT ALL, please let me help. Your gig is to be an English Scholar, mine is instructional design and digital resources. Text or email me before you want to cuss or cry, let me help keep this a joyful experience for you. The sections below will include the bare bones of what I think you will need to get started. For a deeper dive, see the OpenOKState customized edition of [Publishing with Pressbooks](#).

If you are curious about OER and how we are working to support a culture of open at OSU, feel free to browse [Exploring Open](#). Do not feel at all obligated, just if you are curious.

## Creating Sub-Headings

Screen-reader accessibility is baked into the platform. If you are using additional subheadings or other formatting techniques to help communicate your content, please do so using the toolbar at the top of your chapter page. This will protect that functionality. The main headings in each of your chapter templates have been created using Heading 1. If you wish to create subheadings, select a format other than Heading 1 from the dropdown menu in the top left corner of the toolbar. For instance, the subheadings in this example chapter are Heading 2. I populated the chapter with Heading 2 subheadings (as well as further subsections from my chapter outline) prior to adding or creating the bulk of my content. Haha that's not true I did not make a formal outline. But I did create the subheadings before writing the rest of the content.

### Heading 3

This section's heading shows what Heading 3 looks like. The platform automatically adds space between paragraphs. I don't always feel like I trust it and love how it looks when I am in editing mode, but once I switch to preview mode I end up pretty happy with it, so I guess we can trust the coders. You can preview the content by clicking on the 'preview' button in the 'Status and Visibility' box on the right side of the page when you are editing your chapter. The red 'Save' button is in that box, as well. Hopefully you have already found it. Use it frequently, unless your life feels entirely too peaceful and productive and you need the zing that comes from losing your work.

Examples of Headings 4, 5 and 6 are below. Obviously, I am not using them correctly, which makes me nervous when writing for an audience of English faculty, but you are already probably so distracted by my casual and improper use of commas that the heading thing doesn't even register. Sorry about that.

### Heading 4

### Heading 5

### Heading 6

## Adding Content

There are several ways to add your content, some of which enable a smooth workflow and some of which provide exciting challenges on down the road. If you are comfortable working directly in this platform, that is fantastic. Another option is to copy-paste your work from Google Docs or from Word. If you are choosing that option, please clear all formatting from the content before you copy-paste it into this platform. The formatting code (bold, italics, styles and headings) from Docs or Word can create accessibility issues for screen readers, so it's best to bring the content over 'clean' and use the formatting tools in Pressbooks to achieve the look you want. Likewise, a straight-up import from Word brings lots of extra code that can cause problems. Email or text me if you run into issues with this, or if what I am saying doesn't make sense to you. Or if it sounds overwhelming. I can help.

See the links below for information about how to include other structural elements, links, images, etc. Be sure to track attribution as you go. I have linked an [attribution tracker](#) in each of your chapters, but we will remove that in the final edition of the text. I just want to make it super easy for you to track attribution, and super hard to make an excuse for not having tracked attribution. 😊 If you can't figure out the attribution for your resource, contact me (Kathy) early on, and I will help track it down. I actually really like doing that early in the process, it is a fun puzzle/scavenger hunt to me. My feelings about doing it late in the process are quite different.

- [Import Word document](#) (if you want to give it a go and like to troubleshoot)
- [Import Google Doc](#) (same, but maybe less troubleshooting)
- [Creating and using links](#)
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## Adding Other Users

Each chapter is currently set to offer edit access to all of the ENGL 1113 authors, Josh, and by default because I am the platform administrator, me (Kathy). You may, however, wish to provide access during the content creation process to someone else for purposes of peer review, further collaboration, or because you have convinced them to put your content in for you, lol. If the person to which you wish to grant access already has an OpenOKState Pressbooks account, you should be able to add them at the desired level following the instructions described [at this link](#). If they do not already have an account, email [kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu](mailto:kathy.essmiller@okstate.edu) to request an account for them. Include their name, email address, why you want them added, and at what level you want them added, and I will make it so.

## Discussion Questions

This would be a list of 3-5 open ended discussion questions, thought of primarily for in class discussion questions or for students to write about as part of a homework assignment. I am not adding discussion questions yet, until we decide if you all want them numbered, bullet point, etc.

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### Sandbox

You each have edit access to this chapter. You are welcome to use this section to practice adding media, if you are nervous about experimenting in your own chapter. I have made another copy of this chapter, so if it gets broken it's okay.

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### Scratchpad and additional notes

I usually keep a scratchpad at the bottom of the page when I am creating content directly in Pressbooks. Gives me a place to save stuff without risking formatting I am happy with. I mean formatting with which I am happy. Sorry again.

You may have noticed the ‘visual’ and ‘text’ tabs at the top right hand corner of the text editing toolbar. The visual option is a WYSIWYG (what-you-see-is-what-you-get), and the text option shows you a bit of the code. If you are accustomed to code, you might find some satisfaction working in the text tab to nuance your work. You may find there are things, code-wise, that don’t work the way you want. I think that is because of the accessibility baked into the platform. They make it very hard for us to break that by mucking around in the code.

### About the author



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Kathy’s background is in music education, where she enjoyed over fifteen fantastic years making music with MS/HS band students (including her own two kids). She is an Assistant Professor/Coordinator of OER at Oklahoma State University, and was a 2019-2020 OER Research Fellow. She holds Masters degrees in trumpet performance and educational technology, and a PhD in Learning, Design and Technology from OSU.