DON'T FEAR THE BLANK PAGE

Ben Wetherbee on the art of writing

story and photo by Christopher Wilson

Let's face it — in college we write. A lot. Most of the time it's for assignments requiring we regurgitate whatever the professor said in class or an analysis of some research we've completed or because our professors are evil and grade by the pound. I jest on that last part, but sometimes it certainly seems that way.

I asked Ben Wetherbee, PhD and associate professor of interdisciplinary studies and coordinator of writing at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma why students are required to write so much in college and what it takes to be a good writer.

Ben Wetherbee is the coordinator of writing at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma.

Q: In college students are inundated with assignments requiring academic writing, such as essays etc. Why is this important?

A: I notice a couple of telling (perhaps biting) bits of phrasing in the question itself — "inundated" and "academic writing." So, I read this as two questions: First, why do college students have to write so damn much? And second, what good is academic writing, anyway?

I'll tackle the latter question first. The fact is, whatever discipline you're dealing with — from literature to kinesiology to microbiology — the organization and transmission of knowledge occurs through writing. At its core, academic writing is just the language of disciplinary communities, and this language is exactly what facilitates new knowledge about everything from Shakespeare's comedies to the containment of COVID-19. The world needs specialized language to advance and communicate specialized information, and academic citizens, undergrads included, need to familiarize themselves with these ways of writing.

Specialization can also spawn annoying byproducts — jargon, obtuseness, verbosity. But when you get down to it, these features aren't unique to academic writing; they characterize most in-group speech. A sociologist might say, "The habitus of bourgeois sensibility is to exercise moderate decorum in dress and gesture," instead of, say, "Middle-class people don't present themselves too loudly." Maybe annoying, sure. But the sports commentator, who never gets accused of trafficking in academese, might just as egregiously say (do your best John Madden impression here), "Now here's a guy who really knows how to use his explosive physicality to break contain down the stretch." In plain English, that means something like, "Johnny is hard to tackle, so he can run around other players."

In the case of the academic writing, though, the jargon is also productive. Or it often is, at least. Getting an education in an academic field means more than learning about that field; it also means learning how to enter into that field through the disciplinary conventions inscribed in its writing. So, reading sociology articles and learning how to write like a sociologist amounts to a process of enculturation. In a very real sense, I think you are a sociologist — or a literary theorist, or a musicologist, etc., etc. — once you internalize the disciplinary vocabulary of sociology or musicology well enough that you can marshal that vocabulary in your own writing and cite those who have used these terms before you. That's academic writing. Sometimes it's ugly writing. Sometimes it's not. But these key intellectual moves are what really count.

So, we've also arrived upon the answer to the second part of the question: College students have to write so damn much because writing purposefully and often is the best way to intellectually habituate oneself into a scholarly community. Or at

least, that's what should happen. Folks in my academic field, rhetoric and composition, often criticize other disciplines for failing to teach their writing conventions as often and as explicitly as they should. In other words, I'd argue that it's not enough to make students mimic sociology writing; sociologists should also teach their students why they're expected to write this way and what these discourse conventions do. I think much of the anxiety surrounding academic writing stems from failure to explicitly teach what academic writing does in a given field. This happens all the time, even in English studies, and its possible that the frustration implied in your question stems from such mystification.

Q: Does it take a love of the language to be a good writer?

A: It sure doesn't hurt! But at the same time, just consider any vocation or pastime: sometimes it's enjoyable, and sometimes it's not. A mechanic might love cars in general but dread going to work tomorrow. And I might love writing in general, but I might hate writing this Thursday. That doesn't mean I've lost my lust for the English language; it just means I'm not in the mood right now or that the essay I'm working on has hit a suffocating impasse. Writing is hard. These things happen to everyone.

A love of language — that is, again, a playful, experimental attitude toward words and sentences themselves — does brighten up the mundane, though. It can turn a chore into a creative, artistic problem. But we should frankly acknowledge that writing is work, and it's often hard work.

Q: What recommendations do you have for budding writers?

A: Don't write in fear. Silence that nagging voice that questions your very moral fiber if you misplace a comma. Every English teacher or professor has met someone on an airplane or bus stop who recoils in terror a bit when hearing of our vocation. "Oh! I'm not very good at English." That's always code for, "I had a traumatic experience with a semicolon and a red pen once."

In truth, learning to write well is a lot like riding a bike: it takes practice and the metaphorical equivalent of muscle memory. You can't just memorize abstract rules and then — presto! — morph into a great writer. Instead, you have to, well, write. And read. A lot. But at the same time, writing is not an elite activity reserved for an exclusive overclass. Everyone can do it.

The ancient Greeks thought of writing and public speaking as techne, or an art, rather than a science, that one learns through sustained, theoretically informed experience. Techne shares a root with many modern English terms — technique, technical skill, technology. Here, we're talking about the individual's comfort with writerly tools, intellectual and physical both. Writing and readings sharpens these tools and, in turn, sharpens our thinking.

Q: Why do you write and what do you love about writing?

A: I would probably have answered these questions differently at different stages of my life. When I was in high school, I wrote a lot of poetry and song lyrics that I try not to think about anymore, though they surely had a therapeutic quality and helped me develop toward where I am now. Teen angst can be productive. In college, I wrote movie reviews for the school paper. In hindsight, I think I was asserting myself as a "movie guy," and film has remained an avocational and scholarly interest for me ever since. I also started writing poetry and fiction more seriously — that is, with a deeper, more theoretically informed sense of craft and purpose.

Now, I identify proudly as an academic writer. When I sit down to write, my purposes usually involve teaching or scholarship or both. Despite its many flaws and annoyances, academic writing gives me a sense of community and purpose. I study and research rhetoric, and I find intense emotional and intellectual gratification from writing about the persuasive uses of language and expression. I write, in other words, to give shape to my ideas and contributions to my scholarly community, and that community significantly defines who I am as a writer and as a person.

I still write for other reasons, too. I string words together on Facebook to stay in touch with old friends. I still occasionally scribble some poetry when an idea or image wells up that seems to demand poetic expression. I enjoy editing and revision, too; for instance, I spent some minutes last year wrestling with the verbiage of the university's mission statement.

In each case, though, I'm always writing because I have something to communicate or something, I want to help someone else communicate. A playful and inventive appreciation of language itself facilitates such communication; as I see it, the aesthetics and purposes of language are always bound up together, and they both supply my motivations for writing.

Q: Who is a writer?

A: I'd like to bring the term "writer" down to earth a bit. I think that word still conjures images of the isolated white, male genius sitting in nature and inviting the muses to guide his inerrant pen. Instead, writing is messy, writing is social and writing belongs to everyone.

The truth is that all writing is communicative and purpose-driven, whether those purposes are rhetorical, academic, therapeutic, or anything else. A well-crafted email is a noble thing, and so is a beautiful sonnet. These are two vastly different genres that do different things with language, but one isn't better than the other. The poet isn't better than the technical writer, and often the technical writer moonlights as a poet. Every human has the right to locate her/him/themself in the world of written language. We all write; we're all writers. ◆