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Writing 220

Why I Write Scale Up

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Meeting Expectations

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.” At the time, 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, and the dashed lines in the shape of each letter 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. Eventually, I was able to write out the letters without following the dashed lines, but they 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 dashed letters in my workbook.

Without explicit instruction when I go to write an essay, I go looking for implicit instruction. I find 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 sit down in front of my laptop to type out a paper, my creativity is 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 seems to be pleasing the evaluator. I try to figure out the outcome they desire, and then work 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.

Of course, my desire to please an audience is not a coincidence but something I was conditioned to want to do. Elementary through high school was a test of how well I could regurgitate the material the teacher had provided to me in the form of an essay. If I provided the answer they 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 award 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 wanted to believe I was moving on from strict, detailed rubrics and the confining five-paragraph essay form.

Now, I like to think that because I write with less direction that I am writing for myself. I want to believe that I write, because it provides some sort of stress reliever and self- reflection that I enjoy, which makes it hard to admit that most of my writing is directly or indirectly for someone else. An open prompt that asked me to “explore a question that you don’t know the answer to yet” seemed like an opportunity to write freely. No explicit directions were given, which should have meant freedom to write how I choose, but I still found myself choosing a question that a professor would approve of and writing in a way that I thought the professor wanted me to write.

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.

I started writing in a journal a few years ago when I found a childhood diary in my closet. 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 peoples’ models in mind.