

[Student's Name]
[Writing 300 level Course]
[Date]

The Writing Process at 20,000 Feet

Sit down and unfold your laptop. Open up Word. Hit “file”, click “Open Blank Document.” Stare at the blank document. There’s a grey border around the barren sea of white, but the majority is emptiness. Don’t be intimidated. Wait (perhaps 33 seconds). Be intimidated. Shut the computer. Get up and walk around the library looking for friends to distract you from the still-empty page. Ask them about their classes, semester, or even what store their shirt came from. Tell them that you’re trying to write an essay, but the inspiration hasn’t come yet. Ignore their subtle hints that they, unlike you, are trying to get back to the task at hand. Ask them about their weekend. Complain about the weather. Run out of small talk and decide that your paper is worth a second shot. Go back to your seat, sit down, and open your computer.

Try to remember what the sky looked like last time you were flying into [City]. Think about the way that the orange, yellow, and pink all reflected off the vast expanse of gray made up of a thin sheet of cloud stretched out across the five o’clock sky. Remember how you looked around and saw a flock of passengers silently sleeping under the dimmed cabin lights and wanted to wake them up to say, “Look out your window, too!”

The document in front of you doesn’t look any blanker or whiter than before. That is just your mind playing tricks on you. Pull out your assignment sheet. Read it to yourself. Realize you only read individual words without actually recognizing their context. Read it again, this time whispering the words aloud under your breath. Avoid the annoyed glance from the girl sitting a few seats down. She seems like a bitch, anyway. Open up Google and search the key words from the assignment sheet. Scroll down the long list of websites that result from your search and realize that no original or unique idea has ever come out of copying and pasting from an Internet search engine.

Consider the clouds. Remember the way that they seemed to create an artificial floor at 20,000 feet, and how, for a moment, you imagined the plane could land right there in the middle of the open sky.

Google was a dead-end. Try Facebook. Refrain from making a status about how much homework you have, how much time you've spent in the library in the last week writing Facebook statuses about how much time you've spent in the library, or how you might never graduate. Scroll through your News Feed. Look through a friend's photos from a few weeks ago. Look through a friend's photos from a few years ago. Realize you don't actually remember when you met said friend — or where. Realize that they are only a "friend" in the Facebook definition of the word. Evaluate the situation. Conclude you're looking through pictures from four years ago of someone who you would classify, on a good day, as merely an acquaintance. Focus on your paper. It's still blank.

Take yourself back to the Delta flight on that December afternoon. Remember the position you sat in: head rested on the cold plastic interior of the aircraft wall, staring out the window, entirely entranced by the way the colorful light was trapped so perfectly and carefully between the two layers of thin stratus clouds — how you had never seen a sun so bright and a sky so dark at the same time.

Push the computer to the far side of the table. Take out your Organic Chemistry Course Pack. Do this week's homework. Do next week's homework. Draw Benzene rings all over a sheet of paper. Admire your artwork. Pull out your Biology notecards. Go through them once. Go through them again. Reel your computer back in. Look through C-Tools [learning management system] to make sure that there isn't any other work that could possibly procrastinate the writing process. Sigh with disappointment upon the realization that there's absolutely nothing else left to do. Finally make that E-Harmony account — no. Turn your attention back to the paper.

Remember how the of stretch of color sandwiched between the two layers of cloud shrank with each passing half-second — how you raised your hand before your eyes in an attempt to measure the thin strip of glowing sky between the tip of your thumb and forefinger, but when you brought

your fingers back into focus, you realized that you had shrunk the space so much that your fingers were touching and the sun had disappeared.

Open up your mailbox. Read an email your dad sent you with a link to a YouTube video of a Golden Retriever playing fetch. Allow yourself to watch a few of the YouTube classics — the one where the panda bear sneezes or the one where the kid bites his brother. Okay, maybe the one with the boy in the backseat of the car on the way back from the dentist’s office, too. Go through your spam folder. Perhaps something slipped in there by accident. Get slightly offended by the seven male enhancement offers.

Picture the sky. Remember how the clouds unfolded like wrinkles cascading down the front of your father’s white button down shirt when he gets home from a long day at the office. Remember how you wondered if it was possible that something so incredible could be composed of hydrogen and oxygen alone.

Go on Skype. Chat with your sister in [City]. Complain about the Michigan winter. Insist unequivocally that it is warmer on the [...] even though you can’t vouch for the truth of that. Show her the earrings that Mom sent you for your birthday. Sigh noticeably. When prompted, explain how difficult it is to get up for 8 a.m. Chemistry lab. Explain that your exhaustion is manifesting itself in writers’ block. Be angry that she isn’t more sympathetic.

Remember the moment when you first saw the sky. Remember how your instinct wasn’t to pull out a camera and take a picture, but instead to take out a pen and write. Remember how when you pushed up that plastic cover and looked out the small, doubled-paned window and saw the sky, all you wanted to do was write about it. Remember what it feels like to want to write.

Convince yourself that you haven’t been able to craft any sentences because you aren’t listening to the right music. Open Pandora. Browse through your recent radio stations. Listen to your favorite Beyoncé song. Realize they’re all your favorite — she’s Beyoncé, after all. Play three more.

Remember those sentences, the sloppy ones frantically scribbled on loose-leaf paper, pieced together midflight on a December afternoon, were some of the best sentences you have ever written. Remember that.

Turn off the music. You know that you can't formulate your own thoughts when you're listening to someone else's. Search through your wallet for change so you can go downstairs and buy coffee. Add up pennies and nickels and dimes until you have exactly the right amount of money. Remember that it is eleven o'clock at night and you won't be able to sleep if you consume caffeinated beverages this late at night. Make patterns with the pennies instead.

You wrote because you wanted other people to see sky, too—even people whose feet were planted firmly on the ground. These sentences, the ones you're struggling to get down on paper—they're really no different. Your words, carefully chosen and artfully articulated, will give people the opportunity to see things from your perspective. It doesn't matter if you are writing an academic or painting a picture of a cloudy sunset at 20,000 feet. Remember that this is why you write, and it doesn't change just because you are 600 miles west and few thousand feet below, sitting on the second floor of the library.

Close Facebook. Close Google. Exit out of YouTube. Log off Skype. Return to the Word Document. For one, simple, transient moment, close your eyes, tune out the rest of the library conversations, and forget about the other students sitting beside you. Listen for the quiet and constant hum of the aircraft engine. And write.