

CONNECTING

Finding Meaning in our Work and Writing

Christy I. Wenger

I've been thinking a lot about meaningful writing this semester—the kind we fully invest in because we find it personally significant, pragmatic and useful, and resonant with the identity markers of who we are or who we want to become. Of course, what is “meaningful” is slippery: for students, it's hard to pin down in some generalizable way but easier to retrospectively identify as connected to a particular assignment, one that allowed their voice to shine through or their decisions to shape the outcome. For teachers, it's somewhat more encompassing, an adjective used to describe the purpose of much of what we do. Teachers in my program, for instance, see just about every writing project they assign as “meaningful” when queried, even including the humble summary paper, projecting a wider continuum of meaning than the students I've informally polled in my classes.

Michele Eodice, Anne Geller and Neal Lerner trace the question of meaning in higher education writing instruction across the disciplines by posing the research question, “What was your most meaningful writing project, and why was it meaningful to you?” to 700 seniors at 3 universities. What they found was needed for meaning was, in sum:

1. Opportunities for agency
2. Engagement with instructors, peers and materials
3. Learning that connects to prior experiences and future aspirations. (4)

I'm drawn here to the first finding, the importance of agency, for the ways it brings together the seeming divergence in student and teacher descriptions of meaningful writing. What teachers and students seem to be coming to, albeit from different directions, is that meaning is a function of inviting writers to take control of their writing and actively construct their learning (34). Students see this most obviously when they are given new freedoms in their writing and are asked to approach novel tasks. For teachers, the novel and the routine both have meaning, and scaffolding takes on a heightened importance for cultivating agency.

When I shared Eodice's findings with students in my upper-level writing seminar this semester, they had plenty to say to support the importance of fostering agency among writers. Meaningful writing, according to my students, makes them feel heard when so many of their writing assignments ask for other voices to drown out their own and gives them space to see themselves reflected back in the finished product. This kind of writing materializes them in some all-too-often-neglected manner: “reflecting” and “representing” them in ways that helped them feel in “control” of their learning. This is what agency is all about.

Of course, agency is not something that can be simply “given” to students, like a gift at Christmas. Instead, agency is best delivered by choreographing the conditions for it to emerge.

Agency is emergent and a product of our effort as teachers to facilitate student learning and engagement, but it is also gained through the actions of students together with their peers as well as students’ own uptake of ideas and topics. As Eodice et al. note, “[a]gency is strengthened by offering experiences that get students to notice they have the capacity to direct energies for themselves, in and beyond classrooms” (53). Students experience writing as agentic when it is immersive and when it helps them connect their academic and personal identities and interests.

The authors in this section provide an array of methods we might use to choreograph the conditions of agency in our writing classes and the ways teachers and students can co-construct meaningful writing experiences. Together, they offer a response to these findings on agency, a way of articulating how we might work to help students feel the control and newness they desire while still scaffolding the learning process, using our expertise as teachers to open the space for agency to emerge.

Monica Mische provides a poignant reflection on the importance of encouraging students to write for public audiences, an effort to expand the borders of the writing classroom from the university to the larger community. Her story recounts a pedagogical experiment that engaged students in writing for the *Washington Post Magazine*. Unexpectedly, Mische finds herself a subject of her own experiment when the model writing she produces for students is accepted for publication by the *Post*. Her teaching reflection not only exposes the ways we might cultivate assignments that invite students to take agency over their writing in hopes of finding meaning, but also illustrates how meaningful writing is co-constructed by teachers, mentors and students as we find ourselves moving fluidly between these roles.

Kristina Fennelly’s piece that follows traces the question of student agency to the digital communications that permeate our students’ literate lives outside of the classroom and shape the ways they understand their literacy and discuss it in our writing classes. Fennelly suggests that training students in rhetorical listening will help them command their communicative power in those digital spaces, transforming them into empathetic listeners. Agency here is contingent on not only the ability to voice our own ideas but also the ability to truly listen to other voices both in-person and in online environments. Fennelly’s digital listening assignment asks students to help construct bridges between their informal online writing and academic writing, offering an example of a writing project invested in the very type of agency Eodice and her peers target and my students reiterate as key to finding meaning in their writing.

The stakes of agency become fuller when we understand how writing projects are a function of their learning environments: they are living artifacts of a meaningful writing *pedagogy* invested in the individual student bodies in our classes and not simply in abstract pedagogical principles. Laurence Musgrove’s poem, “Sunday Before Midterms,” underscores this point and starkly reminds us that students’ material learning conditions include a host of mental and physical factors that follow students’ into our classrooms. Lindsey Allgood reflects on how pauses, by pushing us to meaning, can help students produce “more satisfying and authentic writing,” another illustration of how meaningful

writing is connected to student bodies, not just their minds. Student bodies are a host of meaning for Allgood, who recounts her experiences working with student writers to discover meaning in writing center consultations. Allgood's lyrical narrative encourages us to question if agency itself has an embodied pattern or rhythm for the writer that we miss when we ignore the embodied dimensions of writing.

Together, the pieces in this section provide useful ways of approaching agency through personal connection, embodiment, and listening. They help us to pause over the idea of agency as emergent from the writer's body and incorporative of the teachers' presence. They invite us to embrace the ambiguity of what counts as "meaningful" to help us stumble upon it in our classes.

Work Cited

Eodice, Michele, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching and Writing in Higher Education*. University Press of Colorado, 2016.

+

Response from Beyond

Monica Mische

In my developmental English classes, I often encourage students to submit their writing to "real-world" venues. So often lacking confidence, these students need to feel that their words carry weight, that their voices matter, that they—beyond the walls of our insulated classroom—have something essential to say. To this end, we've mailed letters to authors and political representatives, sent op eds to newspapers, and submitted memoirs to anthologies. Sharing our work lends energy, focus, and inspiration to our writing. However, one interchange stands out as especially impactful, affirming for us the power of words, the profundity of "ordinary" lives, and the gift of empathetic listening.

For several years, the *Washington Post Magazine* ran a column called "Mine," for which readers wrote in about treasures they own. Capped at 250 words, these mini-essays focused less on describing objects than on relaying their significance—on describing the relationships that impart meaning to our experience. How beautiful, I thought. Determined to try this in class, I distributed past "Mine" columns. Then, we all brought in objects we valued. I presented an assortment of treasures, and students selected one for me to write about—a can of soup bequeathed to me by a dying friend. At home that night, I labored to capture my decades-old experience, but as much as I tried, I couldn't squeeze my story into the allotted space. At class the next day, students workshopped my draft and helped me make the brutal cuts. "Ok! Thanks to you, I think it's ready," and they watched as I emailed the *Post*: "I'll probably never hear back, but, see, I'm giving it a try!" Surprisingly, within days, I received a note from the editor David Rowell about publishing my piece. My heart sank a little, and I thought about declining, explaining this was just an activity for my students and, really, I wasn't seeking a by-line. However,

something in David's phrasing gave me pause. He'd said the piece had "moved" him. I relented, thinking, "I'm asking my students to be brave; I should do the same".

The next week, I ventured to the *Post's* offices to get my soup can photographed. David greeted me warmly, and as we walked the halls, we discussed my story—its resonance and themes. "We don't quite have the ending yet though," he conceded. I knew he was right, and over the next two days we exchanged a flurry of emails, devoted to reworking just the last couple of lines. He was patient and gentle and motivated me to probe more deeply. Finally, I was able to voice an epiphany, a realization I'd never seen before. Soon thereafter, two of my students also heard from David (that he was "moved by their stories") and embarked upon their own journeys of collaboration. Those students had lived such heartbreaking and inspiring lives; I felt David had somehow divined this, had traced through their writing to see who they were. Touched by his encouragement, I reached out to him for further insight. He kindly agreed to meet and share his thoughts about editing and writing.

Growing up in North Carolina, David was a natural story-teller who loved the movies. He'd dreamed of studying film and television, but in college he became captivated by a more tightly-woven form of expression—the short story—and determined to be a writer. Upon graduating, David worked first for literary publishers, then was offered a job with the *Washington Post*. He'd never edited journalism, never been to Washington, but they felt David understood storytelling and could bring out more literary elements of their pieces. That was nineteen years ago. Back then, the magazine was known for long-form journalism. David could craft articles with tremendous scope and insight, highlighting "ordinary people doing incredible things." However, the magazine had also developed a reputation of being dark and heavy; new publishers desired lighter themes; word-counts were slashed. Still, David pushed to make the stories "live" and to illuminate the beauty of individual lives.

When we met, David discussed some favorite recent stories: Muslim scout troops exploring what it means to live in a democracy in the shadow of Trump; and the longest serving keeper at the National Zoo (a man whose remarkable sensitivity allowed him to forge incredible bonds with the animals). Readers were so moved by the latter that the story was read aloud in the U.S. House chambers so that it would become part of the congressional record. Indeed, David sees his work that way—as "adding to the record of who we are, of how we live with the consequences of our decisions." And he believes this surfaces most keenly in the stories of people we've never heard of.

David has taught writing in an MFA program and understands how student writers (like most writers) are nervous about what their readers will think. He likens teaching to editing: "both require real dialogue and collaboration." No matter how weak the story, he finds something hopeful to say. "This is going to be great by the time it's done." If a piece is troubled, he'll start with good things but then carefully lay out steps for improvement: "This is where the pivot doesn't work. This is where the character drops off." He admits that some drafts are not ready for comments; that writers and editors must first talk it through. "This story's lost its way but we can re-imagine it and find its path." When asked whether such an affirming attitude is unusual in an editor, David admits he's known for the effort he puts into a story. For example, he'll help staff writ-

ers whittle down an 18,000 word draft to 3,000—something most editors would never consider. David knows how hard it is to write; thus he tries to be encouraging:

My mother was a teacher, and my father a teacher for many years, and the people who played the most important roles in my life were also teachers—English teachers who encouraged me in my writing and made me feel confident about what I had to say. I think teachers are always the most important players in a person’s life. Being an editor is not quite like being an English teacher, of course, but there are some similar aspects, and I try to never lose sight of that—the power of what we have to say about someone’s story, the way we talk about how someone has told it. I guess I go about my life believing words are everything, and I know the wrong teacher can have a terrible, long-lasting influence, just as the right teacher can really shape who we are and what we go on to do.

Some months after our meeting, David relayed that “Mine” had been cancelled—a top-down decision, too few clicks on the web. Feeling my disappointment, he suggested that although he could no longer publish them, my students could send him “Mine” drafts anyway. And the next semester, for my new batch of students, David not only read their work, but invited us to visit the *Post* headquarters. On a beautiful spring morning, twenty of us took the metro downtown. Most had never read a newspaper, but there we were, sitting in white leather chairs in a glass walled conference room, just blocks from the White House. David, at the head, discussed the profundity of my students’ keepsakes: a locket with strands of hair from a student’s mother who had died too soon, a grandfather’s army tags sewn into his grandson’s belt; a cake-topper from a *quinceañera* a father couldn’t attend. As David shared the profundity of their pieces, I saw nods and shivers of recognition. He had made each one feel special, each one feel inspired. At the end of the semester, the students reflected on their most significant experience. Every one of them said it was David—visiting the *Post* and hearing his words, hearing the beauty he’d found in their own.

+

Reflecting on Arguing and Listening in Digital Spaces

Kristina Fennelly

Recent examples of Gamergate in 2014, various presidential and political tweets, and collective social organizing for activist-based protests by Black Lives Matter, white nationalist groups, and women’s rights organizations via Facebook and Twitter all testify to the opportunity but also to the personal and intellectual risks of arguing in digital spaces. The form our students’ writing takes in online spaces significantly shapes their lives and affects their academic writing. I’m interested in how students gain rhetorical power via exchanges in spaces typically not associated with academic writing like blogs, messaging exchanges, and Facebook discussion forums. Online, students think critically, question others’ ideas in relation to their own, and arrive at new ideas via social discourse. Though perhaps unknowingly, they practice such skills in these digital forums on a near

daily basis, yet they often do not value such exchanges or connect these practices to their academic writing since these skills are not as concrete as form and grammar, nor are they readily embraced in some academic settings.

I believe students can harness the rhetorical power inherent in online exchanges by developing their skills in listening rhetoric, which can in turn produce a more empathetic approach to how they argue. This approach privileges cooperation over agonism and is applicable to a variety of assignments, but especially those framed with public deliberation in mind. My call to action for students and instructors alike is to explore listening rhetoric in order to actively practice listening as a skill and to explore the process of deliberating ideas in online forums. Here, I want to explore two questions that drive this call to action: how do we “listen” when writing, and how do we listen in digital spaces where face-to-face interaction is minimized?

One crucial step in evaluating the role listening can play in rhetorical situations is to define goals for the listening-oriented writer as he/she sifts through competing viewpoints. Listening-oriented writers should be reflective, inquisitive, and curious: consider first, ask questions second, and respond last by acknowledging (though not necessarily agreeing) with a genuine understanding of other points of views. The over-arching goal is to understand other positions and interests cooperatively, *not* to aggressively convince the audience that this position is right. With this goal in mind, listening-oriented writers learn to suspend judgment in order to cultivate an empathetic approach to those who hold diverse and even conflicting views.

Exploratory essays are one way I’ve worked with students to develop such listening skills. In preparation, my students practice the believing and doubting game, an exercise made popular by Peter Elbow. As John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson note in their textbook, *Writing Arguments*, the believing and doubting game is the foundation of dialectic thinking (44). Through this process, students actively seek out alternative views and test those ideas against one another. This exercise develops students’ skills in self-reflection, critical and sustained inquiry, and intellectual curiosity—skills they hone by evaluating online exchanges where they can witness the deliberation of a variety of views in a public forum. For their exploratory essays, my students are invited to write about an issue of their choosing. However, there is one important caveat: they must choose an issue that they are *open* to changing their mind about. Such assignments often give students the much-needed opportunity to break free from thesis-driven monologues and instead practice investigative dialogues. Indeed, students are often surprised when I encourage them not only to read primary source material but to also look at comment threads attached to contemporary news articles. Doing so allows them to read unfiltered public responses to key issues of the day, such as gun control, abortion, immigration, LGBTQ rights, etc. They quickly see how reading collective deliberations by citizens like themselves can prove just as meaningful and insightful as reading traditionally-published texts.

Another one of my writing assignments invites students to choose a current issue that has drawn close attention and great scrutiny. Then, they practice composing a content analysis based on the same criteria followed by Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin in their seminal study “Rediscovering the Back and Forthness of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube.” Jackson and Wallin’s study serves as a model for instructors and students to

realize the potential available in Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube, Facebook, and other online social network spaces that feature comment threads and discussion forums. Jackson and Wallin focus their attention on a YouTube video that captured the arrest and assault of Andrew Meyer, a University of Florida senior, at a town hall meeting with Senator John Kerry. The video provided “an opportunity for ordinary citizens to make arguments about free speech, police force, civility, ethos, and the normative standards of public forums” (386). I share this video with my students before we read and consider Jackson and Wallin’s study. My students respond to this lesson because these are the kinds of videos and online content they engage with on an almost daily basis. Their interest is piqued because Jackson and Wallin’s study involves a content analysis of a comment thread related to issues of free speech on college campuses. Students grow excited to see how public voices similar to their own can be read and interpreted in socially significant and meaningful ways in relation to contemporary issues with direct applicability to their lives.

Through discussion and informal writing assignments, students have the opportunity to follow Jackson and Wallin’s lead, evaluating comments and arguments on a YouTube or news thread much like a “content analysis.” In doing so, they draw on the same criteria Jackson and Wallin use to determine the effectiveness of dialogue in online forums. As Jackson and Wallin explain, these questions prove useful because they serve as the foundation for effective dialogue, a “back and forth” which they denote as “a procedure involving critical listening and responding, and then receiving, listening, and responding again” (385). The back-and-forthness of rhetoric is what I hope students will take from this assignment so they will treat argument as an exchange of ideas with the primary goal of apprehending a new perspective. This exchange lies at the heart of listening rhetoric. It allows students to break free from dichotomous thinking and develop empathy as our positions evolve, change, and grow.

One of my students, a Pennsylvania resident, in writing about the contentious topic of fracking, a prevalent practice in the state, exhibited such empathy in her balanced response. Her conclusion points to the ways in which listening rhetoric—when practiced by the careful evaluation of competing claims and when considered with the goal of empathy in mind—can yield great insight:

Whether you support fracking or not, there is a clear imbalance between the will of companies and the will of individual citizens. The companies have the power and influence to get their way, which puts the democracy of society at stake. Even if the economic benefits are undeniable, do they really outweigh the safety of citizens who happen to be living on top of one of the country’s most valuable shale deposits? Do they make it acceptable to potentially taint fragile aquatic ecosystems with poisonous chemicals? The humanitarian answer should be no. Companies need to be held accountable for their actions. Citizens should be able to make decisions for their own communities.

As my student argues, by seeing this issue from another’s perspective, we can understand more and are thus less inclined to fight in counterproductive ways. If we can reason more as this student writer does here, then we are less inclined to act in our own self-interests to the exclusion of what might benefit the greater good. This ideal of empathy can, in

fact, help students hone their role as writers situated within a moral community—a community intent on treating actual arguments in more complex ways than simply as a win, lose, or draw situation.

Listening to what others have to say in asynchronous communication invites us to slow down the pace of rhetorical exchanges in virtual spaces; we can provide students the opportunity to more thoughtfully consider responses they might offer in a comment thread, rather than issue an immediate reaction. A sustained commitment to listening thus distances the writer from hot-tempered reactions, impulsive shouting, and antagonizing tactics. I agree with Krista Ratcliffe that rhetorical listening is different from reading closely and carefully—the same way we might imagine listening closely and carefully to another speaker. I want my students to practice that level of attentiveness. Yet I also remind them what Ratcliffe argues: “listening does not presume a naive, relativistic empathy, such as ‘I’m OK, You’re OK,’ but rather an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just” (203). An empathetic understanding of the stakes involved seeks to uncover and identify more common ground, not just winning ground or giving up ground. Many of my students suggest the last strategy, disengaging from arguing online all together. They believe that if they somehow refuse to “take the bait,” then they will solve the problem of the argument culture. Indeed, some websites, such as *Popular Science*, have adopted a similar mindset by eliminating their comment sections “due to ‘trolls and spambots’ who overwhelmed those who were actually ‘committed to fostering intellectual debate’” (Sebastian). Yet shutting down comment threads and/or discouraging students from participating in online forums does not seem realistic or particularly useful. Instead, it is imperative for students to learn how to recognize positions in a factious argument in order to participate in debates in ethical and productive ways.

With Ratcliffe’s context in mind, I urge them to see listening in asynchronous communication, which allows opportunities for purposefully pausing—opportunities that are not always available in face to face communication when we may feel a greater urgency to respond immediately in unfiltered ways. Some may find online exchanges also allow unfiltered responses afforded by the relative anonymity of posting and contributing to a comment thread. Yet if we treat listening as both a teachable and learned skill, instructors and students alike can embrace listening as a rhetorical act: one imbued with empathy and a conscious refusal to engage in agonism.

It is our duty as teachers to practice ethical dissent as responsible and active citizens and to teach these skills of listening rhetoric to students. Such ethical dissent involves locating potential solutions among disparate views and promoting collaborative wisdom over adversarial discourse. We must recognize how communicating in digital forums, namely Twitter and Facebook, necessitates a new way of approaching argument in a more constructive fashion. If we can identify, understand, and learn from both the potentials and pitfalls of social media exchanges, then we can revive the ethical elements of communication like dialogue, conversation, community, and cooperation.

Works Cited

- Jackson, Brian and Jon Wallin. "Rediscovering the Back and Forthness of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2009, pp. 374-96.
- Sebastian, Bailey & Scott R. Stroud. "No Comment: Online Comment Sections and Democratic Discourse." Media Ethics Initiative--The University of Texas at Austin Center for Media Engagement. 31 Aug. 2018: 1-3. <https://mediaethicsinitiative.org/2018/09/04/no-comment/>
- Ramage, John D., John C. Bean, and June Johnson. *Writing Arguments*. 9th ed., Pearson, 2012.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1999, pp. 195-224.

+

Sunday Morning Before Midterms

Laurence Musgrove

I try to convince myself
That I shouldn't
Check my school email
Over the weekends.
But this before noon:

*I was recently discharged
from the hospital
following a suicidal overdose.
Because of this
I have a mandatory
psychiatrist appointment
on Monday.
Due to the severity
of the overdose
I will still be recovering
from the side effects
on Tuesday
and will unfortunately
miss your class.
I apologize
for the inconvenience.
Thank you.*

I write no

You're welcome

To the student
Who sits closest
To the door.

+

Honoring Impulse, Attending to Gesture

Lindsey Allgood

Every Wednesday afternoon this past spring, I sat in a plastic chair in silent meditation with 12 strangers in a chilly, bare hospital conference room. This was Mindfulness-Based Stress Relief training at The University of California Irvine's Susan Samueli School of Integrated Health. Our task was to notice our thoughts but remain still as stone. The typical result: hot tears dribbled down my face. I felt like my body would explode with nervous energy if I didn't adjust my cramped leg, arch my back, or crinkle my nose, which was always overwhelmingly cold. I wanted to throw my chair across the room. Every class period, I panicked because when I forced my body into stillness, my mind raced, emotions boiled, and I was reduced to a state of overheated, agitated uselessness. Lately, I worry that students sitting in my office chairs feel the same.

Perhaps I didn't give motionless meditation a fair chance (I've always been a fidgeter). But I believe our bodies want to tell us how they need to move—or not—to function, express, and compose effectively. Stillness should never be imposed on invention. I've realized certain postures, twitches, habitual stretches, and seemingly mindless gestures lubricate my creative faculties. Most importantly to my professional life, un-stillness unclogs writers' block.

As a professional writing specialist, I often find myself sharing with students how, when I honor my intuition and impulse to move, I find deep satisfaction in the final product, be it an entire essay or simply a choice of this word over that. And as an artist, I think of that moment after a dancer lands a satisfying jump, but before her mind and muscles negotiate the next move and when and how to get there. In this split second (which can feel endless) a natural knowing occurs when we as composers of all kinds trust our bodies and their coded beckonings to twitch, turn, and shift.

But stillness is not the enemy; it incubates. Intentional reprieves polish and amplify intentional action. As Peter Elbow tells us in *Writing Without Teachers*, ideas need to simmer. We must literally walk away sometimes, meaningfully pause for meals, stretches, and naps to allow ideas to continue "bubbling, percolating, fermenting" (48). When our bodies take needed breaks and move how they naturally need to, our subconscious takes over as cook in the kitchen, where an enigmatic chemistry occurs that I'm not comfortable calling science. Composing—in and of my own mind and body—feels more like an art because I can't explain how when I pause to pop my knuckles on a beat, one by one, and pace in imaginary concentric circles, the sticky, frantic claws of anxiety

and rumination are lulled into suspension for a time, and I can write in a way that feels “well.” I want my students to feel this wellness, too.

During Writing Center consultations, I attempt to articulate how, as writers, our idiosyncratic cadences noted by actions and respites of varied lengths and intensities can help us produce more satisfying and authentic writing. I am reminded of a conversation with Anne¹, a multilingual art major who visits me often. In a recent consultation, I witnessed her slam into a mental wall. The prompt asked her to creatively explain how she relates to the word black in 140 characters. She shot backwards in her chair and threw up her hands.

“Ugh...I don’t know the word,” she grunted.

I believe Anne is comfortable with me because I understand as a fellow artist how she envisions the sentiment, color, and texture of a sentence far before the actual words. She is not only learning English, but her body’s instinctive manner of kinesthetic scripting in a new language. She remains perfectly still for ten seconds or so. I intentionally mirror her silence. Her eyes lift to my bulletin board where I pin found poems, campus event flyers, and eclectic magazine cutouts of famous artworks juxtaposed with odd sayings. A black and grey illustrated turtle, courtesy Cézanne, catches her eye. Her frame droops and eyes narrow. She leans forward, outlining the turtle’s shell with her finger.

“It is how black outlines the turtle.” She caresses the print with a fingertip.



1. This student’s name has been changed to protect privacy. Permissions are IRB approved.

Figure 1.

“Oh? What else?”

“And how black keeps in a screen.” She traces a finger around her MacBook’s black rim.

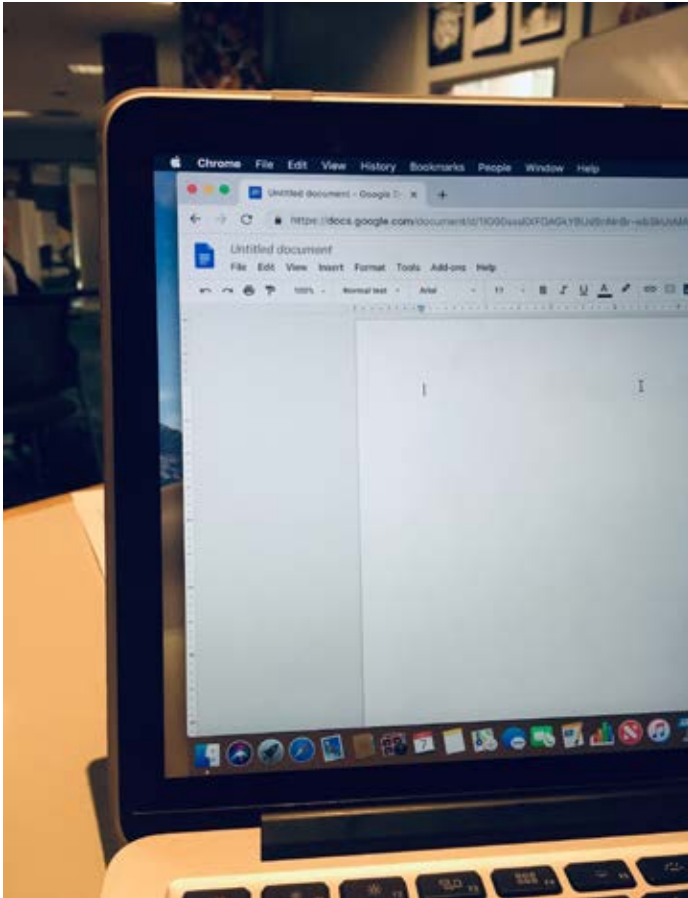


Figure 2.

“Why?” I ask.

Several more seconds of silence hover between us. She yawns, stretches to the left and right, wipes her eyes, and resituates in her chair in a way that suggests she has mentally evacuated and re-entered her own body, and, therefore, my office. She seems to see with different eyes. Her gaze floats around the room and rests on my multi-colored tapestry of an elephant on the wall.



Figure 3

“It’s how... black curves... the elephant face...he is stuck inside the fabric because of the black...” Between phrases, her wand-like fingers gesture again, as if speaking in a sign language she’s simultaneously inventing and learning.

“What does that mean to you?” I ask.

“It means...” She drums her sternum. Then her palms push the air as if shoving something out of the way. “In or out.”

“Tell me about ‘in or out.’” I try not to move in my own chair. I can sense she’s about to encounter resolution. I see it in the way her eyes and fingers seem to draw the same pattern in the air. I wish I could see what she’s seeing.

"I don't know." Her eyes close and grimace.

"Okay, describe the feeling," I offer. "How does 'in and out' make you feel? What does 'in and out' remind you of?"

A full minute goes by in silence: a salient reprieve. If clarity that strikes before invention had scent, I could smell it. She shifts and twirls her hair, then her eyes rest again on the elephant tapestry. Her chin bobs up and down; I find myself holding my breath. Suddenly, she pulls her chair forward and sharply inhales. Her eyes focus on something I cannot see on the desk between us.

"I am lonely," she nearly whispers, staring into her blank computer screen. Her finger calmly traces that black rim again. I realize I've finally exhaled.

"What about black?" I softly ask. I read the subtle shift in her posture and muscles around her eyes. A little more energy trickles back into her limbs, which begin to twitch as if thawing.

"Black is safe."

She finally looks up at me a little bleary-eyed. Her spine stiffened and her voice dropped an octave, indicating a nexus had just congealed in her mind's eye. I continued to offer brief, vague guiding questions, inviting her proprioception to guide this quest for meaning. As her body worked for words, her understanding of black unfolded in snow-ball effect. She told me how, at various ages, black allowed her to hide her evolving forms of shame: dirt stains on new clothes from her angry father; thickening thighs from judgmental school girls. Her gestures quickly began to lose rhythm and gain frenzy. I could tell we simultaneously hit the jackpot and a raw nerve. But this was not the time for me to intrude, so I settled in as the audience. That day she left my office with a writing plan.

As Anne reminds us, we can choose whether to respond or react to psychological discomfort. We choose whether to crash into and wrestle waves of anxiety or difficult emotions or shiftily roll away from dis-ease like a martial artist, letting its counter energy propel us in brand new exploratory directions. A recent personal example:

I've been writing for a solid nine minutes, no pause. My mind stutters. I eat a mint. Sip coffee. Spit out mint. Stand and stretch. Sit back down. Rearrange paragraphs. Jot down erratic jumble of inspired sentences. Bite inside of cheek ten times. Read. Copy/paste elsewhere. Do five pushups. Walk outside. Return to office. Lie on floor. Watch my belly rise with breath. Deflate it by rolling over. Imagine writer's block sucked into wall, like into a vacuum. Wonder why vacuum is spelled so funny. Wonder why words flit around in my mind like illusive fireflies. Remember a lost word. Return to computer before I forget. Print out draft. Spread pages on floor. Remove shoes. Scratch itch. Explain my point out loud to myself. Walk in three circles. Feel my focus go fuzzy. Thank my body for writing revelations to come and immediately go to lunch.

I honor the surge of mental fuzziness because I trust my rhythm will come back once I've eaten. When we move, and pause between, we notice subtle shifts and potential salience in our language's musicality—whether a sentence sounds like a song or a series of sour notes. In the pause, a sentence can *feel* too long or too vague before we *know* why, like the performer, who, as a child, intuitively improvises the transformation of one leap into its landing. As a dancer on stage or yogi on her mat, I try to listen to micro discom-

forts as well as Anne. I am fascinated by how an itch to move or an external distraction, when attended to, often reveals the word for which I was searching. When resting on my belly on my office floor, I allowed my mind to compare words to illusive fireflies. This fanciful respite cleared room for invention to take root.

Nudges of physical discomfort, exhaustion, hunger, or anxiety are simply my mind's wiser layers poking at my subconscious, reminding me not to waste time staring at my keyboard when words evade me. Instead, I get up, move, gesture, dance, spin in circles and wait for meaning to show itself. It sounds cheesy, but it feels Newtonian.

Kinesthetic scripting encourages thought to evolve, but our bodies' promptings speak in enigma and emotion, neither of which are our primary languages in adulthood. I like to ask students to "show me" rather than tell me their writing concerns. When they quickly point to the troublesome passage, their fingers, eyes and body language begin to illustrate lack of clarity or a muddled thesis before they speak. I regularly work with language learners like Anne who struggle with run-on sentences and misused commas. We realize while they may not *know* when to end a sentence and when a conjunction is needed, they can often literally *feel* it. I ask these students to point out the commas that make them feel uneasy. They often immediately highlight misused commas scattered throughout their writing when invited to this primal act of pointing at something that threatens them. For many language learners I see, those tiny squiggles can be terrifying.

I watch a group of composition students read each other's drafts during a writing center peer review workshop. Their legs violently quiver; pencils tap tap tap; hands doodle, flip pencils, drum tables; bubblegum is popped and smacked. But I don't hear distraction. I hear bodies working for words, and I wonder if the pencil tapper is actually inspiring the bubble gum popper. Is the subtle cacophony actually a form of collaboration? Where in their bodies do they hold and process this information? How do they know to listen to others' rhythms? I also wonder how various types of bodies physically script in different ways. Do the athlete's feet run practice drills under the desk while brainstorming or does the singer hum vocal warm-ups when remembering APA format? Witnessing this improvised ensemble, I am grateful for daily conversations about moves we can make toward more lucid, juicier writing. My favorite writing conversations end with definite questions and loose plans of action: one step, stretch, gesture and stroke in front of another. After all, we are guaranteed nothing else, except, perhaps, our next move.

Work Cited

Elbow, Peter. "The Process of Writing—Cooking." *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 48-75.