
WRITING ON THE EDGE

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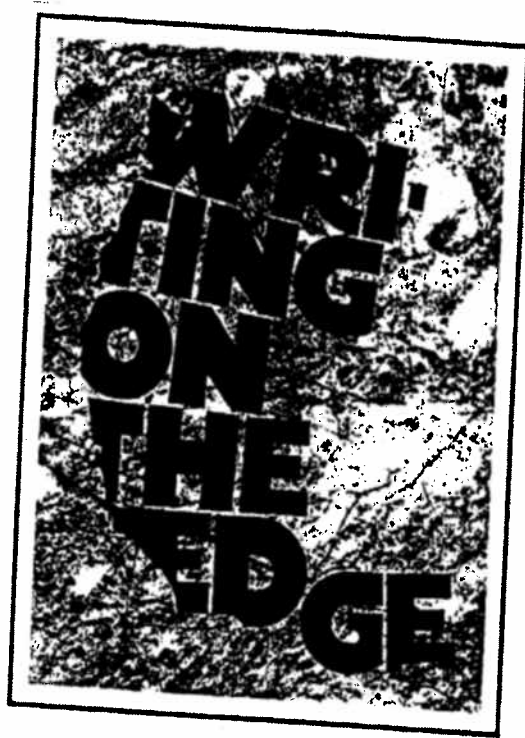
Noam Chomsky photograph courtesy of Donna Coveney.

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Writing on the Edge

solicits contributions for our 20th Anniversary issue
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All submissions are welcome, but we especially encourage work that concerns the changes in writing and teaching writing since 1989 (the year of our founding), the current state of writing and teaching writing, the future of writing and teaching writing. You may send essays, articles, interviews, poems, stories, collages, cartoons, drawings, or whatever else your fancy dictates. The deadline for submissions is August 1. Help make this a memorable issue of *Writing on the Edge*.

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Taking the Pulse of the Essay

Rob Schnelle

"It's a sweet time to be an essayist," Joseph Epstein confides (with a trademark verbal wink), but readers should note the occasion of a statement written when the author was approaching retirement. As a faculty star at Northwestern University, Epstein would have taught a predictably sweet course load before he stepped down, at least by the standards of garden-variety schools like mine. Where I work, members of the composition lecturer pool cover up to twelve sections annually. Each of these sections enrolls 25 students, every one of whom submits at least four substantial essays per ten-week quarter. Reading and commenting on 1200 student papers a year is exacting work, to put it mildly, and it fosters impatience with cheery asides about the state of the essay. What golden age are we basking in, Joe? Whence those blushing sunbeams that light the pages you read? While the personal essay has always been an awkward stepchild, I'm not sure it has gained poise in maturity. If literary forms had parents, they'd be shaking their heads, resigned to see the essay once again chilling among its bedroom memorabilia. You don't have to hold down a teaching job for proof of this; reading blogotorials in the *Times* online or half-listening to the hearthside musings of NPR commentators, I'm stunned that they find an audience. Organs of public record and classrooms alike keep the essay alive because no alternative has appeared.

Let's begin with its most captive audience. Teachers are force-fed amateur essays, which explains the low status of the form as well as the general dyspepsia of English departments. The national supply of Roloids can no more treat a comp faculty's malaise than overconsumption of *foie gras* can relieve heartburn in geese. Writing teachers are lambs in an avalanche zone, so crushing is our task. Yet to complain of indigestion, as fattened poultry may do, would violate our professional code. Bridled in self-censorship, we live by the myth that at some level, teachers *enjoy* student writing. Public discourses ranging from inspirational Hollywood films to certain academic journals encourage this brazen fatuity. The notion that student compositions hone the teacher's intellect, that they stimulate humanitarian concern or summon cognitive revelations is widely promoted. With rare exceptions, this view is also false. Perfunctoriness and cramped imaginations frame the work-a-day universe of student writing as they do most fields of human activity.

Intelligent life exists, to be sure, but how many galaxies of text can a teacher explore during one career? †

In short, comp instructors suffer twice. The inferno of grading gives way to a purgatory of civic face saving. Thou shalt not be candid about thy work, we learn, not if thou desir'st a cost-of-living raise. Airline seatmates and other strangers get nothing out of me on the subject of student essays, no matter how confessional they permit themselves to be. ("Oh, *English*—that was my worst subject!") Moreover, if tact is the watchword of the prudent, in the company of students I practice a sphinx-like discretion. Many's the time, while handing in or retrieving papers, that undergraduates have paused at my office door as if holding out for more—a benediction, maybe, or at any rate a modest expression of gratitude. My uttering a polite few words—"Thanks for your offering"—would release them from their spell, but I've lost the power to congratulate. What can I do but wish my apprentices a good break while suppressing the urge to torch their pages and burn to cinders the stacks that remain? It's rough on the frontiers of composition. Unsuspected by the citizenry, comp teachers toil like ants but guard our trade secret with our lives, for we know that virtue presumed is the public employee's first line of defense. And yet so often we reap despair. Sisyphus had nothing on us.

If you are still reading, though, you'll be relieved when I say that mediocrity is not the fault of students. For what I have yet to acknowledge is that while educators are right about student writing (it does not charm), we are right for the wrong reason. After all, mere ineptitude is treatable. Multiple drafts, office-hour tête-à-têtes, and trips to the campus writing center confer a degree of competence on even the most hapless amateur prose. Given time, ideas may be shaped; faults can be found and rectified. Nor is the teacher/reader's sympathy killed by mealy-mouthed expression or frankly contemptible opinions. Who among us has *not* been naive? Under stress, whose keyboard has never played false notes? No, I don't blame students for dismal essays, or not entirely. The essay itself is the main problem. Consider an introductory paragraph like this:

Everybody on earth is drawn to pretty people instead of plain people. The fact that we discriminate between these two types of people is not because we are shallow, but the fact is, we are built to be visually stimulated. As humans, we are drawn to what is colorful, cute, or somehow interesting. Nobody wants to be bored, so the more esthetically pleasing anything is, the more likely we are to pay attention to it. I feel that pretty people and plain people have advantages and disadvantages.

For some readers, the relative fluency of the passage cannot cover up its aroma of “Engfish,” Ken Macrorie’s word for insincere or formulaic academic prose. The assumption of a sweeping generalization in the opening sentence, the weak repetitions in the second, the premature rush to conclusions, and the vapid non-sequitur of the thesis itself are symptoms my generation of writing teachers once learned to militate against. From conformity’s shackles, the school of expressivist pedagogy once sought to liberate classroom. (It was a heady time for comp theory, the 1980s.) And yet, I find myself less put off by this writing than merely indifferent to it; in form and content it is competent enough, I think, especially given the author’s inexperience. What discourages me from further reading is not what some would call its inauthenticity, but rather the premise of the essay form: “I’m going to talk for a while about a subject I have in mind.” The motive is to occupy space on a page. Admittedly, the fact that I (the expert) must comment incisively and helpfully—write an essay of my own in response—and then repeat the process twenty-seven times before Thursday, is not what you’d call an incentive, either. (Do I count my piecework? Always.)

Here’s another excerpt showing the classroom essay as talk for talking’s sake. Note that while its author may be less adept than her predecessor, the dominant impression she leaves is the same:

When your mind stumbles across humor, you immediately think of something being funny. That’s because humor lets people express themselves, and it makes conversations more enjoyable. My question for you, however, is not “what is humor?” but “is humor really all its cranked up to be [sic]?” For the most part humor is funny, but you might find that not all types of humor are what they’re cranked up to be when you look at the harmful ways people can use it. Through these next few pages, I will be exploring three types of humor: verbal jokes, practical jokes, and sarcasm.

Like the previous writer, this student has developed and edited her work well enough to be read. She has also discovered an insight on a topic of general interest and introduced a plan of exposition. Depending on learning outcomes relevant to the case, we might find little to complain of. We might suppose that the rest of the essay will satisfy most ideas of communicative competence. On the other hand, if reading essays were not obligatory, we might take a powder.

Lately I’ve had cause to read, at break-neck pace, several anthologies of personal essays featuring many of the world’s great writers. This has been an instructive exercise on many levels, but what hit me most forcefully was the fact that, differences in sophistication apart, the world’s great writers sounded more like undergraduates than I wanted

to admit. The further I read, the more I was struck by Montaigne's incoherence, Johnson's orotundity, Hazlitt's bluster, Emerson's windy abstractions, White's bland resignation, Didion's anhedonia, and so on. Many of these habits of mind I meet in motley. What were they doing dressed in doctoral robes? When Annie Dillard announces that she "chanced upon" a book by Martin Buber, or when, impressed by the beauty of flowing water, she tells us, "I leap to my feet; I cheer and cheer," I want to sew my eyelids shut. To overlook the fey posturings that are this author's weakness takes work, especially when you realize they would not appear, unless recognized for what they are, in works of literary fiction or drama. (Coming from a less artful writer than Dillard, they wouldn't be tolerated in *Seventeen* magazine.)

Essays don't aim for verisimilitude: they are the thing itself, the maundering, oddball human brain discoursing about its notions. "On Some Verses of Virgil," one of Montaigne's masterworks, departs from its putative subject of sexual candor to compare the intellectual abilities of Italians and French. Without transitions, the author explains a method by which orangutans are snared in India, and he tries to discover the golden mean between "stagnant and sleepy idleness" and "thorny and painful busyness." In the world before GPS, unexplained digressions must have challenged the most avid reader, but Montaigne had an inkling of his own haphazardry as well as an answer for it: "Any topic is fertile for me," he says in the same essay, "for all subjects are linked with one another." Similarly, Hazlitt's classic piece, "On Going a Journey," seems almost to strive against unity. Casual exceptions, shifts in tone, and outright contradiction are freely interspersed with quotations whose only apparent relevance is that the narrator happened to think of them. You could argue that Hazlitt is simply mimicking the scatter-shot free-fall of consciousness, a technique Virginia Woolf would perfect in her nifty phantasmagoria, "Street Haunting." With equal justification, though, you could dismiss the personal essay as an exercise in self-indulgence.

The writers mentioned above are heroes of mine, so rather than bite the proffered hand—or to bite it and then make amends by chasing my own tail—I admit that the literary faults I resent the most are ones I'm also guilty of. As a self-absorbed writer given to moods and digressions (in other words, an essay writer), I have tried to imitate Montaigne's catholicity and even (as I do here) Hazlitt's contrary temperament. But on the rare occasions when I succeed, gratification is short-lived. Hard on the heels of publication comes the recognition of ephemera for what it is. Even *Table Talk*, in the end, is just talk, and as Gertrude Stein put it, "Remarks are not literature." So when I complain of student

writing, I suppose I'm dissing its medium. Like conversation, essays find so many ways to flag that you wonder why anyone bothers. If you write a poem, words alone can be the point, while novelists create self-contained worlds, dimensions teeming with schemers, pawnbrokers, obstetricians, whatever. The essay, by contrast, speaks in the wan voice of the solitary self. Yet it is the essay we assign students to write. And it is bootstrapped into this genre, one defined by tentativeness and lexically grounded in a verb which means, roughly, "to give it the old college try," that novices have to find their footing. We serve them flimflam sauce but tell them not to waffle.

I realize my critiquing the essay by writing an essay makes little sense. The only alibi I can muster is the lack of an alternative I mentioned. My subject is not the stuff of musical theater, and metrical rhetoric died with Alexander Pope. So, to keep on assigning classroom essays, I need to remember why we write them. However polished their surfaces, professional essays are feckless creations no less than student essays, and if you read enough of them, you'll find yourself reaching for the bilge bucket as surely as if you'd just slogged through a folder of I-Search papers. Putting it another way, to read four or five student essays, even weak ones, can be mildly engaging. To imbibe fifty in the course of several days is toxic to the nerves. The rule of satiation applies.

A colleague of mine, Will, who publishes poetry *and* fiction *and* essays, relates a telling anecdote. While giving a reading at a nearby community college, he notices a local faculty member grading papers in the back row of his audience. Amused and pitying, he later mentions the incident to Fred, his host for the reading. The next day, Fred writes Will a defensive e-mail, which Will eventually forwarded to me:

Mel WASN'T grading papers during the reading. He would never compromise himself or his students like that. Being single-minded about the craft is his way of listening, of being present, of walking with his students—for him, responding to essays is giving the gift of attention. I'm grateful every day for the teachers who read my papers and walked with me from one world to another. It's the most sacred work there is.

There is so much (forgivable) humbug wrapped up in this passage, it's tempting to dismiss it. Apart from the denial of Will's competency, Fred's umbrage suggests a man at pains to shore up self-regard. He protests too much. Granted, the comp instructor's job is poorly rewarded for the credentials it requires, but what makes it more *sacred* than selling shoes? Why, necessarily, is the person who manages medical data more "of this world" than a writing teacher? I can imagine prison guards as conscientious in their duties, as mindful of spiritual motives, as I am

