

***Some Things About Writing,
Thinking, Noticing and
Other Class Stuff
at the Year's
Halfway
Point***

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1. Why I'm Writing This

Every year at a certain point I come to the (usually) sudden conclusion that time is linear and elusive and slipping quickly from my grasp, and I realize that at a certain point you guys will slip from my grasp (such as it is), and-despite not really wanting to flatter you -that is a moment of something like depression. Part of the feeling comes from the simple fact that I've been hired to help you guys, and learning/improvement is anything but linear. It also isn't always so noticeable, even when it's happening. So the halfway point of the year seems like a fitting point to stop and take stock, to think about where we've been and where we're going and how we can all do better. I hesitate to write things like this, because obviously you're all at different points, so the things I say don't apply to everyone. Some of you are doing great; all of you have been memorable in one way or another; but I wouldn't be writing this if everything were positive. One way to look at this: I can sometimes tell how the writing part of the class is going by how many papers I want to photocopy. (When I do want to photocopy them, it's because I think they're worth showing to other classes or because they're just so damn good that I want a copy of them; I just can't bear losing them). This year, I've copied many non-literary essays but not many of the literary variety.

2 The Most Important Point, the Point Around Which All of This Revolves

Anecdote #1: Michael Soto walks into the English office to talk to me about his Huck paper, which I proceed to read. Michael's a pretty good writer, and the essay is certainly competent. Its subject is women in the novel, and the way that Twain casts them much more positively than he does the men. The thesis is a reasonable one, and he has some proof to defend his claim. The problem is that it pretty much just ends there: Twain is positive about women. Mike probably wants some specific advice from me, but all I can really tell him is that I don't think that writing the paper has hurt his brain much; that he needs to do more thinking; that what he's written seems like the beginning of a more interesting essay that discusses the implications, the why's behind Twain's decision to favor female characters. Then Michael says: "The thing is, I don't really like writing this kind of essay". And I realize: until he does like this kind of essay, it's going to be really really hard to convince him to think hard enough that his brain hurts.

Anecdote #2: Three students (let's call them for the sake of convenience Dan, Darryl, and Eric) are in my room during exam week talking about the class, and basically discussing the same thing that Soto was. Except their point is bigger, something like: look, we're just in this for the numbers, man, we don't care about all of that other [expletive] stuff, like life, or getting better at writing, because none of that [expletive] stuff is very immediate, and so on. One of Eric's comments was "I just wish that reading was interactive," part of a larger conversation about how much television he watches.

And I was thinking to myself about a poem that Miss Kennedy wrote for me that she gave me on Monday as she left Hun for good and about a sort of famous

essay called "I Have a Dream" by a guy whose name was King that pretty much changed the world when people heard it and about how incredible the forbidden-relationship in *The English Patient* is written (incredible enough to make you want to fall in love) and about a letter that my ex-girlfriend wrote me this year (basically a series of pretty heart-breaking memories) and about the fact that before I knew what I was doing with my life and was just kind of drifting around I read a book called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (by Milan Kundera) which basically was written for me and spoke to me about 16 hours a day for the next year and about hearing people crying on the air talking about *The Bluest Eye* and about a woman bringing flowers to Toni Morrison at a reading and telling her that her works had changed her life and about the poem that Tabor Story read at Kate Gorrie's memorial service and I thought to myself: Yeah, I wish reading were interactive.

3 What #2 Is Trying to Say

You'd do much much better in this class if you could find a way to really care about it¹, to realize that in all kinds of important ways literature has the ability to touch our lives. And yes, I realize that not all of you are going to fall in love with reading or become English majors or teachers, but consider this: Physics teachers have novels on their bedside tables; English teachers or stockbrokers or even Physics teachers do not have Physics textbooks on their bedside tables. There is a big difference between what you read in most other classes and what you read in English, and you need to treat them differently.

Here are the ways that I can contribute (or have contributed to this; and yes, I realize that I could do better with this side of things): try to make class discussions interesting; sometimes do some weird things in class; change the reading list to include modern novelists like Kesey and Morrison and O'Brien; assign essays like the Afterlife one or the fragmented one or the holiday one or the Thoreau experiment one. In other words, some of the things I plan are there largely because they might make you interested. But: that doesn't mean that the stuff that seems less interesting (analytical essays, more 'dry' novels, in-class writing, etc.) can't also mean something to you.

4 Something Else Eric Said

"Look, we really just want to write papers about getting laid".

5 An Answer to #4 (Alternative Title: The Nick Yurchenco Postulate)

The other day, Nick stayed after to ask me if he could write his Huck paper about emotions versus intellect (or something like that), and in the middle of telling him that I thought that it was a good topic, I realized something that seemed

¹ There's an irony here, isn't there? The only way to do really well numerically in the class (what most of you want) is to bring the class closer to your life (what I want and some of you say you don't care about).

important: on the literary papers, Nick is just finding ways to use the books to help him say things he's interested in; he's finding ways (even when the books don't totally satisfy him) of meeting the books halfway, of interacting with them. In other words, his answer to Eric is: "Use the books to help you write about getting laid".

As I think about this, it's probably true that Richard and Arina and Sara Hopper on her particularly excellent Cuckoo's Nest essay (and perhaps others students) are doing their own versions of the same thing; they have pet topics, and they use the books to help them investigate further. These days, my pet topic is coincidence/fate. I've been writing an essay for our writing group at Hun on that subject, and now it seems that whenever I look carefully at my life or at a movie or a song or, yes, a book, I notice something about coincidence/fate.

6 Something That I Thought About As I Walked My Dogs This Morning (Snow Day #2)

It occurs to me that what #5 is suggesting is something pretty close to a discussion about free will². That is to say, I think that you guys are used to going to classes where you don't have much say in what goes on; you can't determine your own fate (except perhaps numerically, by working hard). The teacher, in those cases, gets to play the role of God, the being who dictates (and can therefore be blamed for) what occurs in the class. I think that my class is much more about free will, about choices that you guys get to make: What should my topic be for this essay? What form should I choose? What author (and what books) should I read for the twenty page essay? When should I really begin working hard on that assignment³? What should I write about for the "creative" essays? Where should I find the words for the vocabulary? What midterm book should I read? And so on. The good news in a world governed by free will: you get to choose; you are at least somewhat the master of your own ship. The bad news: free will implies responsibility. Passivity in the face of free will doesn't usually turn out so well.

7 The Carly Baldwin Postulate

On Monday, Carly (in a hurry, frazzled, running out the door) came in to ask me if she could write her Huck essay as a comparison between it, Thoreau, and Into the Wild. When I said that I thought it was great, she said "Ok, but I don't know where it's going," and I said "That's good" and then her head exploded. Post re-assembly, it took her a while to agree with my claim, but through the use of two quotations⁴, she got there. Actually, I don't think that Carly was alone in think-

ing the way she did; I really do wonder how many of you look at writing as a generative process. My sense is that you ought to have some idea about what you're interested in (either because it grabs you as you read or because I or someone else mentions it to you or because it's on the assignment sheet) and then you ought to spend some time rereading and writing feverishly and ripping up half of what you wrote and pacing nervously and stopping for a couple of days and so on....until you reach some interesting point that is way different than the general idea you started with.

My experience in writing an essay on Twain's novel a couple of years ago for my class was something like that: I noticed something about time, but wasn't sure what; then I went back and reread most of the book, and noticed about 700 hundred things about time and came up with a conclusion that interested me very much; that is, I learned something by writing; I let myself wander and ended up in a place that I originally knew nothing about. By the end of the writing process I knew what I was saying.

8 The Best Quotation for Carly (But I Forgot to Tell Her Then)

E.L. Doctorow, a famous contemporary writer: "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way".

The point-I hope it's already obvious-is that your papers should be about experimenting with ideas, about heading down roads you didn't even know were there. What this is suggesting is doing some informal writing, some writing that might turn out pretty sloppy. I think that's great, as long as what you ultimately turn in is an edited version, not the original.

9 The Paul Muldoon Postulate

I'll repeat what I wrote on the last page of the class expectations sheet I gave you the first day of the school year. Paul Muldoon, a famous Irish poet who teaches at Princeton, once said something like this to someone I know: "My job as a teacher? My job as a teacher is to let you change my life". I love that line, but here's how it applies particularly to our writing. If I can do a better job of helping you guys write interesting essays, my life becomes infinitely more interesting. And despite the fact that the statement seems incredibly self-centered for a teacher to say, what it's really suggesting is something very important and cool about writing. Instead of what usually goes on with student writing-that is, teachers held hostage by the fact that they are paid to read essays, even if the essays are incredibly boring, instead of operating the way the world works, which is that if the writing is incredibly boring, it gets jettisoned (please don't toss this!)-you guys should operate under the assumption that your writing has to be good. Your essay shouldn't get a good grade unless I wanted to keep reading it.

²Which, coincidentally, is pretty damn close to Richard's pet topic.

³A hint.

⁴"Not all who wander are lost", (J.R.R. Tolkien) and "He who knows from the start where he is going will not go far", (Napoleon).

10 A Word to Amelia (and anyone in her boat)

In no way have I ignored the writing advice things you wrote me in class the other day. One of the repeated suggestions was that I should give more specific advice (and more feedback) on essays: I think it's a fair complaint, and I'll try to comply with the request. But I do have a couple of responses. One is that so many times, my advice need to be something like what I gave Soto (see #2): you need to think more. In other words, it's not so much a question of style or writing ability, it's about process and independence and thinking: things that are much harder to help with. Another (somewhat related and directed to Amelia specifically but others as well) is that some of you are great stylists, writers who make certain teachers jealous, who don't need much (or any) help writing, but instead have to keep plugging away and experimenting and thinking and deepening life experiences. (If you are someone who's struggling stylistically, I probably have put more comments on your papers and I hope I can help you find ways to say things better; if you have more questions or are frustrated, you should probably be coming to extra help more often).⁵

11 How Much Reading⁶ is Getting Done?

Not much needs to be said. All kinds of chances for success, improvement, life-fulfillment, and so on have been missed by some of you because you are not reading (or not reading with anything resembling care or not reading on time).

12 A Reminder

At the beginning of the year, I played "Hook", by Blues Traveler, and I gave you a Hemingway story with a hidden-ish idea behind it and we realized that soy milk could spell some pretty amazing things if we looked at it carefully enough and I

⁵I should probably be more clear here. I think I'm saying a couple of things. One is that many of you are better writers (that is to say, stylists) than you are thinkers/readers/interpreters. (Or maybe part of it is that you aren't spending enough time thinking or reading; the bottom line is that many papers are written better than they are thought out). It isn't so easy to give advice to those people, who, after all, are really being told that they need more independent ideas. The one thing I try to do is to send them off in a particular direction. Now, if what you are after is advice about style, about how to write better sentences, there probably is a whole lot more I can help you with. But, if you are relying mostly (or solely) on my comments on your paper, then you're doing yourself a disservice; it's very hard to give you tons of advice about style in a written way; I'm not going to tell you what words to put down, after all. Often, I'll say something like: "This section could be worded better". In cases like that, I'm hoping that a couple things happen. One, that you experiment with better ways to word things. Two, that you come see me for much more substantial (verbal) advice. It's extremely important to say that these matters of style are very personal; you have to develop your own way of writing. If you look at the four highest grades this marking period-in some sense the most successful writers-you'll find very different things. One is probing, academic, analytical, somewhat impersonal; one is poetic, multi-syllabic, erudite; one is skillful, conversational, somewhat lighter in tone; one is stopping and starting, mazy, profound).

⁶As I've said before, what you call reading and what I call reading might not be the same thing. Some of you have engaged in some pretty Clintonesque reasoning when saying that you read: "Sure. I read last night".

told some of you a story about an older and seemingly stodgy professor I had who, after reading a particularly phallic description in a 19th century novel told us: "You've got to know a _____ when you see it!!!!!" How many of you are missing the _____'s in your life because you're just not paying attention?

13 Something Famous that Relates to #12

"The unexamined life is not worth living".

14 Some Stuff About Me

One of the greatest times of my life was the month I spent in France almost two years ago at the soccer World Cup. This was basically a month of going to soccer games and eating really greasy sausages smeared with mustard (and sometimes with French fries inside the sandwich!) and hanging out in Brazilian samba circles in between a guy playing a trumpet and another playing a drum and beating Romanians at foosball and almost never showering and taking 12 hour train rides to get to the next game and talking to die-hard and toothless Scottish fans wearing kilts and thinking I was going to die when I heard an enormous explosion at the same time that a group of neo-Nazi skinheads were rushing down an alley towards the street I was on and so on. This trip was really just for fun and because I love soccer, but an added bonus was the fact that the Princeton Packet (ok, so it wasn't exactly Sports Illustrated) was allowing me to write a weekly article to send back to them⁷. I loved the writing because it awakened me to the world around me: I had to notice stuff or I'd have to send back something to publish in an actual newspaper that was incredibly boring or stupid. Even while I did things that were to me (or anyone) incredibly fun, I was looking for stories, angles, little snippets I could use. (I began one article by talking about a movie I had seen just before the trip; another began with a conversation I had with a middle-aged Brazilian man on an incredibly crowded and sticky subway on the way to a game; the second half of another article relied on overhearing a drunken Danish man with a soccer puppet around his neck--don't ask-- talking to another man about the game we were going to see). For a month, all the events of my life had potential significance. Who could ask for more?

15 The Other Part of #14

What I wrote about above was the fun part. The part that wasn't as fun relates to the fact that writing when it's taken seriously is, for most people, just damn hard. I was really exercising my brain to come up with stuff; I was trying to tie a bunch of threads together; I was writing against deadlines; I didn't get rewrites! And if what I'm writing to you now has a message, it might be that writing is hard work.

Anecdote: when I went back to graduate school three summers ago, I would think so hard while writing my papers that I often got headaches and was totally

⁷Articles which were read by at least 3 people.

spent-emotionally, physically, mentally-when I finished writing.

Anecdote: Leidy Springsted, who was in my class last year, said: "I wrote so hard last night my forearms still hurt".

Anecdote: Jack Kerouac, one of my favorite writers, used to work so hard that he'd sweat through a number of shirts as he wrote. Picture one of America's most famous writers, typing through the night, with sweat-stained shirts drying all around his apartment.

When I read your papers, I should think that smoke poured out of your brain

16 Some Thoughts About Process

This section also mostly deals with me⁸. When I was in that graduate school course, these were the steps in my process. I knew I had a paper coming, so during reading and discussion I tried to find a topic and eventually came up with a general idea. Then I reread the whole book trying to find evidence for it, and learned many things. While I reread I took a ton of notes, and did some brief outlining as ideas came to me. Then I wrote like crazy for a while to generate ideas. Then I began the essay, and had written about a page and a half when I realized that I was going about it all wrong; I realized then exactly what I wanted to say. I outlined the new idea, then began writing from the outline. From that point on, it was pretty smooth writing until the end, though exactly where I was going changed a little bit a couple of times. Then: printed it out and proofread it several times. Handed it in.

This is neither a story about how hard working I am nor one about exactly how to write a paper. But it does make some points: you could probably be working harder; you might benefit from more steps in your process; the steps swing back and forth, they don't need to be divided into neat little sections; you might benefit from doing some informal writing to generate ideas; rereading the book (or sections) might help; proofreading is important. Now, you guys⁹ probably don't need to work as hard as I did in a graduate class; but if you put more thought and more steps into your papers, they would probably turn out better.

⁸As Thoreau said, I'd talk about someone else if I knew someone else better

⁹Teenage punks.