

Formal Paper 4: Reflection Paper

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English 125- section 071

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Let Us Clarify Together

“You don't start out writing good stuff,” says Octavia E. Butler. “You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That's why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.” I could not agree more with this statement. Although you have to persevere through it, I think the main part of learning how to write is by learning from the “crap” you wrote initially. It is very difficult to do this by yourself. Everything makes sense to the one that wrote it—but it takes input from others to have it make sense to everyone else. We learn to write by understanding the assignment, putting in a lot of effort and building off of our original draft while listening to others as they help perfect our papers.

During my years in middle school and high school, I was repeatedly told that I was an excellent writer. I would write a paper in all of thirty minutes and be told that I was a creative genius. The first time any teacher ever refuted this was during my senior year in AP Lit. I turned in my first paper, confident that another “marvelous” work had been created with little to no effort on my part. When that paper was returned to me, I felt like I had been hit by a bus. A “C” was not what a creative genius was used to receiving. What was even more shocking was that many of my friends, whom I had always been superior to when it came to writing, received “A’s” and “B’s” on their papers. I could not believe it! My paper was bleeding red ink: a whole other essay was written in the margins, correcting my sentence structures and debating my thesis. The language I had used for the past ten years was no longer accepted.

Although I was not happy with it at the time, this paper was one that actually taught me how to write effectively. In the past, I was able to get away with sentences that were very choppy and sporadic, but now I had to make my sentences to the point and intriguing. The next essay I was assigned, I wanted to do better on: correction, I had to do better on. I wrote a paper in which I put a little more effort in than usual. I turned it in and promptly received a “C+.” “A’s” were again common amongst my non-creative-genius friends. Aware that I was upset, one of my friends came up to me and said she would help me edit my next paper. So, the next week, I wrote out a draft and had her read it and make corrections for me. To my surprise, she made my paper bleed red ink, too. It was not that my paper was awful—it was that it made sense in my head, but apparently did not make sense to anyone else. When I turned this paper in, I was scared. Thankfully, when it was returned, the red marks had reduced and I received an “A” along with the rest of my friends. I realized that by being told I was such an excellent writer, I was not actually learning anything about writing. While I was being praised, my friends had actually gone out and gotten help from others, leaving them with better writing skills than me.

Similarly, the peer editing that has been done in this class has helped me receive a good grade. Our formal papers two and three really challenged me, as they were papers that I was not very used to writing. When I began the paper, my thesis was two sentences and read, “many times, when upset or frustrated, we may assume others know why we are upset. Usually they do not know, which is why the problems begin to arise.” When I wrote this, it made complete sense to me. Even when I read it now, it makes sense. But, from the feedback I received from the peer editing process, I realized that others were not certain what I was trying to say and I also did not follow the format that the paper was supposed to follow. For this paper, we were supposed to either make an alternative definition or talk about unintended lessons. I did not mention either of

those in my thesis. From what I had in the paper earlier, I assumed it was obvious what I was trying to say. After I stopped assuming and actually said what I meant, my thesis read: “A version of bad communication we see in a plenty of situations is when we limit the information given to others, leaving them to figure out the problem by themselves, sometimes resulting in severe consequences.” This used my own definition to “bad communication” and got to the point, making it a lot easier for other people to read too. With the help from my peers, I was able to receive an “A” on this assignment. This is a process that I believe should be used repeatedly in writing courses. I did not realize how effective peer editing was until recently. It should be encouraged to share our writing with others, rather than trying to blindly write a big paper because what we may find obvious in our writing may not be as obvious to others reading our paper.

After I had the requirements in the thesis, I was able to receive a good grade on formal paper two. Similarly, I was able to receive good grades on other papers from thoroughly reading the assignment’s requirements. As obvious as it sounds, we learn to write by reading what is expected from us in the paper. I am the queen of not reading the specific requirements in the papers I write. I get the gist of the assignment and just start writing. When this happens, I miss out on a whole lot that I was supposed to get out of the writing assignment. Informal paper one was a good example of this. I wrote up a draft of the paper a few days before it was due. I really just wanted to get it done, so I just threw something together about people’s scents and how a sniff of old perfume reminded me of my grandmother. On the day the paper was due, people were conversing about the paper: comparing ideas and audiences. Audiences? I did not put any specific audience in to my paper. I thought it was just about remembering memories from smelling things. When I got back to my dorm that night, I decided it would be a good idea to

check the requirements for the paper. Much to my surprise, we did need to gear our paper towards a specific audience and at some point directly state what audience that was. I quickly re-typed my paper, making it towards a teen blog. I re-submitted the paper just in time, and successfully received an “A.”

A similar situation occurred recently, unfortunately without the nice outcome. I was in a hurry last week, with assignments piled high, so I quickly wrote our informal paper three language experiment paper. I thought I did a great job, and turned the paper in just in time. But, when we discussed the “good” examples in class, I realized I had completely missed the point of the paper. I wrote about the experiment itself (which I did not conduct completely right) and never analyzed how my experience did or did not reflect Tannen’s points in her essay. I wrote a sloppy, not well thought through paper about a misconducted experiment where the whole point of the experiment was for it to be a fun way to analyze an essay. Unfortunately, I did not catch my mistake this time, which resulted with a “B” on the paper.

In both of these instances, I initially missed out on the whole lesson of the experiment. Anyone can sit down and write out what happened during an experiment they conducted or about a memory that sparks from the sniff of perfume; but it takes a much better writer to sit down and analyze the difficulties of what they wrote, to compare their findings to someone else’s, and to manipulate diction in such a way as to address a specific audience. As straight-forward as it may sound, I learned a lot from the assignments where I actually read all of the directions. When I read the directions, I was able to learn how to analyze and develop my writing even further. My evidence of improvement is this paper. I went from writing silly things such as, “I have always been one to thank the bus driver, to apologize for everything, and to be very sympathetic towards others. The first day of the experiment, I did a horrible job changing my ways...” to this whole

paper actually analyzing what I have done to develop my writing. A better example may be from my first informal paper, where I actually caught my mistake in time and was able to receive the good grade. I went from plain, general sentences to sentences addressing the audience, such as, “But until then, you can keep this small bottle with you as you leave for college,” and “(It had been used before cars existed! Crazy, I know!).” I was able to force myself into adding and editing the language I previously used to meet requirements given for the paper.

I believe my writing has improved greatly since I began this class. With the help of peers and the peer-editing system, my writing has changed to a more concise and understandable language than before. I am able to get my point across and effectively provide an arguable thesis. Much like my AP lit class, the criticism I have received in this class has also contributed to the clarity of my paper. Lastly, the simple task of reading the assignments has helped me learn what I am supposed to from the various fun activities we have done. Some of the assignments I found to be very “out there” and fun, actually really helped shape my writing when I read the assignment and did the necessary analysis. To effectively improve our writing, we must communicate with others and read specific instructions for the assignment. Great writing develops from criticism of our writing instead of praising of our writing.