Kayla Cockrum

Professor McDaniel

Writing 220

Why I Write Final Revision

December 18, 2012

Why I Write: Pleasing The Audience

When the teacher asked us to pull out our handwriting workbooks, I quickly lifted up the top of my wooden desk table and reached inside to pull out my bright blue book. As I sat in the middle of my second grade classroom, I flipped through the pages of my handwriting workbook to find the letter I had left off on – “G.” When I was seven years old, writing out the letter “G” legibly was not an easy task. Thankfully, the handwriting book gave explicit instructions at the top of each page on how to move your hand with the pencil to accomplish writing out the expected letter. There were even dashed lines in the shape of each letter that provided additional guidance. I put my pencil to the paper and followed the curved line of dashes around, and there was the letter “G.” Without those dashed lines on the page though, I would have been completely lost. However, after a lot of practice, I was able to write out each of the letters without following the dashed lines, but my letters still looked exactly as if I had. Each of my letters met the model, and I was praised for my handwriting that replicated the font of the letters in my workbook.

I wrote for praise throughout the rest of my K-12 education. My desire to please an audience was the drive that helped me write each of my essays. I was conditioned by my education to want to please the teacher, because that would ensure good grades, which would ensure getting into a good college, which would ensure a good job. At least, that’s what my family and teachers were always telling me. In 2001, when I was nine years old, the No Child Left Behind Act went into effect, which required the elementary and secondary schools to give assessments to their students in order to receive funding. I remember how the teachers would show us exactly how to write our responses in order to receive the highest scores. From elementary through high school, I felt as if I was being tested on how well I could regurgitate the material the teacher had provided to me. Writing was often boring, but if I provided the answer the teachers wanted, in the organization style they wanted, with the correct number of vocabulary words that they wanted, with the correct spelling and grammar that they wanted, I would be awarded an “A.” Meeting the expectation was the goal, so the process of reaching it consisted of figuring out what the teacher was expecting. As I entered college, I hoped that I would be moving on from strict, detailed rubrics and the confining five-paragraph essay form. I wanted writing to be more interesting.

While I moved away from the explicit directions, I still wasn’t able to write without thinking about my evaluators. At first I liked how the courses that I took at the University of Michigan gave me more freedom to write as I wanted. For instance, one class provided me with an open prompt that asked me to “explore a question that you don’t know the answer to yet.” However, while the prompt seemed to present the opportunity to write freely since no explicit directions were given, I still found myself choosing a question that I thought the professor would approve of and writing in a way that I thought the professor would like. I wanted to think that because I was writing with less direction that I was writing for myself, but even without explicit instruction, I would go looking for implicit instruction. I found myself digging into my knowledge of what I know about a teacher or professor and then asking what they would want to see in my paper. When I sat down in front of my laptop to type out a paper, my creativity was stifled with questions like: What does he want me to say? What kind of organization would he like? Should I start out with a personal anecdote or a witty quote? What does he expect me to do? Would he think this title was cliché? My only goal seemed to be pleasing the evaluator. I still tried to figure out the outcome that they desired, and then worked toward it while writing. While asking these questions about what a teacher may want can be helpful in earning a higher grade, I fear what asking them says about me as a writer. I aspire to write freely and creatively without boundaries or expectations, but I question whether anyone can write without considering an audience.

While pondering this idea of writing freely - whatever that means and if it even exists - my mind jumps to possible exceptions to my assumption. Free writing could be a way of writing without others in mind. It is often used as a brain storming exercise, where one writes about whatever pops into their head without a plan or organizational strategy. I personally have a hard time not filtering my thoughts during this type of exercise, and I usually only do it when someone else has suggested the idea. Some people, more talented than I perhaps, have the ability to write an essay in the form of a stream of consciousness. However, for a stream of consciousness work to be worthwhile, doesn’t some deeper truth have to be revealed to the reader? I have to believe that a writer who chooses this style has to have their mind on a certain track to start at least. It seems as if their thoughts have to be directed toward a story that another would find appealing for the writing to be thought of as good. An essay’s worth seems to be found in how the reader perceives it.

When I found a childhood diary in my closet, I opened it to find “Dear Journal” written on the front page, but nothing followed but a blank page. It was almost like a calling to write - just for me. I decided to take another shot at writing without a filter. I made an entry and continued to do so once every year, eventually it became once a month. I found joy in writing about what I cared about. The act of journaling seemed to be a purer form of writing. I was free from trying to please an audience. The fear of being judged or evaluated was absent as I took pen to paper in this journal. However, I started to notice that a filtering process did take place. What I decided to include or omit from in my journal was based on what I thought I would most likely want to read about in the future, and my entries were written the way that I thought journal entries should be written - a greeting of some sort, followed by a few personal anecdotes, and a closing, which often included a hopeful pondering about what my future would hold.

Even when I was writing for me, I was writing with other people’s models in mind. Initially, I resented that I had been taught to write within such strict borders, but I’m beginning to understand how this education helped me to become a successful writer. I started writing because others asked me too. I wrote the way that they wanted, and I found it very uninteresting. However this provided me with the tools that I needed, so when I did start writing on my own I would be able to communicate effectively with others. To become a good writer, I had to first learn the rules in order to break them later. I have learned that in order for an essay to be successful, one of the most important things to do is consider the audience. Writing is form of communication, and for my audience to understand my ideas, I have to consider them while I write. I write for other people, but I no longer think that’s such a bad thing.