Snapshot of a Writer/Teacher

When I got out of high school, I didn’t really know how to write an essay, despite having been in all the honors English classes. In high school, or at least in my high school, there were few enough students who enjoyed writing that, if a student had one or two original ideas and a smart turn of phrase, she could get away with almost anything. I certainly had never been told about the five-paragraph essay, and I usually just wrote to amuse the teacher or myself.

My instinct for writing structures got me through the English 102 research paper in college, but I didn’t really learn what academic writing was until my Shakespeare and Chaucer seminar at Evergreen. The professor slammed my first paper with quite a few sharp and sarcastic remarks, and I figured out pretty quickly what was acceptable and what wasn’t. My analysis was more careful from then on. But what really taught me to write was the fact that I had an actual audience for the first time ever. The professors had us publish our bi-weekly essays in a notebook in the library, and other students not only read them, but also responded to them. It was here I learned to keep the reader in mind and lead them carefully through my argument without losing them or confusing them. If they were going to respond to my paper, I really wanted them to respond to the idea, not talk about the places they got lost or confused, or completely misunderstand my idea and so respond to something I hadn’t intended.
Although I have written some manic short stories, I am most comfortable writing academic essays. The process is a simple one to me and continues to yield satisfying results, eventually. Of course it was not until grad school that I learned the method I now teach my students, and some of my bad habits learned at Evergreen still persist. Even in grad school I would not do any actual writing on a paper until I had mulled an idea over for several weeks and then only start when the due date was imminent. Then I would just chip away at the first paragraph for several hours until it was pretty bad and put it away. I tend to rely on my unconscious quite a bit because it usually comes through for me. After I write that first bad paragraph, my mind keeps chipping away at it while I focus on other things. When I come back to the essay, usually after a few days, a new introduction seems obvious, and the rest of the essay flows pretty easily from that.

I have been slow to adopt some of the useful methods I was told to teach my 101 students as a graduate instructor at Western. I will frequently fastwrite with my students in class, but I rarely do it on my own when I have a paper due. When I do use it, it works very well, and helps me to avoid the kind of trouble I got into with my critical essay rough draft on the death penalty, in which my conclusion contradicted my thesis. Allowing myself to be open during the drafting process, however, allowed me to take a new direction with this essay in the next draft and helped me to clarify my position on the death penalty. When I came back after several days to write the second draft, I situated myself precisely in the debate between Blackmun and Scalia and also did some research to make my essay more relevant.

I was still not sure, however, that I had written the best essay for my audience; in this case, my students. There were no tangents like there were in the first draft, so the argument was much cleaner, but I tended to go too quickly through the arguments and
presumed a level of understanding of the law that most of them don’t have yet, so it makes it difficult for them to use it as an example for their own work. This is where the review process helped. When I passed this essay out and still had to walk them through the argument in the essay (not just the organization), I realized that I had been writing to a different audience and needed to slow down and explain legal concepts a little more clearly. Some students also pointed out in the peer review that, rather than siding with Scalia over Blackmun, my actual position seemed to be a compromise between the two. 

While I don’t think any judge has the right to abandon the death penalty independently, I sympathize enough with his concerns that I think the whole legal system should call a moratorium on the death penalty until Scalia’s legal formulas can be worked out based on the cases that have already come before the supreme court, and I have adjusted my thesis to reflect this in my portfolio. 

Although I can say I have used most of the writing process I teach to some degree in the construction of this portfolio, I have not needed to use an outline at all. I can only recall needing to use one once in grad school when I couldn’t see a currently 15-page paper on semiotics and romanticism ever coming to an end. I had to sit down and outline what I had already done just to figure out what I was trying to say. I probably moved every paragraph in that draft to a new location and had to write new transitions, but the final essay did sum up on about page 20 and was much easier to follow. The composition director at Western was a fan of breaking essay drafts into functional “chunks” instead of doing formal outlines, and I did that with my memoir, when I had to isolate and remove the analysis from the rough draft essay in order to reconstruct the story draft. 

This also allowed me look at the stories again without the original framework and get some ideas from my students as well. I was surprised to see how different the
interpretations were, and I started to revise the focus of my essay. The original theme tried to apply the concept of latency to these childhood experiences, but I didn’t have a clear audience for this exploration, and so it lacked the definite message I like to see in the conclusion of any essay. Now I have decided that parents and educators might be a good target audience for this essay. They should know that, despite their beliefs that their children are innocent, sexual knowledge can sweep through a grade school like a cold virus. So I have now included the conversation I had with my friend who had experimented with her friends and cousins after being molested by an older step brother to show that a parent’s denial can lead to lasting guilt on the part of the child, who may grow up believing they are dirty and have corrupted others.

I hope what this portfolio reveals most, especially to my students, is that, as a writer, I will never outgrow the tools I am attempting to teach them now. Writing never really becomes so easy that you can abandon the drafting process completely. No one writes a perfect draft the first time because there is no such thing as perfect writing. But the process of writing will become increasingly interesting to them as they become more confident in it. They will come to realize that revision is more than just correcting the “faults” that a professor may see in their writing and see it as a way to open up new possibilities in their thinking and understanding.

Comment [DO10]: I no longer teach the memoir because we don’t have room for it in the sequence. Once again, I never actually made this revision, but it was fun to think about.

Comment [DO11]: All essays need a conclusion, even a reflective letter. Try to tie some threads together. This is a strange example because I am writing as both a writer and a teacher.