

Assignment Instructions

Final Writing Assignment: Writing: Living with/in Words

Due Date: November 29-December 6, 2017 / Length: 4-5 pages (double spaced)

Part One:

“Writing...is an action, an event, a performance.”

David Bartholomae

We have been thinking and talking about editing and writing and reading and language, and the way they are always and already elegantly entangled. But you already know this: your in-class writing pieces, in fact, are already flickering with ideas that are connected to an ongoing conversation and debate taking place among contemporary writers, theorists, philosophers, and sociolinguists who are writing about writing, and who are paying attention to the relations between language and society, the relations between language and identity, between language and writing, or reading, or editing. What we don't know enough about, however, is what you good young people think writing is, or what you think about when you think about writing.

We don't know enough about what you think reading is, or what editing is. We don't know enough about what you think language is, what you think it does, what you think it can – or can't – do.

Over the course of this term, you will be developing, with your editor, a writing piece that explores the notion of “Writing: Living with/in Words”, a piece that you will submit for potential publication to the PWSA's online journal *Inventio*. I am inviting you to add to the contemporary conversation about language/s by zooming in on a particular encounter with language to investigate and explore an aspect of your relationship to language and writing (or reading, or editing) from your own personal, particular, and peculiar context.

I'm asking you to write about something that is interesting to you, to write about something you care deeply about. I'm asking you to open up a process of questioning and then write a conversational essay (or article, or story, or series of poems) that shows your thinking on the page: develop a critical, contemplative, and reflective exploration on your topic that narratively and stylistically unfolds your insights about a specific question that addresses your particular encounter with the action of writing (or reading, or editing, or words or language/s).

I ask that you also keep in mind the larger social, temporal, cultural, and educational context from which you are writing. Your experience in the world gives you access to this context. It's always a good idea, however, to think *with* somebody: another writer. Gilles Deleuze reminds us that "...writing is a flow among others." Write, then, in the company of one of your others. I supplied you with a few quotations to think-write with on our first day together; I will add a few more here at the bottom of the page. You are not limited to these, and are free to find your own writer to think with. Choose someone who can offer you a framework, someone whose views prompt you, and guide you toward a different way of "seeing language" and how it is implicated in the various ways we navigate and negotiate identities in everyday life.

Let me say this bit again: write about something you care about. Find out more about that thing you care about by writing through its complexities. I am asking you, above all, to produce knowledge, to take us into a scene of writing that will reveal insights about the writing and/or reading and/or editing process. I'm inviting you to add to the conversation and let us know what you think about the topic and how, from your perspective, we might know about writing differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities

of language in connection with writing, reading and/or editing, I invite you to help us see the writing process differently by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the field's representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about writing – or reading, or editing. Writing is not just your topic this term: it is your event.

Part Two:

On November 1st, you will submit a substantial draft of your writing piece to your in-class editor. Between November 8th and 15th, you will receive your editor's substantive editorial recommendations. Once you receive these recommendations, step into the final revision process and, while editing your own manuscript, please engage with the following:

- Critically reflect upon your editor's recommendations and consider which suggestions you will accept and/or reject.
- Revise your piece by further developing your "argument" while keeping in mind Williams's and Bizup's key principles of cohesion, global coherence, concision, motivation, emphasis, shape, and elegance.
- Keep reading: pop on to *The Electric Typewriter* (<http://tetw.org/Linguistics>) and read through the smart, stimulating, and critically reflective essays, all of which are written in conversational style. Use them as a structural template. Let them inspire you and give you permission to play with and experiment with your own style. Notice, too, how these essays are in a conversation with language, with writing and reading and editing, and that they are, like your own piece, making a contribution to the ongoing, vital, and urgent debate in the field of writing and linguistic diversity.
- Make an appointment, if you wish, to come and talk with me about your manuscript. We can have a conversation in my office or over a cup of coffee in La Prep (York Lanes) to discuss your paper and move through any pressing questions you have about content or style.

A hardcopy of your writing piece is due between November 29th and December 6th, 2017.

To: You, From: Me

Tonight is one of those nights. I can't sleep, no matter how much time I spend tossing and turning, taking deep breaths, and attempting to meditate. My back-lit digital clock tells me it's 2:31 a.m. I feel the heaviness of thoughts in my mind – it's a mailbox jammed with junk mail, letters from friends, anonymous notes, and lots of spam coming from the Self-Doubt Company and Emotions Inc. I keep the key to the jammed mailbox in my desk: my journal. I play with the thought of unlocking it. I am restless, and all I want right now is to relieve myself of this congestion.

It's been a while since I've written in my journal; I guess I just forgot about it recently. That explains the huge accumulation of thoughts in my head – it hasn't been cleaned out in a while. Writing, just writing about anything, and getting the words out of my mind and onto the page, seems to get rid of the pressure of the envelopes pressing against the walls of the mailbox.

But why is *it* writing? Why is *it* not taking a walk, and throwing the letters onto the grass and the street? Why is *it* not listening to music, and throwing my words back at the singer, who throws his at me? Why is *it* not drinking a hot cup of tea, and washing the words down my throat to be burned in the acid of my stomach?

I don't know why. *It just is.* And that's why I am now sitting at my desk waiting for my first words to come to me.

The lines on the page remind me of an open road. There is so much potential. And so much space. It's intimidating.

My writing isn't forced, especially in situations like this. It just happens, as the letters pour out. Sometimes I have a motive, which could be writing about something interesting that

happened to me, or writing about what I feel at a particular moment. For any of these topics, I always feel there is a reason for me to write about them, but I don't always know what *it* is – I just know that they're important. Sometimes when I write, I don't include a return address on the "letter"- I just want to write to forget. This kind of writing functions similarly to that of a Dead Letter Office, which "deals with the materiality of communication, not its supposed spirituality" (Peters 169). By making my unpleasant thoughts tangible in the form of writing, I can simply throw them away, burn the page if I want to, and physically rid myself of those thoughts forever.

I begin tapping the end of my pen on the open road. It feels lonely without words to fill it.

Why am I awake, finding myself with my journal again? What is calling to me tonight? My mind is so full and yet it's empty. I don't know where to start, but I know I need to write *something*, because I *feel* that I need to write *something*. *Something* in this moment is telling me to pick up my pen and scribble letters on this page.

It's the moment that is driving me to write. I'm not sure what is so important about this moment. But I am present, I am here.

My mind is here.

I need to write about *here*.

Maybe my words will begin to uncover the importance of this moment.

I begin writing about things that I am feeling and thinking about, but it doesn't feel right. It's almost too real. The energy is almost overwhelming. This first-person narrative is making me feel even more trapped inside my head. My goal, here, is to get out of it, outside of myself

I can picture a larger version of myself, standing over me like a shadow, watching my pen move across the page. I will write about this shadow. Is shadow-writing a thing? I will make myself stick to the ceiling of my room so that I can see the moment from a new perspective. I need to look at my own reactions in the moment, my facial expressions, my body language, my response to the ambiance in the room. I want to understand why I'm feeling this way, but I don't think I can understand that if I'm too much inside myself.

Well, here goes nothing:

She waits, listening for someone to tell her where to begin. She needs direction, but she doesn't want someone to tell her where to go. Writing comes from the heart, and the heart goes where it wants. In this moment, though, her heart is staying still, right here in this room, in this time, in this moment.

As she picks up the pen, it glides across the page effortlessly. She guides the pen, but the air is writing the words. The words are in the air; she is simply picking them out of the space around her and bringing them to the page.

Space – she lingers on this topic for a few moments.

“I don't take up a lot of space in this room,” she writes, “but I am suffocating.” As she writes about space, she observes her surroundings. “It's not that this room is small, or has too much furniture in it. It's the intangible things – thoughts – that are taking up all the space.”

She turns her body around and looks at various objects around the room: the nightstand, the dresser, the mirror, the bookcase. Every inch of this room has a story – every space holds a memory. Then she looks down at the little book beneath the point of her pen, the physical piece of space that holds so many memories and moments. She writes about words as space:

“This journal is a place. It occupies physical space, mental space, and emotional space. Each word takes up a space on the page, and a space within the capacity of the journal. These words contain space within them as well. They hold on to feelings and memories so that they don’t slip away from me. Words are temporary...when they are spoken. But when they are written down, they last forever. I believe this is part of the reason why I keep a journal. It is because I need a space to keep all the words that hold so much personal meaning. I need to tie them down and make them physical so that I can return to them someday...or so that they’re easier to throw away. I need to write to remember...or to forget.”

The pen stops on the road. She thinks about her words on the page and the space they occupy. She imagines herself a few minutes from now, closing the journal and storing it in her desk, the only person to open it next being herself. The journal is a safe place for her writing. It allows her to speak, to be, without feeling scared. The journal doesn’t criticize, it just listens. “In a world where it is so difficult to trust another human being, paper becomes your best friend,” she thinks to herself. She can yell at the paper, swear at the paper, pour her heart out to the paper, and it will never talk back. But she understands that as soon as she returns to these entries, years or maybe only days later, her own words begin to talk back and the paper becomes alive. As she reads her own stories, she discovers that she is yelling, swearing, and pouring her heart out to herself. She creates a life in these words, and she must be careful about how she constructs it, because she may end up hurting herself someday.

She wonders who she thinks she is yelling at in this moment. Is she picturing a specific person? Is it someone she doesn't even know? She is distancing herself from these topics by passing the weight, and the *wait* of it, onto "someone else". But no one else reads this journal, so where is this writing going? Is it disappearing into thin air? It can't be, because it occupies space on these pages. Maybe she *wants* these entries to be dead letters: written and full of emotion, but never delivered.

She is writing to herself subconsciously, not directly, maybe because she's afraid of confronting her own feelings. She doesn't think they're really all that bad. But maybe they are, and that's why she can't even reflect on them directly. Maybe she is afraid of feeling *too* much. Is there a word for the fear of emotions?

Edward Robb Ellis once said "There is another way in which I saved myself from madness, and this is the fact that all my life I have tried to communicate with myself. This diary is proof of this effort..." (Nordquist, *ThoughtCo.*). The act of writing in his diary was an *attempt* at communicating with himself – it was an *effort*. There seems to be some sort of struggle embedded in his words: why does he use the words *trying* and *effort*? She understands, because as she has experienced in past entries, and in this moment right now, communicating with yourself is not that easy.

"How do I do it?" she asks herself. She fools herself. She is not always writing to the same self, but to different versions of herself. These selves may be embodiments of feelings, someone she wishes she could be or someone she never wants to be, someone she hopes to meet. She has never written about herself, to herself, exactly as she is. The self she is writing to tonight speaks to her inside her head: "Write to yourself, but don't let yourself know that you're really you." Writing to herself might be the greatest barrier she has ever faced in her writing.

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I complete this train of thought with a period, but it feels more like a pause than a full stop. There is *something* more to this story that exists, something more to understand my urge to write. I know that if I keep writing about it, I will eventually make my way into a new area of thought. Writing uncovers complexity even in the simplest of things.

Whoever I was writing to tonight has taught me something about myself that I didn't know before. Maybe that's all I'm trying to do: learn about myself through the eyes of another, or the I's of an other. It's hard to see yourself for who you truly are. You can't physically look at yourself without using a mirror. I guess my journal is my mirror.

I look like a mess.

I don't think my journal is necessarily a "mess". It's quite beautiful when I look back on my writing, and see all of the different places I've been in my mind. I get to see who I am and who I've been. All of these identities might be false. They might be feelings rather than identities.

I find that some of my best writing is spontaneous – *it* is improvisation. As a musician beginning to study improvisation in recent months, I've realized how similar it is to writing. Improvisation is spontaneous, but it comes out of a catalogue of material that exists in the back of your mind. You call on these materials according to whatever you're feeling while you're playing, and whatever your mind leads to. It is very much a stream of consciousness form of playing music. Sometimes it is completely mindless, sometimes it is random, sometimes it is well thought-out, but almost every time – even in the strangest of ways – it sounds like real, good music. In improvising, you learn things about yourself. While you are playing, you begin to

experiment with different themes, ideas, patterns, chords, shapes, and in that experimentation, you create new material to play from in the future. You also learn what you like and what you don't like. I think writing is this way, too. It can be experimental. Writing can reveal new things about yourself, and can create new materials and areas of thinking that can be accessed in the future. It doesn't matter if the writing is "good" or "bad". The only thing that matters is the experience, and the new areas that you've explored. It's all valuable.

Writing and improvisation is about discovering. There are no strict rules. You just have to write or play what you feel, and hope your audience feels it too.

A lot of my writing starts from a feeling. But I can't always explain what that feeling is – *it just is*. But maybe this feeling is not supposed to be explained, maybe it is only supposed to be felt, and nothing more. Louis Armstrong once said, "Man, if you have to ask what [jazz] is, you'll never know" (Mullenweg). Sometimes beautiful things don't need to be "over-thought", they just need to be experienced, and that experience will tell you everything you need to know about its indescribable beauty. If you think about jazz too much, it just becomes chord names, numbers, beats, and black and white – it's not interesting anymore. If you think about writing too much, it's just words on a page.

Straight and curved lines.

Was I thinking about writing so much tonight that I restricted myself from writing at all? I am beginning to feel that in wondering where to "begin", I lost all creativity in my writing. I should have just begun.

Maybe tonight was the night that Rilke was describing in *Letters to a Young Poet* when he said:

...ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity....Then, as if no one had ever tried before, try to say what you see and feel and love and lose.

(Rilke 6)

If I feel I must write, then I must try to write what I feel, and maybe that will lead me to understand why I needed to write in the first place. But if anything, I at least need to *try*, because *something* wants me to. If I am not satisfied with my writing, that's fine. At least I have satisfied the need to write.

So then, I must ask:

Does writing really have to be anything at all?

Can't *it* just be an attempt, and effort, at simply writing?

Works Cited

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Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Scriptor Press, Massachusetts, 2001.

Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, University of Chicago Press, 26 April, 2012, p. 169.