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# Growing Abroad

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Emily Miller  
Growing Abroad  
Spring 2019  
Honors Project

### Abstract

For my Honors Project, I wrote a creative nonfiction essay about my study abroad trip to Le Mans, France last summer. In the essay, I broke up the narration with three sections, each highlighting a personality trait I gained from my experience: independent, overcoming fear, and adventurous. Because this is a creative work and something I may consider publishing later on down the road, I am not submitting the main essay. Following this abstract is my Critical Essay and Personal Essay.

## Growing Abroad Critical Essay

I don't recall a time in my life when I wasn't reading and writing. Even when I was too young to read, my parents would read me stories and my imagination was always on the run. Over the years I've read books I have strongly disliked and I have read books that have opened my eyes to a world of opportunity. The latter is what has inspired my writing and has given me a multitude of writing styles and techniques to incorporate in my own writing. Before I began my Creative Writing minor, my writing consisted of some decent papers, a few poems, and an abundance of half-hatched story ideas and novel openings doomed to never make it past page five. Ever since engaging in creative writing workshops, my writing has become more developed and I'm more confident than ever in my abilities. I am in an exciting period of time where I am finding my voice and developing my own style by engaging in writing workshops. I have, in no way, mastered any kind of ability. I'm not sure if it is really possible to completely master writing; it is ever-changing and luckily, or unluckily, depending on how one looks at it, there is never going to be nothing else to learn. Inspiration and growth can be drawn from anywhere: authors, books and their contents, classes, people, and the everyday things that surround us. All of these things, in one way or another, have inspired and shaped me as a writer and I am here to pay tribute to them.

The first book that truly stands out in my head when I think of childhood stories is *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn. In my kindergarten class it was a travelling book; everyone got to take it home for a few days to read with their parents. The story is about a raccoon, Chester, whom is going off to school for the first time. His mother teaches him to do the "kissing hand." She kisses his hand and presses it to his cheek, telling him that no matter what he does

throughout the day the kiss will stick (1993). My parents and I were very fond of this book, and began to incorporate the “kissing hand” into our own daily lives. Whenever we would leave one another, we’d kiss our hands and press them to the others’ cheek. Even to this day, when I’m headed back to school after a weekend home or driving a far distance, the “kissing hand” is still done.

Other than a lifelong ritual shared between my parents and I, *The Kissing Hand* brought to me an understanding of the impact a singular book can have. This children’s story book, less than twenty pages with only a sentence or two per page, has impacted my family for good. Fifteen years later and we are still putting what we learned into practice. *The Kissing Hand* created an abundance of sentimental memories that I’ll always remember and will most likely put into practice with my own children. If a few hundred (if that) words can make such a significant impact, I can only imagine what a few thousand can do. Stories that leap off the page and into everyday life are what changes people’s lives. To make such a profound impact on someone’s heart is a goal I think many authors strive for, and I hope to make it one of mine.

Throughout my childhood years, an array of books and authors were introduced to me. Teachers would read series like *Ramona* and *Junie B. Jones*. My mom and I would continue those traditions, finding characters we both fell in love with and collecting their volumes of books. The first poet I ever encountered and loved was Shel Silverstein. His poems were light and humorous, yet sometimes carried with them a deeper message. My mom’s and my favorite was, from his collection *Falling Up*, “Obedient,” in which a student is asked to stand in the corner for unruly behavior. The teacher forgets to dismiss the student and he stands through summer vacation and finds that the school is moving locations. He waits in the corner for years to be dismissed, proud of his new-found and unbending obedience (90). Along with its silly

story, it carried a message about the dangers of blind obedience. This is important to note, because, especially in writing, you get a lot of advice on what you should and shouldn't do. While a lot of the advice will be given with good intentions, it is important to always be able to decide what is best for you and your writing.

It was around the time I started reading Shel Silverstein that I also began to write short stories, poetry, and songs. I was convinced I was going to write the next great American novel, and might even be the next rising artist like Taylor Swift while I was at it. I wrote a poem about Heaven when I was eight years old. I remember writing it in my living room, my mom helping me find words that rhymed. I showed the poem to my Sunday School teacher and she was delighted. She gave the poem to my pastor and he read it out loud in Sunday service. It was the first time any of my work had been presented. The poem is still taped to my Sunday School teacher's window outside her classroom thirteen years later.

Before minoring in creative writing, the short stories I wrote were always heavy on action and lacking in development. I was so eager to get to "the good stuff" that I skipped right over necessary details. I would imagine a scenario with that one pivotal Hollywood scene in mind. I'd write a brief character description and then begin writing those drama-intense scenes that naturally would occur in chapter fifteen or so in a normal novel. Needless to say, my stories never got off the ground. I still own numerous notebooks that have a singular scene or less than twenty pages of a book idea scribbled in my childhood handwriting.

As a more mature young reader, one of the first books that truly moved me was *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. The story takes place in WWII Germany and the main character is a German orphan being placed with foster parents. She becomes fascinated with books and language, and steals her first book during one of the book burnings in her town. Her family ends

up hiding a Jewish man in their basement, and together she and the man learn to read and write and tell stories. The novel is narrated by Death, which fascinated me from the get-go (2005). The words on the page were written so beautifully. I had never read a book that held so much beauty and wonder in it. It changed my perspective on what a book could be. I became fascinated with interesting narrators. Reading a book from an unheard-of narrator was seeing the world through a totally different set of eyes. I often longed to write with such beauty as Zusak did. He uses poetic language a lot in his narrative, and it comes across as very authentic. It's not that he learned to write in such an eye-catching way, but it seems as if it was his second nature. I don't think I could replicate a masterpiece like *The Book Thief*, and even if I did so it would be a disservice to my own narrative voice.

In my experience, I've found that voice is something that develops, not something you really learn. You can explore different kinds but there is always going to be that one writing style that just clicks in your head and comes out naturally on the page. Through continuing to write using different voices and styles, I've been able to hone my voice. Receiving feedback from other writers in workshop has allowed me to see through others' eyes what works for me and what doesn't. I'm in the process of finding my own voice. I believe I am getting closer and closer to it. To me, my writing voice feels more conversational than anything else, especially in my nonfiction. I'm telling a story of my life on the page so why shouldn't it sound like me on that page?

I saw this style reflected in Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: A Guide to Writing and Life*. Assigned in my Writers on Writing class, I read *Bird by Bird* just this past January. She employs a light, conversational narration, and, after watching her TEDTalk, I found that her writing reflects her speech almost perfectly. Reading the book felt personal and real. It never felt like I

was being talked down to or something was being over-explained. It was like we were getting coffee together and she happened to be loading me full of advice.

A few concepts in her book actually helped me in writing my essay. The first concept was, as the title reflects, taking things “Bird by bird.” At first, I found myself struggling with what to write about. I didn’t know where to start or how to convey my emotions on the page. The simple advice of taking things bird by bird is like taking things one step at a time (19). I realized I didn’t have to have all the answers when I sat down to write, I just had to sit down, write, and take it one step at a time. I had already begun to section my pieces in different time frames, but reading about this concept and discussing it in class allowed me to realize I had found something that was working well for me that other successful authors were also using.

Another concept was “Shitty first drafts.” Lamott talks about how all first drafts are going to be bad. You shouldn’t be writing to an audience when you write your first drafts. They are more like a brain dump in which you can get all of your information out and then work with everything you have (21). That is exactly what I did. I took each element I wanted to talk about and just spilled the details out onto the page. It wasn’t pretty or even remotely good. It was a kind of draft that went like this: “This happened, then this, then that, which caused that, and made us end up here.” It wasn’t anything worth reading, but I had all of my information out on the page and I could then mold it in to the narrative it was meant to be.

In *Writers on Writing*, we also read *An Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy. A few of Grealy’s techniques stuck with me as well. The first was her ability to center childhood stories around small details. This book was a memoir about her cancer as a child and her facial difference that resulted from it (1994). She didn’t hold the readers hand, walking through each day and step of the cancer. She took details that might have seemed small at the time and focused



her narrative around them. These details centered the piece and gave the readers a focus. She described her struggles and the mechanics of cancer so well and even gracefully. I never felt as if I was reading a medical textbook, but as if this person was standing before me and telling me the facts I needed to know to make sense of it all.

A technique of hers that I both admired and slightly disliked was her laser focus on what the story was about. There was never a shadow of a doubt that the story was about the cancer and what it had taken from her: one third of her jaw and all of her confidence. The narrative felt zoomed in on this detail through the whole story. We didn't learn about her twin sister or any other siblings, we got glimpses of her parents, and a few rare views of her friends. We didn't learn in detail about the classes she was taking in college or the sites she saw abroad. Everything she wrote about was centered on her facial difference and how it affected her life (1994). Part of me really wanted to see all of those things, yet the other part of me admires her ability to separate the two narratives. It was in this technique of hers that I fully realized that I didn't need to tell the whole story of my trip abroad. I didn't need to tell about the close friendships I developed or the magnificence of Notre Dame or even about the guy I ended up dating from the trip. Those things are a part of my story, but aren't a part of the story I am trying to tell.

Another recent author that has influenced me is Kate Atkinson. I recently read her newest novel, *Transcription*, which was also set during WWII in England. It wasn't so much the story that influenced me, but how she crafted the story. The book was broken up into sections, and then each section had little fragments of narration. Those pieces could be a few pages long, a paragraph or two, or even a one-liner. These fragments broke up the narrative and moved the story forward without all the in-between, unnecessary action (2018). We didn't have to watch her

main character brush her teeth every morning or walk home from work. The breaks in the narrative told the reader what we needed to know: the story was moving somewhere else.

I really admire this style. In my own works I struggle with writing big, long flowing narratives. I get bored with the mundane tasks and want to skip ahead to all the action. Sometimes mundane tasks are necessary, but when they can be skipped and replaced with a transition I think it serves the story better. I decided that my essay would only focus on the necessary. I wouldn't give pages-long detail because, frankly, I didn't have the room in twenty pages to tell the story and all the backstory as well. I broke it up by characteristics I gained/learned about myself and I told the narratives individually rather than trying to weave multiple themes into one huge narrative. I took bite size chunks and expanded them with details, inner thoughts, and actions. It felt more like a flowing story even though it wasn't a straight, unbroken line all the way through.

One thing that has captivated me through different books is the ability of authors to make an unfamiliar situation seem familiar to a reader. They take a foreign environment and make it known through description and the way the characters move through it with ease. It always seemed so effortless that I didn't even really think about it as a technique they had to develop until I started to write on my own. I knew what the environment looked like and what I was trying to describe, but my readers, on the other hand, were entering into a new space that would be blank until I filled it all in. This is what first got me to start writing description more clearly. I wanted to always plow right through to action without giving setting a second thought until I realized how important it really was.

The classes I have taken within my Creative Writing Minor have been extremely influential during this project. I entered college knowing I was a good academic writer, and also

knowing that I had some creative writing potential. When I had time in my schedule for a minor, I decided to pursue creative writing more intentionally.

Having the structure of prompts and workshops alone greatly improved my writing. Before I would just write whenever inspiration hit, never pursuing it on my own or seeking out prompts. Having my work critiqued was also helpful. Before I would just show my work to my parents or a close friend, no one who was actually a writer themselves. Impressed that I could do such a thing at all, all they had for me was praise and words of encouragement. This was, in no way, a bad thing, but also wasn't constructive either. I continued to go on thinking I was amazing without having a concrete knowledge of the mechanics of creative writing.

Having work critiqued allowed me to see my work through others' knowledgeable eyes. They would honestly point out what wasn't working and complimented what did. I relearned basics that I thought I had already mastered, and learned how to take my time with my characters and plot lines. My first few stories were rushed and flimsy, but as I went on my fiction became more realized and I took time considering the story rather than rushing to get it down on the page.

Whenever I used to think of nonfiction writing my mind would immediately think about science journals and dry biographies of long-dead historical figures. I was hesitant to take Creative Nonfiction Writing, but went forward with the idea anyway. I ended up loving it. I realized how much more control I could have on telling a story that had already happened to me. I could focus more on how I told the story, a persistent problem in my fiction, rather than what happened in my story, often my main focus in fiction. It took a few workshops to find what was working and what was falling flat. Insightful comments were made about my pieces and this genuine feedback allowed me to craft my work.

For the last workshop round in Introduction to Creative Nonfiction Writing the prompt was to write a story that takes place completely outside in a short span of time. The reason behind the prompt was to get us writers to focus on sensory details and bringing the atmosphere of our work to life. This prompt was introduced on a Thursday, and the professor needed volunteers to have a draft ready by Tuesday. As soon as my idea popped into my head, I volunteered to go first.

I wrote about a creek that was significant in my childhood, and had recently become significant in my faith as well. It was a braided narrative, taking place in two places at once. I felt so confident in writing the piece, and was genuinely proud of it when I had finished. I turned it in with eagerness. The workshop went extremely well. My classmates labeled it as some of my best work and my professor, at the end of the workshop, said “Congratulations on writing one of the best pieces of the semester.” I had never had a piece do so well in workshop.

From there on out I knew what my style was. I would write short fragments of narratives that either braided with other stories or moved onto other parts. I would do my best to be descriptive of the environment around me and to tell my audience everything I had felt simply and surely.

So many things have influenced my writing and I believe that the list will continue to grow as I continue to read, write, and learn throughout my life. I never thought that I would have such a deep interest in nonfiction writing, yet here I am writing my Honors Project on just that. It’s been a whirlwind of discoveries since I first began to take creative writing classes and I hope that the whirlwind never dies down. I don’t think a person is ever done learning from the world around them and I don’t intend to later look back on my life and wonder what all I missed.

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