

Thought Papers

Cultivating Voice, Community, and Risk-Taking Through Low-Stakes Writing

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Abstract

In the assignment described in this essay, students write a two-page paper, on anything they're thinking about, with the express purpose of reading it aloud to their classmates. As a low-stakes assignment (graded complete/incomplete), thought papers create a space for students to experiment and take risks with voice and subject matter. Valuing the grain of a human voice over the high-gloss finish of AI-generated text, the assignment presents opportunities to think further about the role of voice in one's own writing, as well as the work of listening and attending to others' voices.

Introduction

In her essay “Thick,” the American sociologist and essayist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) reflects on a discouraging piece of feedback she received on an early work of academic prose. Told that she was “too readable to be academic, too deep to be popular, too country black to be literary, and too naive to show the rigor of [her] thinking in the complexity of [her] prose,” Cottom found herself pressured “to fit” within a world in which “[her] thinking was deemed too thick” (pp. 7, 8). At the start of the Spring 2023 semester, I read Cottom’s essay in preparation for a faculty meeting focused on then-recent developments in generative artificial intelligence. Although “Thick” predates the release of ChatGPT, reading Cottom’s essay in that context called to mind questions about what makes writing “human”: how embodied, physical experience finds expression in a writer’s voice, as well as what sorts of voices and bodies are standard enough “to fit.”

As Cottom’s essay makes evident, no writer’s voice is ever neutral; we are all inflected by the histories that have led our bodies and voices to be marked in particular, culturally signifying ways. And yet many students—and even senior academics, as Cottom emphasizes—experience an unrelenting pressure “to fit”: to minimize or erase their idiosyncrasies in favor of standard academic discourse. I left that meeting at the start of the Spring 2023 semester thinking about how many of the problems that ChatGPT made newly visible were not really new: that long before generative AI tools became widely accessible, students have felt pressured to write like robots, even as we, their professors, assure them that we want them to sound like humans.

Thought Papers

I started assigning thought papers with this problem in mind. I wanted to find a way to value the uniqueness of my students’ voices and to alleviate the kinds of pressure that can make turning to generative AI appealing. I wanted to create a culture of sharing work in class where students would experience the suspense and excitement of sharing their thoughts with each other. In my first-year writing classes, a thought paper is a two-page paper, in response to a very open-ended prompt (such as “Tell us about something you’ve been thinking about lately”), assigned more than once over the course of the semester, and read aloud during class periods dedicated to

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this work of sharing and listening. A low-stakes assignment (graded complete/incomplete), thought papers allow students to write on any subject, in any style or voice that they choose. Because of the open-endedness of the prompt and the complete/incomplete grading system (students receive full credit for showing up and reading, without any formal assessment of the work), students have license to take risks that they might not otherwise. Rather than having this work evaluated by their professor, students receive a different kind of feedback by witnessing firsthand the effects of their choices as writers on an audience of listeners.

I adapted this work loosely from an assignment I loved (but remember hazily) from my time as a student in Mrs. Jane Archibald's twelfth-grade English class. In the spring of 2023, the recent release of ChatGPT had prompted me, like so many other professors, to revisit questions about voice and presence that had never ceased to be important but perhaps had been raised with new urgency by the advent of AI-generated language. How can we encourage students to write in "their own voice" when so many of them are used to being penalized for not sounding "standard" enough? What do we even mean by "voice"? How does the embodied sound of a writer's voice manifest in their prose style? Can students learn to recognize the connections between their own spoken and written voices? And what role does listening play in cultivating students' writing?

Although it's still relatively new in my classes, the assignment also grew out of the Expository Writing Program's longstanding interest in the essay, defined in the classical, Michel-de-Montaigne sense as an *essai*: an attempt, a test, an experiment. Like many of my colleagues, I use "essay" to designate a process and form of writing distinct from the thesis-driven writing that students often report having learned in high school. Rather than beginning from a place of certainty, an essay proceeds from a place of deep curiosity, a questioning of received beliefs, or a fascination with something the writer does not yet fully know how to interpret. In Phillip Lopate's words, the essay is "an exercise in doubt" (Lopate, 2013). Arguably more so than other kinds of writing, an essay is a form that might feel difficult to grasp until you're actually writing one, and one of the many uses of thought papers is to incorporate some experiential knowledge of this mode of writing, outside of the imagined or actual pressure of writing an official first draft.

Scaffolding

Prior to the first thought paper assignment, I assign André Aciman's introduction to *The Best American Essays 2020* anthology, an essay that is essentially an extended definition of the word "essay." Recalling Lopate's "exercise in doubt," Aciman suggests that "an essay doesn't seek to conclude anything ... because its main purpose is to speculate, to explore, to propose, to delay, to reconsider, and always, always to find a pretext to think some more" (Aciman, 2020, p. xxix). This description might call to mind the expression "thinking out loud on the page," a metaphor that is often employed as a description of essayistic writing. Thought papers take up the "thinking out loud on the page" metaphor fairly literally by asking students to write for the purpose of reading out loud. In order to encourage students to think about their own voices as they approach their first thought paper, in the preceding class I play audio clips from writers whose work the class has already read: Aciman, Joan Didion, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin. As they listen to these writers, I ask my students to jot down their impressions, offering the following questions as prompts:

- What is the effect (on you as a listener) of hearing these voices?
- What is different or distinct about each voice?

After listening to the recordings, and before we share our responses, I ask my students to select

one paragraph of their own writing that they would be comfortable sharing with their peers. It might be a homework assignment, part of a draft, a random thought they jotted down in their notebook. We break out into small groups, and each student takes a turn reading their selected writing aloud to their group members. I ask that while listening to their peers, they think about the same questions: what is the effect (on you) of hearing these voices, and what is distinct about each voice in your group? Finally, I ask that each group share their responses and collectively draft a definition of *voice*; here are some of the phrases that came up in one section's discussion:

Voice as soul

How a person represents himself

Personality, pauses

Storytelling

Rhythmic pauses, speed... placing emphasis, stress

Powerful, airy, secure [as adjectives for Lorde's voice]

Balancing long and short sentences

Volume and inflection mirror content

I find the variety of these descriptions interesting: they point to the physical/tonal qualities of voice ("volume"), as well as to more metaphysical associations ("soul"). Voice appears to indicate both intentional choices ("pauses," "emphasis, stress"), and the intrinsic, enduring aspects that make a particular person's voice coherent as well as distinct from other voices (Lorde's "powerful, airy, secure" voice). While students have a lot to say about the voices of published authors, at this early moment in the semester, I've found them to be more hesitant to name the qualities of their own and/or their classmates' voices.

During the class period when students read their thought papers, I reiterate that our primary task will be listening, and remind them of one of the epigraphs at the top of my syllabus, an excerpt from Jacqueline Jones Royster's 1996 essay "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own":

How do we listen? How do we demonstrate that we honor and respect the person talking and what that person is saying, or what the person might say if we valued someone other than ourselves having a turn to speak? ... The goal is not, "You talk, I talk." The goal is better practices so that we can exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding with the intent of being in a good position to cooperate, when, like now, cooperation is absolutely necessary. (p. 38)

When I ask students what this means, what it would mean to listen in this way, they often refer to the phrase "active listening," and we review what this means in the context of this classroom activity (which for a class of fifteen or sixteen students entails fewer than five minutes of speaking and upwards of sixty minutes of active listening). In lieu of eye contact, students note that we can demonstrate attention by taking notes, avoiding distractions (cell phones), and holding our responses until the end of class.

In addition to preparing ourselves to be courteous and supportive listeners, I also intend these discussions of listening to inform students' composition of their thought papers (as well as their other, future assignments). I want them to think as they write about the voice that they are conjuring on the page, whether the work is to be read aloud or silently. My intention is to help them form a concept of audience that feels actual and present.

Classroom Impressions

There is a palpable nervous energy on thought paper day. I ask a volunteer to begin, and we proceed clockwise around the room. Typically, I assign thought papers twice over the course of a semester, and although some students will explore a theme or idea that connects directly to an upcoming assignment—using the thought paper as a prewriting or drafting exercise—others will take the opportunity to write about something they may not have found a home for in their more formal writing assignments; in the Fall 2024 semester, for instance, several students used a thought paper to explore their responses to the U.S. presidential election results. Many thought papers fall into what I’ve come to think of as the “slice of college life in the city” genre: students write about sharing space with a roommate, or choosing among the myriad dining hall options, or the struggle to keep in touch with friends from home. Many grapple in searching and self-reflective prose over whether they’ve made the right decision: to study far from home, to major in econ. There are also big questions: who am I? How does this relate to where I come from, or the people I associate with? There are some exciting stylistic experiments. There have been at least two (that I know of) improvisational thought papers, in which a student either wrote (or rewrote) and spoke their thought paper on the spot. Every semester, at least one student has asked in advance of thought paper day: Am I allowed to use profanity? (Answer: Yes!)

After everyone has read, I ask the class to write for a few minutes if we have time: What stands out to you? What are you thinking about now? What connections or patterns did you notice? In the concluding moments of class, students share some of these connections and responses. Usually a few students will comment on the sense of relief of learning that some of their classmates are thinking about the same things they are.

Reflections and Future Adaptations

Anecdotally and on course evaluations, many students report that thought papers are their favorite in-class activity; they appreciate how the assignment contributes to their own growth as writers, as well as how it allows them to get to know each other. As one student wrote in a Spring 2023 evaluation, “I loved hearing the way in which other people think and I also really felt like I was able to develop my ideas very efficiently after writing mine.” A colleague who has adapted the assignment for his classes has likewise reported¹ that thought papers “made [his] classroom more dynamic and more empathetic.” He observed that thought papers allow students to “get to know each other as individual thinkers, while they also get to accidentally employ a number of the skills and strategies they’ve been working on as essayists, in conveying their own original thinking,” and he added,

Based on the success of this work, and the excitement students expressed about the way it changed the nature of [their] classroom communities last year, this year I rebuilt the third major assignment they do as a modified and extended thought paper in which some research is required.

All of these reports make me feel confident that even as I initially turned to thought papers in response to generative AI, the assignment also resonates with a hunger for community and self-expression that most students have always brought with them to the classroom. Moving forward, I hope that assignments like thought papers will continue to help students recognize the value in writing as a tool and medium to connect to their audience and community without needing the intermediary of generative AI.

Although thought papers have produced some of the most memorable and exciting work to come out of my classes, some students naturally struggle to venture their own thinking,

choosing instead to read work that sounds more like a report. This was especially apparent when I asked that students use their second thought paper to explore a question that's come up in their research (see "Version 2" in the Assignment section below). Rather than voice what they think about the debate or controversy they were in the process of researching and writing about, several students essentially summarized their research. At the other end of the spectrum, this same thought paper assignment (falling the week after the U.S. presidential election) also created space for students to voice passionate concerns and doubts about the future.

What I've taken away from teaching this assignment for four semesters is that it works best when the prompt is very open-ended. Structurally, thought paper day marks a break from the format of the class, and I think there's value in creating space for students to digress, to think and write about something that hasn't found a home in their essay. For the Spring 2025 semester, I plan to incorporate the assignment into NYU's multilingual first-year writing course (International Writing Workshop I) by asking for two versions of a shorter (1-page) thought paper: an English version, and a first-language version. Creating space for students to read both versions in class I hope will make the concept of "thinking out loud on the page" more accessible and contribute to building community by allowing students to hear each other's multiple voices. I also hope to use this work as a springboard toward metacognitive writing and discussion about what it means to "think in" a language that is not one's first language.

ASSIGNMENT

Thought Papers

Version 1 (Fall 2024, Thought Paper #1)

In his "Introduction" to *The Best American Essays 2020*, André Aciman (2020) tells us that to think is to drift, that every "essay is the child of uncertainty," that "[a]n essay is like a story, only with the difference that the author may have no idea where he is headed" (p. xxxi, xxx, xxix). For your thought paper, your task is to experiment with writing in this drifting, exploratory way, giving yourself permission to change direction, to change your mind. Please give us two double-spaced pages of thinking about something that's fascinating to you—something you've observed, something you've been remembering, something you're reading about—starting from a place of *uncertainty*, so that you have room "to speculate, to explore, to propose, to delay, to reconsider" (Aciman, 2020, p. xxix). When you're done, please print out your work, and practice reading it out loud. Notice if there are changes you need to make to allow the writing to express the voice that you wish to inhabit. Edit your work, print it out again, and bring it to class, where you will read it out loud to your classmates. This assignment counts for 5% of your final grade, you only need to complete the work to earn the full 5%.

Version 2 (Fall 2024, Thought Paper #2)

Remember this: in his "Introduction" to *The Best American Essays 2020*, André Aciman (2020) tells us that to think is to drift, that every "essay is the child of uncertainty," that "[a]n essay is like a story, only with the difference that the author may have no idea where he is headed" (p. xxxi, xxx, xxix). For your second thought paper, your task is to share with us one of the most difficult and fascinating questions that has come up for you, as you've been researching your chosen conversation. What is it that you're still struggling to understand, or to formulate your own opinion about? In keeping with Aciman's description of "essaying," please give yourself permission to speculate, to explore, and to change your mind. You are welcome to bring in some

evidence from your research, but the focus here should be on *your own thoughts, your own doubts, your own questions and tentative ideas*. When you're done, please print out your work, and practice reading it out loud. Notice if there are changes you need to make to allow the writing to express the voice that you wish to inhabit. Edit your work, print it out again, and bring it to class, where you will read it out loud to your classmates. This assignment counts for 5% of your final grade, you only need to complete the work to earn the full 5%.

[Update following the 2024 Presidential Election: If you would like to use this Thought Paper to think through current events (even if these do not feel directly related to the conversation you're writing about), you are welcome to.]

Notes

¹This comment is shared with the written permission of the instructor.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i2.242>.

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