

Semester Reflection: Fightin' with My Head

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What do I want to say? *How* do I want to say it? *Why* do I want to say it? These questions kept echoing in my head as I sat down to outline my end-of-semester reflection. As I thought about where I was as a writer at the beginning of the semester in comparison to where I am now, I realized that these questions in my head were new. This intentionality in my writing has completely enhanced the way that I think, read, and write; all of the enhancements to my rhetorical tools, research skills, and editing processes fall under the umbrella of intentionality. Everything that Harper Lee wrote was intentional. Everything that Bryan Stevenson wrote was intentional. It was this intentionality that had me reading for hours in my dorm room before I realized that I was four chapters past what was due for next class. It was this intentionality that made me put down *Just Mercy*, and say “I want to fight these injustices for the rest of my life!”

It is this intentionality that makes me more proud of the writing I completed in this class than any other writing I have produced in my academic career. No sentence in my Bildungsroman narrative was just a sentence. They were emotional pleas, plot enhancers, connections to my audience and our universal emotions, conveyers of the truth. I edited sentence by sentence asking myself, “What am I trying to say? Is this the best, most compelling way that I can portray it?” I found that including more figurative language, intentionally incorporating it into my writing, always made my writing significantly more compelling.

Instead of just discussing heartbreak, I drew an allusion to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, imploring "when had I been written into sour misfortune's book?" Instead of just identifying as a classical dancer, I also identified with the dance-like alliteration of "*pirouettes* and pointe shoes, *tendus* and blistered toes, *sous-sous* and so much sweat." It was understanding that Tom Robinson and Emmett Till died riddled with the same number of bullet wounds that tells me everything I write has the potential to mean so much more. So my challenge is continually asking myself "which of the tools that I have learned am I going to use to make my writing more intentional?"

The questions of intentionality followed me to my research paper as well. The bright purple sticky note on my computer read, "Why is this here? How does it relate to my thesis?" After asking myself, "What am I trying to say? Where are the holes in this argument? How can I say it better?" again and again and again, I found myself writing and rewriting again and again and again. I rewrote paragraphs and sentences and theses. I reordered my initial outline and my detailed outline and my essay. I reworked four different introductions and five different conclusions. I started by basing my thesis on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, but eventually reworked the framework of my entire essay so that the Declaration more truthfully and intentionally served as a guideline for my essay rather than the proof. At first, it was frustrating. It was really frustrating. I just spent all this time, energy, and effort and now I was going to have to do it again? But after a few re-dos, I realized that I wasn't doing it again, per se. Each attempt was just another step closer to writing what I wanted to say in the most intentional way possible.

What do I want to say? I want to say that not only has my writing— my finished product— improved, but my writing process has as well. The intentionality that now drives my writing process (my outlines, rhetorical choices, edits) not only makes my writing better, but has brought back my love for writing. My previous need for my writing to be perfect choked the joy out of writing and replaced it with self-imposed limitations and anxiety. But now that I realize my writing doesn't have to be perfect and, instead, finds its perfection through its intentionality. I have re-found the joy in writing.

When I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school, I thought that with my color-coded highlighting *and* my notes in the margins *and* my notes in my notebook *and* my commentary on my notes, I was well-prepared to analyze this text again in college. And then... bam! The professor asked, "What's in a name?" and I didn't know. What does "Atticus" mean? What does "Dill" mean? I didn't know. How did I not know the answer after all of the highlighting and note taking that I did? In retrospect the answer is simple. I didn't know and I didn't try to know. I didn't even bother to look it up. That's such a limited way to understand the world around me. I have since come to realize that I shouldn't just take what I am consuming at face value. I gain so much more by opening my computer and looking it up. Only by incorporating what I don't know will I ever expand my worldview. Only by looking it up, will I understand the gut-wrenching impact of Brent Staples' cowbells in bear country. Only by looking it up, will I understand that Atticus is not only a godlike figure to Scout Finch and many Americans,

but the father of laws in Ancient Greece. Only by looking it up, will I ever be able to walk around in someone else's skin.

It was this mindset that drove my reading and evaluation of research sources. Previously, I had been under the impression that effective research papers meant evidence from scholarly articles. Point blank. The end. I have subsequently learned that this approach is also detrimental to my worldview. A good research paper means that you are sharing a new, or at least somewhat unique contribution to the existing narrative. That means that no scholarly article is going to say what you want to say, the way you want to say it, because then, by definition, your contribution is no longer an addition to the conversation. With this new understanding of scholarly sources, I have learned that scholarly articles can be skimmed. In retrospect, I realize I didn't need to read a whole article about the HIV implications for sex workers. I could have read the introduction and conclusion and jumped right into the sections about human rights violations in healthcare, which directly related to and supported my thesis. Scholarly articles can serve as treasure maps leading to the buried treasure, rather than the whole tale. My new approach to research sources has shown me that scholars know and provide a truth, but that truth isn't *the* truth or at least isn't the whole truth. The information scholarly sources provide is important, but it is certainly not omniscient.

I found that some of the truths that scholarly sources lack can be found in newspapers and magazines. There is a concept in community-based research (which emphasizes partnerships between researchers and the communities their research is aiming to benefit) that says something along the lines of researchers being research experts and

members of the community being community issue experts. Most of the community experts I cited in my research paper came from newspapers and magazines: an article written by Melissa Grant (a former sex worker) in *Reason Magazine*, an interview with two sex workers (Adrian and SX) for *Vice*, a profile on dominatrix Karmenife for *Paper Magazine*. I found that these sources which gave voice to sex workers were jackpots for providing effective quotes. In the past, I had avoided newspapers and magazines due to the seemingly inherent biases and lack of expertise that reporters brought to their writing. However, now I have come to realize that, yes, reporters are biased and so are their interviewees. But as long as I acknowledge and appropriately address these biases, the biases of my community experts *should* influence my writing. They certainly know more about the topic than I do.

These potential biases are even more pertinent in internet sources. You can find something to prove anything on the internet. That is both a blessing and a curse. As with any source though, I was able to adequately accommodate for biases by confirming the credibility of my source. In this case, credibility wasn't just the qualifications of those writing the articles, but whether their values seemed to align with the other sources backing my thesis. I found a plethora of websites that provided arguments supporting a plethora of stances regarding sex workers and sex work regulation. However, upon further investigation, I found that many of these sources had sexist values and arguments. This made these internet sources significantly less credible as they pertained to my thesis, which argued for feminist means of protection for sex workers.

Overall, I found that my argument, essay, and personal worldview were only enhanced by expanding my understanding through more information, more distinct sources, and more types of sources. My argument was only strengthened by corroborating evidence, proof, and arguments among the different sources. If one source proves something, finding another source, or type of source that proves the same thing allowed my argument to strengthen its footing. The more voices that contributed to my understanding, conclusions, and theses, the more in-depth and encompassing my contributions to the conversation were. The more credible I became.

When I signed up for my WRTG-101 class, I expected to learn more about writing. What I didn't expect was to learn more about speaking and listening and the subsequent understanding of my own thinking. For better or for worse, I'm a perfectionist. But I already knew that. What I didn't know is that speaking instead of writing lets my thoughts flow without being inhibited by my need for them (or the way I communicate them) to be perfect. When I was writing my Bildungsroman, I talked through my thoughts and emotions with classmates in order to turn my ideas into a narrative that wasn't hindered by my need to formulate them perfectly or fit them into a specific format. When I was writing my research paper, I talked through my thoughts with friends to formulate an effective argument and thesis from my tangled web of thoughts. When we were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Just Mercy*, or any supplemental readings, I found it very helpful to share my thoughts with my classmates to help me construct my thoughts in a logical framework. I also found it helpful to hear the points that either contradicted or piggybacked off my

own thoughts. This insight into others' perspectives allowed me to challenge and expand my own.

My worldview, without the insight of others, is limited. I view the world through a white, cis, straight, socioeconomically privileged, traditionally Western educated perspective. I also view it from a Jewish, disabled, female perspective. I don't know how people of color who are transgender, queer, socioeconomically disadvantaged, non-traditionally Western educated, Christian, able-bodied, and male (or any other variation of identities that I am not) view the world. My peers' insights challenged me to acknowledge my biases and widen my worldview. Statistically speaking, I am more likely to be sexually assaulted than my male classmates. And demographically speaking, they are more likely to be accused of sexual assault than I am. Thus, it was really interesting to hear their inputs into the conversation regarding the Title IX process. This gained insight helps make me a little more understanding, a little more just, and, hopefully, a little more merciful. From these seeds of genuine conversation, I have not only grown but have sown the seeds for future growth.

On the first day of class, I wrote on the green get-to-know-you handout that I would contribute to class once I am comfortable with the people in the classroom. The last statement I have since recognized to be inaccurate. It is not my classmates that make me comfortable enough to contribute in class, it is my confidence in my own voice that allows me to go from silent discomfort to confidently stepping outside of my comfort zone.

The most powerful voice I will ever speak in is my own voice. After spending the semester becoming more and more comfortable

with my own voice, I have realized that this confidence translates to my voice in my writing as well. Just like when I am actually speaking, my voice changes depending on my purpose and my audience. I wanted my Bildungsroman to read like a story, my research paper to read like a speech or presentation, and my end-of-year reflection to read more like a conversation. I have realized yet again that one of the best ways I am able to express this voice, no matter the audience, is through anaphora. Before this semester, repetition felt like a waste of breath. Before this semester, I wrote with little regard to my rhetorical choices. Before this semester, I had never even heard of anaphora; now I feel like it's my best friend.

As I submit my final WRTG-101 assignment, I realize that I have so much more to learn about writing. My voice will change. My vocabulary will change. My understanding of the world in which I am writing will change and grow and be challenged time and time again. However, the foundations for my future writing and learning and growth that I have gained in this class are priceless. The understanding of intentionality, growth, and obligation to my own voice that I have gained this semester will help guide me and my writing as I continue to learn and change as a person and as a writer.