

Excuse My Excess

“Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson



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Intended Program of Study: MFA Creative Writing

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In addition to your writing portfolio, Graduate Admissions for the MFA Program also requires a brief essay detailing the development of your personal voice in writing. In particular, you should focus on the role that contemporary writing conventions and trends play in this development, thereby demonstrating your ability to flourish both artistically and professionally. This essay should exhibit your awareness of the various ways in which your voice has changed and should outline what factors influenced these changes, whether they be personal or academic encounters, particularly enriching writing exercises, landmark essays in your growth, or scholarly research. Your essay should be clear, organized, and well-developed, and it should conform to the standards of good English. Please do not exceed three pages in length.



Page One: “A Strict, Law-Abiding Citizen of the Academic Discourse Community”

About. Above. Across. After. Against. Along. Among. Around. At. Learn. The rules. Before. Behind. Below. Beneath. Beside. Between. Mem. Orize. Down. During. Except. For. From. Succeed. Succeed. Learn. The rules. Mem. Orize. And. You will. Succeed. And. You will. Succeed.

As a college freshman, I could not learn enough rules and I could not memorize enough

lists. I had dozens of alphabetized prepositions waiting in my arsenal. I pored through handbooks, determined to tackle once and for all every last use of the comma. I banished first-person pronouns, exclamation marks, and adverbs from my compositions. In high school, my obsession to write well led me to master not just grammar rules but writing conventions, too: effective introduction tactics, smart transitional phrases, MLA citation format, and thesis restatement.

In. Inside. Into. Inside that tight, flawless prose, my voice remained locked, each link of the shackles hewn with rules: punctuation rules, grammar rules, writing rules. As a result I focused more on the structure than the content of my compositions; the product, while successful in terms of my English class grade, always lacked some ineffable quality in the imperfect, slangy essays of my classmates. My marks were higher, but their papers had punch. However, at the time I was too indoctrinated with the rules to dare to break them; conventions gave me the footholds with which to succeed in writing.

“Particularly Enriching Writing

Exercise”: For this journaling

exercise, reflect upon why you

write in the style that you do. Is there something about your style that particularly satisfies you as a writer?

“Scholarly Research”

“The journal is a great bubbling pot where strange and diverse images meet, merge occasionally, or bump with frightening violence into each other. But out of all this apparent chaos come the outlines of some well-defined concepts” (Stewart 47).

I suppose what I like most about my style is that it is correct. By correct, I mean that in my formal, share-with-the-public writing, I don’t ever dangle my participles, or splice my commas, or even split my infinitives. I also eschew vague language, generalities, and hyperboles. I provide evidence for all my main points, and I transition well from one paragraph to the next. In short, I follow all the conventions for writing, and in so doing I am able to communicate effortlessly a

great deal to my readers.

Things That Are Satisfying about Following Conventions:

“Scholarly Research”

“It is an old observation,’ [William Strunk, Jr.] wrote, ‘that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules” (qtd. in Strunk and White, xvii-iii).

1. The A’s. Oh, the A’s.
I’ve always earned
them. That A is for me
documented proof of

my success. If someone were to challenge my abilities as a writer, to question my competency, I have dozens of A-earning papers lined up as evidence.

2. The confidence it gives me. Kind of like – like I’m on something slippery but it’s OK because I have something to hold onto, or boots with treads on. And everyone around me might be sliding all over the place with quote integration, transitions, and semicolon

usage, but I’m there, right on the same slippery terrain but standing, and not because I know anything more about ice and how to deal with it but because I’ve got the

“Scholarly Research”

“The discourse of academics is marked by terms and expressions that represent an elaborate set of shared concepts and orientations: alienation, authoritarian personality, the social construction of the self, determinism, hegemony, equilibrium, intentionality, recursion, reinforcement, and so on. This language weaves through so many lectures and textbooks, is integral to so many learned discussions, that it’s easy to forget what a foreign language it can be” (Rose 135).

right kind of shoes on, so everyone thinks I’m some kind of expert on ice – though the truth is, I’ve just got superior equipment.

“Personal or Academic Encounters”: Another A

“Here you go, Lauren,” my professor said, returning to me my most recent essay

assignment. I stopped gnawing on my pen cap just long enough to

murmur “Thanks” and reach over the edge of my desk to receive the slim, stapled stack of paper. While she continued along the semicircle

“Scholarly Research”

“The culturally-specific ‘conventions’ that define academic writing construct for both academic and student the entire process of understanding and presenting knowledge...The ‘conventions’ of the academic writing style can therefore be seen metaphorically as a type of ‘code’ to be ‘cracked,’ a form of knowledge that students must uncover for themselves” (Read, Francis, and Robson 388).

of desks distributing the rest of the graded manuscripts, I flipped through the pages of my essay slowly, soaking in the many paragraphs of text that, unlike those of my classmates, no red pen had adulterated. While they moaned at misplaced modifiers, dangling participles, and underdeveloped arguments, I savored the comments that seemed to float in the one-inch margins of my paper, those lovely words in cursive that proclaimed my aptitude: “Great thesis!” “Good examples!” “Your analysis is strong here!” I was smiling by the time I reached the final page which bore that coveted “A.”

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”:

For this free-writing exercise, write everything you can think of about your

selected topic as it comes to mind. Do not worry about organization, structure, or even proper grammar or punctuation – just keep writing for ten minutes without stopping. The results of this exercise can later serve as a pool of ideas for your essay.

“Scholarly Research”

“Sometimes you will produce good writing [in free-writing], but that’s not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that’s not the goal either. You may stay on one topic, you may flip repeatedly from one to another: it doesn’t matter” (Elbow 14 in *Writing with Power*).

Conventions are, well they are the basis of my writing I guess. I mean, I follow them all the time. They make it easier to structure things and it’s easy, then, to whip up an essay when I know exactly what I want to say and how to say it. It’s the difference between trying to drive someplace new with or without a good set of directions – yea, you can get there either way, I guess, but it’ll be a whole lot quicker and less strenuous if you have the directions. No detours. Just straight to your destination. That’s a good metaphor to use, maybe...and I could even give people a taste of what happens without conventions – that’d be fun. Kind of like, “See why you need conventions?” and then have something indecipherable at the beginning, something that’ll make them really scratch their heads and wonder, and then it’ll be kind of like, “Got you! Now

here's the real paper. The one that follows conventions. Don't you prefer it? See why we need them?"

OK, now, specifically, what makes conventions easier to follow? I guess first because you know the directions – they're all those models that we learn at an early age. Like, five-paragraph essay and that ICE model and even all those strategies on how to make an introduction catchy and how to make a conclusion round everything off so nicely. That

seems like a solid point. And what's cool is that I can enact these conventions in my writing, like, use things like the ICE method and probably even the five-paragraph essay and stuff to prove my point. Maybe another point could be about how writers who use conventions really charm the readers and

establish their credibility because a reader can read the writer's paper. And structure - if things aren't structured well, then it's just confusing and even let's say the writer is trying to say something really important, the reader would never know because it's all jumbled in a bunch of mistakes, be they grammatical or spelling or organizational or whatever. So that's no good. It makes it hard for the reader to get the point; thus, it makes it hard for the writer to get her or his point across. So, really, conventions are all about the connection between reader and writer and easing that divide between them. It's the writer's way, overall, of making sure the reader gets her or his message clearly and effectively. Because that is what makes for successful writing.

"Scholarly Research"

"A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asked the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder...

"The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

"Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves" (Truss, back cover).

"Landmark Essay"

Conventions: A Critical Component of Compositions

"People think I can teach them style. What stuff it all is! Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."

In the quote above, nineteenth century

“Scholarly Research”

“The Introduction is the beginning of the discourse, and by it the hearer’s mind is prepared for attention. The Narration or Statement of Facts sets forth the events that have occurred or might have occurred. By means of Division we make clear what matters are agreed upon and what are contested, and announce what points we intend to take up. Proof is the presentation of our arguments, together with their corroboration. Refutation is the destruction of our adversaries’ arguments. The Conclusion is the end of the discourse, formed in accordance with the principles of the art” (Cicero 9-11).

English poet Matthew Arnold succinctly sums up the significance of conventions to effective writing. His labeling of his tip as a “secret” proves apposite, particularly considering the contemporary trends to undermine that breed of

classic, comprehensible, and conventional writing which legendary thinkers from as long ago as Cicero have endorsed. Though many today argue that these conventions are stifling the development of a writer’s voice and limiting one’s creative expression, conventions are actually indispensable for successful composition. Their importance stems primarily from their ability to aid a writer in effectively structuring her/his argument, to appeal to the reader through the use of a familiar form, and, finally, to establish a positive ethos for the writer.

In terms of structure, compositional conventions provide writers at all levels of ability and experience with the guidelines for successful argumentation; this enables writers to organize their points and defend their theories well. Many models exist to aid writers in the process; for example, student writers often learn the acronym ICE to assist them in paragraph construction. The ICE method leads writers clearly through the development of a paragraph, from introducing the topic of the paragraph to citing evidence in support of that topic to explaining how that evidence proves the topic and how that topic relates to the essay’s thesis. Techniques such as ICE instill in writers an accepted and effective form with which they can arrange their information and analyses. In addition to ICE, other writing conventions, including the preview of main points in the introduction and the restatement of the thesis in the conclusion, form a solid and proven foundation on which writers can structure each sentence and paragraph with great

“Scholarly Research”

“People, especially students who’ve done a lot of academic reading, get an image of acceptable academic prose that excludes concrete, subjective, personal writing...it’s no wonder that students try, with disastrous effects, to imitate it by not breaking an imagined set of ‘rules’” (Belanoff, Rorschach, Oberlink 11).

success.

More than just simplifying the writing

process, conventions likewise simplify the reading

process for the intended audience of the written

work. Primarily, conventions offer to the readers a sense of comfort that eases their struggle with subjects that may be new or unfamiliar to them. For example, writing conventions enable a historian to understand an article about astronomy or an athlete to enjoy a literary critique because, though the training and disciplines of the respective readers differ, the conventions of the writing eases that tension. Furthermore, conventions allow writing to cross the boundaries of academic disciplines and reduce the difficulty of comprehending a new concept or idea within a given field. If, for example, a medical doctor is introducing a new treatment plan in a medical journal, her audience members – even if they are, like the writer, medical doctors – will better understand the piece if it adheres to the established standards of the doctor’s discourse community. Thus, whether helping readers to grasp an article about an issue outside of the audience’s area of expertise or on an innovative topic within that audience’s discipline, writing conventions enable those readers to approach the piece with confidence because most recognize, if not the subject area or topic, at least the form. This familiarity appeals to readers by providing them with a steppingstone to approach the new material successfully.

Finally, conventions prove vital components of a written work in that they help to create a positive ethos for the writer. The use of standard writing conventions by the author is significant to the establishment of ethos because this rhetorical appeal

“Scholarly Research”

“The third paragraph of the body should contain the weakest argument, weakest example, weakest illustration, or an obvious follow up to the second paragraph in the body. The first sentence of this paragraph should include the reverse hook which ties in with the transitional hook at the end of the second paragraph. The topic for this paragraph should be in the first or second sentence. This topic should relate to the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. The last sentence in this paragraph should include a transitional concluding hook that signals the reader that this is the final major point being made in this paper. This hook also leads into the last, or concluding, paragraph” (Livermore).

signals to readers the writer's credibility and expertise. The writer can exhibit these qualities straightaway by writing her essay in a standard, recognizable form and employing the standard rules of English grammar and spelling. Readers, who will immediately notice a sense of familiarity and ease if these conventions are present, will trust the writer because she has established for them her competence in the field. Conversely, if a writer fails to adhere to conventions, readers will feel a disconnection between their expectations and what the writer has delivered. They may doubt the writer's credibility and question her arguments and evidence because she has failed to demonstrate her ethos. For these reasons, it is essential that writers follow conventions in order to establish their ethos, a rhetorical appeal which can ultimately determine whether or not the audience will believe the message of the writer.

"Scholarly Research"

"Clearly college classrooms and writing classrooms, in particular, provide a unique (sometimes troubling) atmosphere for students. If (and that's a big if) the goal of writing classrooms is to help students to not only coherently articulate an argument, but also to get them to see writing as a powerful tool for discovery – we need to ask how they can accomplish such a goal if they are mouthing a forced and borrowed voice?" (Brennan 4).

Considering that they assist both the writer and the reader of a piece in these aforementioned ways of easing the writing process, easing the reading process, and establishing ethos, writing conventions stand out as critical components for successful composition. Though

many contemporary writers and writing pedagogies urge a break from tradition, such an action would be detrimental to the written word in that both the writers and the readers would need to struggle in order to, respectively, compose and understand. Surely this type of struggle is contrary to Matthew Arnold's eloquent advice to say what must be said "as clearly as [one] can." Indeed, adhering to writing conventions fulfills Arnold's recommendation, proving that a devotion to conventions truly is "the only secret" of successful composition.

"Personal or Academic Encounters": Lunch Date

To: Lauren

From: Kristen

Hey, you free for lunch on Thursday? Lets meet in the caf at 1. Hope your classes are going well! ~Kristen

To: Kristen

From: Lauren

Dear Kristen,

Unfortunately, I am unable to meet you for lunch at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday. I have class from 11:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m., and then a rather difficult Spanish examination at 2:00 p.m., the preparation for which I must sacrifice my lunch hour. Let us reschedule this rendezvous forthwith.

Thank you for your courtesy in inquiring about the progress of my classes; thus far, my semester has been quite successful. I do hope you are enjoying your courses. I greatly anticipate meeting with you to discuss the various happenings in our lives both on- and off-campus.

Sincerely,

Lauren

“Scholarly Research”

“When asked about advice she would give..., one student responds: ‘See that there is a greater purpose in writing than completing the assignment. Try to get something and give something when you write.’ This idea, that a student might ‘get something’ other than a grade and that there might be a ‘greater purpose in writing than completing the assignment,’ represents the most significant paradigm shift...When students begin to see writing as a transaction, an exchange in which they can ‘get and give,’ they begin to see a larger purpose for their writing. They have their first glimmerings of audience; they begin to understand that they are writing for flesh-and-blood human beings, readers who want them to bring their interests into a course, not simply teachers who are poised with red pens, ready to evaluate what they don’t know” (Sommers and Saltz 139).

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”: Now that you have examined aspects of your style that you feel fulfill your needs as a writer, reflect in your journal about what, if any, aspects of that style frustrate you at times.

I could wallpaper a whole house with the pages of white paper upon which my black, double-spaced, twelve-point Times New Roman text marches in flawless grammatical construction. A: “Nice work.” A: Good job!” A: “Great analysis, and excellent use of detail.” A: “Perfect, as usual.” A, A, A, A: Nice, good, great, excellent. Perfect. Perfect. Perfect. *Perfect.*

Perfect: I hate the harsh clash of consonants at the end of that word. It echoes the harsh clash of motives I feel every time I choose to cookie-cutter out my essay and earn that “A” rather than risk failure with something I truly mean, something I shape myself.



Page Two: “I Split an Infinitive and Nobody Died”

Near. Of. Off. On. Onto. Out.

Out with the rules.

And out with convention because by college my frustration seethed and all those rules, those rules I had learned and memorized and applied without exception, they had to go out.

Outside. Over. Past. I started small: splitting infinitives, fragmenting sentences. I loved the risk, the not knowing, the excitement of experimentation. Gaining confidence with my lawlessness, I produced some screamingoutloud compositions that charged my writing with power, angst, and true freedom of expression. Yet, though gripping, though charged for the first time with my voice, though overturning tabletops rather than just kicking wooden legs, my writing lacked control. I had fluctuated from commanding every character to absolving myself of any obligation to standard and comprehensible discourse. Throughtoscrewyoutoward.

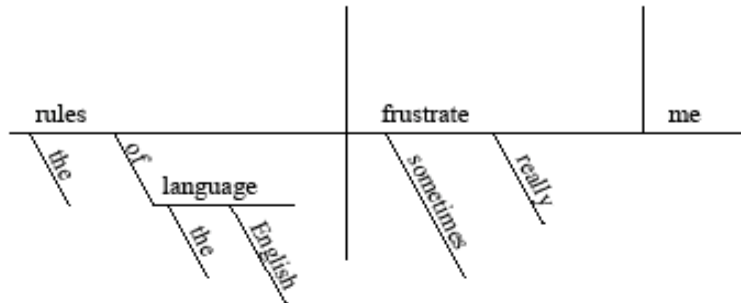
“Scholarly Research”

“A symbol of everything old and stodgy, sentence diagramming is attributed to an 1877 book by Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg, two professors at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute who believed that grammar instruction had become too far removed from the practice of writing, and that students would better understand how to structure sentences if they could see them drawn, almost like architectural plans” (Zernike).

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”:

Feeling disconnected from your prose? Try

diagramming a sentence or two of your writing in order to reacquaint yourself personally with each individual part of the sentence(s) – this will allow you to appreciate more fully the coherence that you as the writer provide to each selection of words.



“Personal and Academic Encounters”: Splits and Screams

During a course in my sophomore year of college, the professor allocated a week of class time to be used for one-on-one writing conferences with her to discuss the most recent essay assignment. So, on my designated date and time, I arrived at her office bearing a nearly completed draft. It was good, good enough to be handed in and graded without discussing it with her for fifteen solid minutes, but I sat across from her at the desk and meekly surrendered my paper to her inspection.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked me as she scanned the pages. “Are you having any problems?”

I shifted in my seat. Well, I wanted to say, I feel as if I’m choking on intractable globs of claims, evidence, and analysis. My mind feels trapped within a parenthetical citation, stifled by the amalgamating arcs of mirror-image parentheses. I can restate my thesis in my sleep. I think quotation marks are ugly. I used the word “thus” twice on one page. I can’t do this anymore.

I realized that I was gripping the armrests of the chair.

She waited for me to answer.

I folded my hands in my lap and crossed one leg over the other, as though I were completely at ease with discussing compositional issues. “Well, we could look at this sentence. See, I’m splitting the infinitive, but I think the sentence sounds weird when I move the adverb.”

“It sounds weird?” she asked, trying to clarify my vague assertion.

You see, I wanted to say, I’m not supposed to split infinitives, and I *know* I’m not supposed to split them, but before me lies this verbal that I swear I can hear *screaming*, “Split me, *split me*, SPLIT ME!”

Instead, I shrugged.

My professor read the sentence. Glanced at me. “I think you should just keep it split,” she said, almost as a dare.

I looked up, startled by her recommendation, wondering if screams are audible to the reader as well as to the writer. “Yea? OK,” I agreed, and my foot tapped excitedly against the leg of my chair. Just like that, this sentence had become my favorite one in the entire essay.

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”: To prepare for your next essay assignment, brainstorm the types of rhetorical techniques that will be particularly effective for your intended audience. If you experience difficulty with this exercise, try placing yourself in one of your reader’s shoes and imagine how *you* would be most effectively persuaded.

My intended audience, yea, a bunch of academic snobs who

“Scholarly Research”

“Our attitude toward split infinitives is the same as our attitude toward ending sentences with a preposition: we don’t understand why anyone would care, since we can think of no way in which either affects anyone’s ability to communicate written meaning” (Belanoff, Rorschach, Oberlink 133)

“Scholarly Research”

“The structures of identity thus come about through the self’s changing patterns of compliance and resistance to the social roles that are assigned the individual. The problem of identity formation is a problem of working out patterns which allow a satisfactory interaction between the roles we embrace, the roles we comply with while merely tolerating them, and the roles we reject” (Brooke 22).

want a thesis smacking them in the face. A thesis all summed up into one neat sentence, as though that's possible, as though it's possible to encapsulate this whole compositional MOVEMENT that I am experiencing into one goddamn sentence with *maybe* a semicolon to give me a littlebitta word-count leeway, but even that's probably pushing it. Maybe theses need to have only one independent clause and max one subordinate clause to count. Who makes up those rules anyways.

Conventions are crushing, like we need anything else prohibiting us from saying what we mean and feel and *want* to say. We have the snotty standards of the discourse community to contend with. And professors who say with a bewildered sigh that this could have all been said in a five-paragraph essay. And ourselves, the prescriptive grammarian in each of our heads that urges us not to bother with all that experimenting stuff. It'll just make this assignment take longer to complete, plus who knows if it'll be accepted or even understood, and then, yea, we'll have ourselves in a big mess indeed. It's just so much, we urge ourselves, to just do it like everyone else is. You know, all we do is say, OK, this is my main argument, let me pound out a few paragraphs in support of it and *bam!* it's done, like *presto change-o!* But anymore, the fact is that that type of writing seems meaningless to me, empty as a conch shell.

What would convince *me* that conventions aren't necessary is something that follows *no* conventions, something that's allovertheplace and inyourface and at parts has you thinking what in hell is going on here and at other parts makes you think you've got it, oh yeah like you're the

"Scholarly Research"

"I am not arguing here that one should discourage dramatic writing or efforts to write in impassioned ways about a topic. What I am attempting to point to is the tacit privileging of a specific genre and the implied message to students that they should resist the temptation to learn to write traditional academic prose. Personal growth issues evolve into personal power issues, and the hallmark of personal power (at least for voicists like Elbow, Coles, Macrorie, and others) becomes the discovery and practice of *personal* voice in writing. By extension, the student is encouraged *not* to join the ranks of the academic elite who write vacuous, empty prose but to acquire power by promoting their unique selves" (Bowden 184).

master sleuth, before ripping the rug out from beneath your gettingcomfortable feet so that you stumble and trip on dusty old hardwood again, clamoring for a hand

to help you back up, but there's no hand so when you finally *do* rise, you know exactly how you did it and what it meant to you in that moment, you know you know *youknow* because you've been there and made it through. And *that's* what my essay needs to be.

“Landmark Essay”

I split an infinitive and nobody died -
- that I know of, anyways.

“Scholarly Research”
“The secret of productive word play is simple: Let yourself go” (Macrorie 238).

No prescriptive grammarian assassins stooped in the shadowy corners of my home, waiting with black-inked Times New Roman knives. No five-paragraph essay four-cornered me in any abandoned alleyway. I had feared the world of words would stand syntactically still, but, in fact, I split the infinitive, saved the file, and went to sleep without once wincing from grammatical pangs or misuse misgivings. I earned an A on my essay – no angry red ink encircled that spot on page three, paragraph seven, sentence four where the splitting occurred. No one asked me what the *hell* I was thinking. The only screams I heard did not channel shock, anger, or even splitting pain, but rather freedom
expression

and *me*.

I might just splice a comma next.

“Scholarly Research”
“In written text there is no literal voice; writing is marks strung out across a page. Oral features like stress and intonation may be keyed or suggested through word order, underlining, or italics, but voice in writing can only be metaphoric in nature” (Bowden 185).

Splitting and splicing:
it's like ripping off those dead,
tissuey layers of skin until
the reddened flesh
lies vulnerable,

exposed,

compelling.

Like scraping off all those **otherwise**s, those **nevertheless**s, those **whereupons** and **wheretofores** and *screaming*. Like shedding **thuses** and **therebys**, **consequentlys** and **ergos** into one conclusive heap.

Like *screwing* all those verbal caveats, those transitory demarcations. The flesh, the words, they wait, saturated with meaning and the growing anticipation of being screamed at last by a writer who finally revealed her voice through *slashing*, *splitting*, and *splicing* off the trappings of conventions.

Matthew Arnold had it right: “Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.” Sometimes the clearest way to acknowledge that I’m so obsessed with obeying the rules that my message becomes buried beneath the rubble of superficially perfect yet ultimately meaningless constructions is through *screaming*,

I WANT TO WILDLY WRITE WITH WORDS I MEAN!

I WANT TO WILDLY WRITE WITH WORDS I MEAN!

I WANT TO WILDLY WRITE WITH WORDS I MEAN!

Sometimes I need sentences that exceed the expected maximum length, sentences that stretch and ramble and flex their verbal muscles as a threat to just *try* and cut it down to accepted size, sentences that roll on like choppy waves that drag the sand around your feet until you’re trapped, immobilized, thigh-deep in water from that pull, yelling for help or a lifesaver or lifeguard, your arms flailing as the water rises higher about you, until at the

“Scholarly Research”

“You don’t have to write in a straight line that runs right at your reader. You can shoot words off on a diagonal, a little off target, and expect the reader to see where the bull’s-eye really is. ...You may turn upside down what you say. Exaggerate. You may say exactly the opposite of what you mean” (Macrorie 250).

period you at last – *gasp* – breath.

Sometimes I want fragments.

Fragments like electric shocks.

Like little kicks in the shins that recapture your attention.

Like a strobe light beating – you can hear the electrical droning – and your eyes keep adjusting, squinting, refocusing.

Pay attention.

Like the rapping of the teacher’s ruler at your desk.

“Scholarly Research”
“When people hear a voice in writing, what they most likely hear is a tone conveyed through an aggregate of small discourse features characteristic of the writer’s public persona. (For example, in writing I commonly use parentheses to suggest an ironic perspective on my own discourse...)” (Fulwiler 219).

(Do fragments count towards the minimum sentence requirement for a proper paragraph? (Do extra long sentences count twice towards that requirement? (If not I won’t bother making them. (You know, because I wouldn’t want to say something the way I think it should be said if doing so is going to impede my sentence count.))))))

We’ve been taught to design every aspect of the structure of every essay we write as though we’re going on some discomfited first date with our readers. Are my intentions clear? Do they know where we’re headed tonight, and at what time I’ll get them home? No, I want spontaneity, life –

I want to swing by their houses without calling, duck into places uninvited, pull them to me as though to slow dance before breaking down to boogie.

I don’t want these brushing fingertips, these holding hands –

I prefer the intimacy of peeling open my mind, and yours, too, and seeing what charges, impulses, ideas they share, see what arcs span across the flapping skin of our scalps and which remain rigid, disconnected, buzzing with confusion. Let’s

extrapolate and compare.

I won't have you back by midnight. I may not have you back at all and we'll just drive around Kerouacing and barbarically yawping 'til tomorrow. It'll be great to hear your voice. And mine. Because for me these screams yawps and latenight drives are the meaningful evocative flesh that my split infinitive exposed, *this* is what I want you to hear – not some sentence-level stuffing packed with celery, onions, parenthetical citations, not claims or evidence or analysis, or introductions and certainly not conclusions, just my voice, my voice *screaming*, as I bare myself to you, not screaming with pain, though, with joy – the joy of liberation.

Scalpel?

Now, doctor?

Yes. I'm going in for the splice.

“Personal or Academic Encounters”: “I dig this chick’s voice”

***ENGL 311: Poetry
Midterm Examination***

Directions for #1-3: Define each of the following literary devices with a short sentence or phrase.

1. Alliteration:

Alliteration is the repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of words in a sentence or phrase.

2. Personification:

Personification is the endowment of humanlike characteristics to an inanimate object.

3. Voice:

DEFINE VOICE THE PROFESSOR ASKS AS THOUGH A SENTENCE OR TWO

WOULD CUT IT. VOICE is the movement, the creation, the soul inside the writer bleedingwritihings*screeaming* on the paper, bleedingwritings*screeaming*cryingdying until someone comes and reads and says **AH-HA** I know you I feel you I see you I see you in myself and know that you are there, here, everywhere. **VOICE** is me talking to you, is the moment after when you start hearing and start listening and sucking it, absorbing it in, rolling in it. It’s the moment I press you against the wall against me against each other – you’re framed, now – confront you with me, me with you though I don’t know you in the sense of going out to lunch together but rather in the sense of someday somewhere I’ll know that you’ll know that we had this moment – **that** moment, and it’s during that confrontation you’ll know it and say, “I dig this chick’s voice,” because you were there, you are here now, with the writer, with me.

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”: Many writers often undergo periods of

“Scholarly Research”

“The primary purpose of punctuation is to ensure the clarity and readability of writing. Punctuation clarifies sentence structure, separating some words and grouping others. It adds meaning to written words and guides the understanding of readers as they move through sentences” (Gibaldi 80).

frustration with words and language. In an informal journal entry, describe what types of frustration you are facing or have faced

with your writing.

it’s gotten **S**o that i question eventapping the spa **C**ebar between words why bother why bother **r**with lin **e**br eaks or page breaks why not just fill bl **a**nk sheets of potential with my own handwriting **m**y own screamin g who want to read **w**ill find a way **a**nd they are the only ones listening **g** the only ones whom matter to me

except i want to reach more people than myself and a *selected few*
except i think I have *Something. To. Say.* that goes beyond myself
except if no one can understand what I’m saying it’s really of house at all

(if a tree falls down and nobody hears it crash into the bushes and foliage beneath it, does it make a noise at all?)

I have to think of my audience. And of my intention.
And those two aspects, they have to have to *havetocollide*

that no one can understand.

or else it'll all be a heap of vain words



Page Three: “I require no wavy lines”

Under, up, upon.

*Once upon a time, I would have reverted to those rules I had exalted for so long and lived happily ever after with my claim-sevidence-analysis and subordinating conjunctions. But that time was outside, over, past, impossible to return to. Now, also lost were my written whiplashes of wild anarchy and fetterless fervor, which, while screaming with self, acknowledged neither the piece’s message nor its intended audience. With. Within. Without: time to work with some rules without some others, all within the context of each writing task. By empowering myself as the final arbiter rather than allowing my fluctuating passions – my love/hate relationship with rules – to determine each essay’s destiny, I developed at last a voice that I could control: turn the volume **UP!** or down; adjust the tone from snarky to reflective, from I-love-you-madly to get-the-hell-outta-my-way, from academically persuasive to creatively compelling. My choice; my voice.*

“Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise”: As we begin to think about the rewriting process, consider your personal methods for writing and editing. When are you best able to produce work? When are you best able to revise that work? What sort of strategies to you use for both?

I used to always write hot and edit cool.

The result was some really cold writing that was edited really, really well.

Then I wrote hot. And edited hotter. And then broiled the whole thing on high.

I think I burned a few readers (I won’t even tell you how many trays of cookies I scorched).

I still write hot. As for the editing process – well, it depends on the temperature outside. And how many layers my readers are wearing. And if they need, say, warm chicken soup or freeze-your-brain milkshakes so thick they clog up the straw.

“Personal or Academic Encounters”: Quotations and Relationships

During another writing conference, my professor pulled a writing handbook

A WRITING HANDBOOK? IS SHE KIDDING?

from her desk drawer so that we could look up the rule regarding whether a colon goes inside or outside of quotation marks,

“Scholarly Research”

“If the structure of your sentence requires a semicolon or a colon that is not part of the quoted material, it belongs outside the quotation marks” (Belanoff, Rorschach, and Oberlink 115).

WHO THE HELL CARES?

since I used such a construction in my essay and since neither of us could exactly remember the edicts of prestigious prescriptive grammarians on the subject.

SOME THINGS AREN'T WORTH THE MENTAL SPACE.

We skimmed through the text of the handbook together until she located on page fifty-three the bulleted rule we wanted. “Outside,” she determined, pointing her finger at the spot for me to verify.

right.

In the final draft of my paper, I placed the colon on the outside of the quotation marks. There was no point in not doing in that way.

Particularly Enriching Writing Exercise: “Choose one of your papers that you would like to revise by changing the voice. It could

“Scholarly Research”

“Sometimes *stance* or *persona* can be substituted for voice; other times, it is *style* or *tone*...Voice is a metaphor—a very powerful one. Metaphors, by their very nature, enable us to talk about abstract concepts...that are difficult if not impossible to talk about in any other way...Despite the concreteness of production—you take a pen or computer and produce tangible text—composing text is as abstract and mysterious as love, war, or argument” (Bowden 285).

be a finished paper, it could be a draft, or it could be a long fragment from your private writing or freewriting” (Elbow and Belanoff 186).

Could it be all three – the finished paper, the draft, the long fragment? Because I’ve devoted a lot of time – a lot of *paper* – to experimenting with voices that weren’t my own, forcing false inflections like fleeting seasonal fashions instead of sticking with the one thing that lay within me the whole time. I drowned out the sound of myself with stiff prose burdened by conventions and shrieks that flirted with tastelessness – I jumped from wearing three formless bulky sweaters to a magenta minidress and heels.

And frankly, I’m more of a pajama pants type of girl.

That’s not the metaphor I want, though. Voice isn’t some strange garb that we can peel

on and off – no, it’s more of something *always*

there, but that only *sometimes* gets heard clearly.

It’s like one of those Casio keyboards that has two-

hundred different settings to choose from: honky-

tonk piano or stringed orchestra or a choir saying

“ooh” or a banjo strum. Yet when you listen to it,

you know it’s none of those – there *is* no honky-tonk piano or orchestra or choir or banjo, just a

keyboard that has the capability to generate similar sounds. And something’s missing, when the

keyboard plays in a style that’s not its own. Something like, authenticity, sincerity, truth – like

what you hear when you hear a for-real piano, a stringed orchestra, a multipart choir, a banjo.

“Casio,” you want to say, “stop trying so hard to be someone you’re not – you sound just fine as

the keyboard that you are.” That’s the state I want to be in. I want to stop imitating other

instruments and settle with the one I’ve got: my writing voice, without the flourishes of academic

“Scholarly Research”

“Real self. Real voice. I am on slippery ground here. There are layers and layers...Our less than real voices usually help us to deal with pressures we feel from some audiences and situations, and protect the deeper layers of self...Most of us, even though we don’t sound as false and slick as salesmen and hyped-up announcers, neglect this power of real voice. Our speech may be lively and fluent and sound just like us; we don’t lack voice...But we seldom use the power of our real voice, and we know it because of the surprising difference we feel on the few occasions when we do—when we get power into our words” (Elbow 293-5).

haughtiness or the squeal of nails-against-the-blackboard. Though I can use those elements sometimes, to add a little pizzazz – Casio shouldn't ignore all of its special functions, after all. The gist is to use them only to strengthen your writing – and to make sure the main melody is always played in your own key.

I want to revise and play the notes this time as the keyboard that I am.

“Landmark Essay”

Love, Hate, Negotiate

There's a very particular position in which I like to write: banged-up laptop supported on the wide arm of the couch, my hands poised over its keyboard; legs curled to my left; slippers feet tucked under a decorative floral pillow. Light: on. Jazz: on. Pretzels: very close at hand. Pen: chewed between sentences. Or phrases. Or even words, if there's much deliberation. Notes, books, and articles: when necessary, spread on available couch space. Mind: somewhere, usually focused on the blinking cursor, anticipating every character yet to come or pondering every one already there – no matter how I pledge to edit cool once I'm through the piece, I can never resist rereading and revising in the heat of composition.

Voice: a two-part answer. My speaking one waits stagnant for some interruption to require it – usually the phone ringing, at which point I *ahem-ahem* before

“Scholarly Research”

“I've 'found' my voice, then, just where it ought to have been, in the body-warmed breath escaping my lungs and throat. Forced by the exigence of physical disease to embrace my self in the flesh, I couldn't write bodiless prose. The voice is the creature of the body that produces it” (Mairs 399).

answering with a croak, “Hello?” My writing one, nowadays, sings, sometimes in the softest hum and other times operatically – *fortissimo*, in fact. The range is quite exquisite, really, and the singing quite preferable to the angsty screams and almost imperceptible whispers of my past.

Here in gray flannel pants and my hair banana-clipped off my face, here beneath the light

of the lamp that I always observe I should dust, here atop the neutral-colored cushions of the living room couch, here I stroke the raised dashes on the F and J keys while considering the topic or the title or the time that it's due, contemplating what I have thus far (even if it's just a line or two of wiggling ideas) and how I can shape that into a product to be proud of. Here I ponder the choices surrounding every word, every letter, and every comma in my paper:

Should I write in the first person?

Should I use the five-paragraph essay format?

Do I need a thesis? Do I have one? Want one?

Are there more pretzels?

Will the reader understand if I...?

How would it affect the piece if I...?

Should I ignore that rule about quotation marks?

Is that the phone? *Ahem-ahem.* "Hello?"

"Scholarly Research"

"The development of an authentic voice is a natural consequence of self-discovery. As you begin to find out who you are and what you think and to be comfortable with the person you are, you learn to trust your own voice in writing" (Stewart 2).

The answer to each of these questions shapes the content that will follow. Yes to the five-paragraph essay? Let me develop three main arguments, then. Yes to ignoring the rule about quotation marks? I'll backspace them away and reread to ensure it's still understandable without them. Yes to the pretzels? Looks

like I can endure another hour or so of work. Each choice creates a tributary stream into the overall composition, one that will affect the success of the essay, one that in later revisions I can levee or leave freeflowing in. I love the potential locked in every decision. I love the voice released in every choice. I love making the appropriate adjustments in my timbre as I transfer that singing into lines of written words.

I adjust the angle of the laptop's screen, musing over a semicolon or a thesis, a transition or an apostrophe. What am I trying to convey here? How can I best express it? Sometimes I slip in curse words to embody frustration. Sometimes I nix quotation marks to blur the boundary between what is thought and what is said. Sometimes I run-on a sentence to build excitement, or fragmentize to Shock. And. Awe. Other times, I write tidy sentences with cheerful punctuation. I provide evidence and I analyze and I capitalize appropriately. The point is, I try not to make these decisions based only upon the conventions and expectations of my discourse community; instead, I incorporate my particular needs for each particular essay at the particular time that I'm writing it as well.

Right now it's cozy on the couch with Coltrane's jazz and pretzel snaps.

(You want some? I'm willing to share.)

The light's on. The lamp's dusty. The pillow's positioned atop my feet. And the singing? I'd say it's strong tonight. Must be because I have something pretty important to say, not timidly or aggressively but in a rhythm that I can hear and, with proper negotiations of those rules I love and hate, that I can portray vividly in my writing.

"Scholarly Research"

"I am also convinced that the more you know about your craft, the freer you can be from it. My interpretation of freedom has nothing to do with sloppy or careless technique that is a caricature of freedom. To me real freedom arrives when the artist's creative instinct can function without limitation and without consciousness of technical means" (Peterdi, qtd. in Macrorie 263).

"Personal or Academic Encounters": Relations

I worked on my senior honors thesis for seven solid months. The thesis and I were, in all respects, dating – in fact, to date, it's the longest committed relationship I've ever been in. We spent our weekends together – we stole late hours from weekday nights – we woke each other up to get to know each other some more, just a little bit more, prying into each other's selves with

every letter produced.

I was in love. I dreamed about Thesis. I talked to everyone about Thesis, and everyone asked me how Thesis was doing.

“How’s the Thesis, Lauren?”

“Great, five pages done this weekend!” Five pages, I’d say, as though Thesis had picked me up at 8 one night, shared popcorn with me at a movie theatre, and brought me to an all-night diner for gravy fries before kissing me goodnight at the door.

Other times were dark, with angst-driven emails to my thesis director:

“I hate it right now.” (She said it’s natural to hate it. She said I’d probably hate it again before the whole thing was over. But I had fallen – hard – back in love and at that moment further strife seemed inconceivable.)

She and I met on Tuesday mornings to discuss Thesis, reviewing the week’s activities like two teenagers analyzing every detail of a date:

“I did really well incorporating the personal aspects and excerpts from my own writing. But the research is giving me trouble...”

“Still working on the research this week. It’s gotten easier to incorporate. But the subtitles are a disaster...”

“I revised some of the personal elements. Subtitles, done! The framework is working nicely. Any idea of a source for this section...?”

The truth is, it was constant – *constant* – LOVE. HATE. NEGOTIATE. Here I was, aiming to show to the world that *strange* world behind the writing process, behind the shakyunsteadyandsososcarly development of a writer’s voice. I’m grabbing a scalpel and opening up a writer’s sacred space, I’m pushing the boundaries, and yet every time I’d fall back on what I

needed to make every mind-boggling moment comprehensible:

Subtitles.

White space.

Punctuation.

It was like, in order to blow my reader's mind, I needed to put their mind at ease. Trust me – this part may be confusing, I explain with every convention-saluting sentence, but just stick with me and you'll understand. Just hold on to me, the conventions, for your handlebars and I'll ease you through the crazy potholed path ahead, and man will you learn from the ride – and you may even let go of the handlebars along the way.



Expectations

“Clear”: Check.

“Organized”: Check.

“Well-developed”: Check, to a fault.

“Standards of good English”: “Good” is pretty subjective, so check.

“Three pages in length”: Negotiations necessary. I hope it's something we can talk about.



Page Four (The Excess): “What Exactly We Can Do”

In his car, I am fiddling with everything within fiddling range: the silky pink fringe of my scarf, the pennies in the pocket of my gray dress coat, the beige seatbelt strap that affixes me firmly not only to the passenger seat of his car but to this weighty moment as well, pinning me to the scene like some Prufrockian dead bug mounted in an insect exhibition.

The truth is—, I think. Or, What I mean to say is—. How about, I want you to know that I treasure our friendship and hope that we can take it to the next—. Maybe, I've been wondering if you feel the same way that I do about—. Are there rules, I wonder, for how to tell your best friend that you've been uselessly suppressing a crush on him for months, and suspect that he's been doing the same with you? What exactly is the conventional protocol for broaching this almost taboo topic?

"I want to ask you something," I begin.

"Yea?" He glances at me.

"Yea." The difficulty now lies in getting these words just right. Should I begin with, say, a direct address followed by a conditional clause? Or I could opt for an interrogative followed by a direct address, or even nix the direct address since, seeing as he's the only other person in the car, it's a bit unnecessary. I could also jump straight into a declarative, with an implicit interrogative in pursuit.

I prefer the direct address, really. It's just more personal.

At a red light, he reaches out to lower the volume on the car's stereo. He releases the brake when the light changes to green and I wonder as we continue down the road how I can ever amass and assemble ten-thousand shooting words and thoughts into one coherent query.

I rewrite mentally, rashly: *Do you feel the lightningy, glitteringly, static-crackling, snap and pop of the electricity between us at times?*

I imagine lunging over the emergency brake and ripping a kiss right off his unsuspecting lips: *I'm not waiting any longer for this moment to occur for it to unfold like careful origami and lie flat and bare so we can see its shape without any fancy misleading designs – I'm not waiting any longer let's look at it boldfaced now and see what we have and what exactly we can do with*

what's there, okay?

“What did you want to ask me?” he finally says because I haven’t spoken and we’re already on Euclid Avenue, just six blocks from my house.

It occurs to me that I should just e-mail him tonight, compose a beautiful message from the comfort of my desk that I can edit *ad infinitum* and send when I’ve approved its faultlessness and he’ll respond in similar fashion and we’ll know, and that will be that.

It occurs to me that I can close my eyes and scream, “ILIKEYOUILIKEYOUILIKE-YOU” until his credulous ears pick up the spaces between the words and he can quiet me down enough to offer some, hopefully positive, reply.

I sigh and make my selection, stuttering out in alliterative syllabic smash, “I was wondering what we are.”

“Well,” he says, and shifting the car into park after he turns into my driveway, “that’s something we should talk about.”

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