

# The Behavioral Change Essay

## An Embodied Writing Assignment

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### Abstract

This Behavioral Change Essay assignment is a trans-disciplinary reimagining of the personal narrative essay. Students are invited to embark on a four-week behavioral change of their choice (e.g., going to bed by 12 a.m., eating one vegan meal a day, playing guitar for thirty minutes each day, etc.) and are asked to observe what happens in the process by noticing what supports their new habit, or prevents them from establishing it. These observations, kept in a daily Observation Log, motivate their curiosity to research sources and fields of study that contextualize the social, cultural, technological and capitalistic mores students find themselves living within that may or may not support the values they hold. Through the practices of embodied writing and contemplative self-reflection, students learn how to identify tensions between themselves and the neoliberal demands they encounter in an engaged, exploratory 4- to 5-page self-reflective essay.

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### Slowing Down

A mantra has emerged in my first-year college writing classroom: *slow down*. Slow down in writing, in reading, and in thinking. In the name of efficiency, students often skim-read, cherry-pick evidence, write in a templated structure, and are onto the next writing task without really arriving at a deep level of insight that has personal value. This mode results in a separation of students from their selves and an avoidance of the gray areas of life that more thoughtful, engaged, and meaningful writing traverses.

This goal-to slow down and explore for deep meaning by relating the self to larger, transdisciplinary contexts-inspired me to design an essay prompt that teaches students how to identify and articulate one's embodied values, beliefs, and complex relationships with the world. The progression of assignments that lead to the Behavioral Change Essay invites students to make a behavioral change they can engage in during the final four weeks of the semester, serving as a capstone assignment that features the skills developed throughout the term: inquiry-driven research, critical writing in one's own voice, and reflective engagement with evidence.

In the first exercise for the progression (see Exercise 1 in [Supplementary Materials](#)), each student generates a list of options to choose from. This can be anything from taking the stairs instead of the elevator to eating one vegan meal a day, from stopping biting one's nails to going to bed by 12 a.m. What is most important is that the list contains behavioral changes the student genuinely wants to make. Through in-class reflective writing followed by peer conversations, each student makes a choice of which habit to attempt once they step out the door at the end of class.

I initiated this essay progression with NYU's first-year international student population, and later within NYU's core first-year writing classrooms. A common student response in both contexts was the desire to succeed at the habit challenge itself. This task orientation led to fabricated observations and fictionalized realizations where their efforts went suspiciously well, removing all tension and points of interest for students to examine, research and reflectively write about. As a result, I have begun emphasizing, in the prompt as well as in the classroom,

### prompt

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that the objective of the overarching assignment is less about being successful at adopting the behavioral change they have chosen and more about creating space and a process to slow down and observe what happens over an extended period of time when they attempt to make said change. During this period, observations are recorded in a daily Observation Log (see Exercise 2 in [Supplementary Materials](#)); slowing down to identify, question, and reflect on the internal and external causes and conditions that support or detract from their behavioral change helps students uncover lines of inquiry that motivate their research and writing (a three-draft process), ultimately culminating in a self-reflective 4- to 5-page final essay.

## A Curious Problem

Due to the capitalistic framework of higher education, a fundamental problem we face as instructors is the decline of slower-paced self-motivated curiosity and the rise of efficiency-oriented neoliberal curiosity amongst students. Arjun Shankar, an assistant professor of culture and politics at Georgetown University and co-editor of *Curiosity Studies: A New Ecology of Knowledge*, explores this problem in his chapter titled “‘The Campus is Sick’: Capitalist Curiosity and Student Mental Health”:

A neoliberal curiosity is a form of curiosity that is instrumentalized toward questions that pertain only to monetary success and value as defined by corporate-State interests. [...] As a result, students continue to experience an increase in the distance between what they want to know (i.e., a self-motivated curiosity) and what they ought to want to know (neoliberal curiosity), which in turn tears them from themselves, producing anxiety, depression, and the like. (p. 107-108)

Students are discouraged from pursuing what they want to know, resulting in a kind of disembodiment and erasure of non-hegemonic identity traits and values. Students become estranged from what interests them, lose “the ability to wander, explore, and question without purpose” (p. 119), rush through what is required of them, and as a result struggle to name what they value and believe, which is perhaps why so many students refer to being “bored”: by classes, by content, by life.

Time and space for discovering what interests them is rarely provided due to the standardized framework of education prior to college, as Shankar describes:

Most students come into college already deeply indoctrinated into capitalist knowledge-values, inculcated into ideas of achievement, success, and self-worth during a secondary education that emphasizes standardized tests calibrated to those ideas that will make them compliant and productive members of the workforce. (p. 111)

Achievement-oriented anxieties cause students to focus more on what will make them marketable upon graduation, rather than pursuing what they may see as risky alternative areas of study that “feel less certain and less related to expected career outcomes” (p. 117-118). Muting one’s interest in aspects of life that exist outside of a meritocratic frame is a consumptive dynamic that should give us all pause.

## An Internal Solution

The Behavioral Change Essay prompts students to return to themselves. The problem of disembodiment Shankar (2020) describes has many students living in the future, neglecting their mental and physical health as a result. Slowing down to observe and reflect on a range of experiences over time helps students learn how to embody the present moment and parse “how

one feels about what one ought to want [as a] way to see cultural production of all sorts” (p. 110). Doing so allows them to tend to their future well-being in a more concrete, autonomous way, one that matches Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh’s (2001/2010) perspective: “We can only take care of our future by taking care of the present moment, because the future is made out of only one substance: the present” (p. 51).

This prompt appeals to students’ future-oriented focus by naming the well-being of their present and future selves as a primary reason for making this behavioral change:

This final essay is about you, to give you a chance to try out a little bit of an experiment, to learn more about your own values, automaticity, and the socio-cultural forces at work in your life that perhaps pull more strings on your daily behavioral choices than you are aware of, so that you can be more in control of becoming the kind person you want to be!

Motivating students to pause, embody, and evaluate their lived experience in the present helps them plant seeds for the kind of future they want to live.

## Embodied Writing

The Observation Log aspect of the assignment brings students back to the present moment so they can bear witness to their own lives. It is maintained daily—from the moment students choose their behavioral change until the final draft is due—and it asks them to “reflect on what [they’ve] observed each day by way of challenges, ease, discomfort, joy, and suffering.” While capitalism conditions us to view our bodies as limitations to productivity, the perspectival shift students are invited to make with this prompt is the complete opposite: the body is a site of deep knowledge and liberation, so long as one slows down to observe and approach what it contains with curiosity.

Encouraging students to amass a wealth of firsthand evidence in observation logs grounded in their “embodied interactions” (Shankar, 2020, p. 109) helps cultivate an excitement, a feeling of intrigue, an emotional buy-in to better understand their lived experiences and the causes and conditions those experiences are positioned in. In “Embodied Learning,” Janet Emig (2001) describes the embodied classroom as

a site where students are required to acknowledge human complexity, situational ambiguity, vexed, even unanswerable questions about self and society. [...] [It] re-introduces students to the joys and inevitability of human pace, crucial if they are to find satisfaction with partners, children, elders, colleagues, themselves. Learning—often jazzily erratic, maddeningly slow—cannot be rushed or decreed. (p. 279-280)

The slower, human pace of embodied learning is vulnerable work that can cause resistance from some students, and this response requires teacher encouragement and modeling in feedback to encourage students to explore, question, and engage their experience as they would a text.

Even for students who are open to being vulnerable, they can struggle with the slow pace this kind of patient work demands. Students are aware of this problem as they often express early on in their observation logs that they thought it would be easy to develop the habit or that they are surprised to not see any results yet. Many students also choose behavioral changes that would introduce idleness or leisure into their lives, like taking a walk every day for the sake of walking without a destination, returning to playing piano every day after not being able to since the busyness of the semester started, and meditating for 10 minutes each day. A common

tension students observe and write about is their inability to engage in idleness, in leisure, and a tendency to turn their habit into another form of work or source of productivity.

While some students are excited to share these observations of struggle, some tend to feel sheepish about sharing what they see as personal shortcomings. Within a capitalistic framework that condemns failure, to be asked to document their challenges and failures in their Observation Log can feel counterintuitive. In feedback, I stress throughout the process that the moment when a student inevitably fails to follow through with their new habit is exactly when something to write about emerges.

Two weeks into attempting their behavioral change, students reach the research step (see Exercise 3 in [Supplementary Materials](#)), during which they are invited to especially engage with what has been challenging for them in maintaining their habit:

Explore what documented research has been conducted on what you've chosen to experiment with to help contextualize your observational insights about your experiences. You are not alone in the struggles you are encountering! Your struggle becomes a point of relation to other writers and your readers.

This step helps to shape their writing, from a series of journal entries into a reflective essay that zooms out from a constellation of personal evidence to larger sociocultural and psychological contexts. In other words, the habit itself becomes the catalyst for the actual essay that results, an essay which foregrounds a line of inquiry that is supported via self-reflection of first-hand experience and contextualized by research.

As mentioned above, this reflective work requires a level of vulnerability that can be difficult, though generative. In response to post-assignment reflection<sup>1</sup> for example, one student observed:

Going into this, I had no idea what my essay was going to be about. [...] I wasn't expecting to talk about loneliness. No one talks about how traumatic quarantine was for a lot of people, and I wanted to explore that space where I haven't seen anything about it.

This student excavated deeper layers of personal significance while also noticing “unanswerable questions about self and society” that her writing could acknowledge. To me, this indicates a shift from the kind of conditioned compliance Shankar describes to the self-motivated curiosity and agency this prompt aspires to cultivate.

This kind of embodied reflective work also requires a kind of flexibility unfamiliar to many students. In her article, “Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching,” Pat Belanoff (2001) describes the complex, embodied nature of reflection:

Etymologically, *reflect* is composed of *re* “back” and *flect* “bend”, so literally *to reflect* is “to bend back.” [...] The earliest definition [...] is from 1605: “to turn one’s thoughts (back) on, to fix the mind or attention on or upon a subject, to ponder, to meditate.” *Fixing* suggests a need for some degree of stasis, a lack of movement. Within the word *reflection* we thus uncover a paradoxical linking of “turning” and “fixing.” (p. 405)

The Observation Log is intended to help students pause and look back to meta-cognitively interact with a growing cache of documented evidence and to identify directions for research. This ongoing aspect of the assignment teaches students that the writing process is an unfolding one that continually alters the original intention for the essay and inspires new directions for research as embodied experiences accrue.

## (Re)Form

This kind of writing assignment also requires students to think about structure in more nuanced, complex ways. As one student noted,

High school writing was structured to the point where every essay was the same, but this time it was up to me to build a structure that fit the essay and then incorporate both voice and analysis. [...] Informational writing has always been separate from like, writing-writing. However, in this last essay I was pleasantly surprised that I was able to integrate both in a pretty seamless way.

The student's shift from imposed structure to a form that serves the student's voice and vision indicates a transition towards self-motivated curiosity for how she can best capture her intention for her reader. Encouraging students to develop a structure that dramatizes their unique path of inquiry for an outside reader to experience alongside the writer is an integral part of the course and program pedagogy. Anchoring this assignment to a timeline of evidence helps reinforce those pedagogic principles of structural flow: how one reflective observational insight leads to a new motivating question that leads to research, which leads to another, deeper reflective insight, and so on. This student's emergent genre and audience awareness (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) suggests that the resulting essay is something that lives in the world (i.e. self-motivated), rather than merely fulfills a (neoliberal) course requirement.

## Consequences of Resistance

Still, the tunnel vision towards neoliberal success persists, and to become successful within a capitalistic framework, students learn to displace their identities and lived experience in the process. As a result, writing for other classes and assignments becomes a slog, research becomes tedious, and in the words of one student what is being written about seems to have “nothing to do with” the student or their aspirations. Every semester students share that they used to love writing until high school stripped them of their voices and ways of seeing. By foregrounding the everyday embodied interaction students encounter when attempting their habit, by valuing their ways of seeing and experiencing the world, this assignment helps students reframe their knowledge-values and reconnects them with who they are and who they want to be through their behavioral choices. This shift disrupts the otherwise fatalistic beliefs students have in terms of what to value, what to question, and what to be curious about. As one student reflected:

[Writing this essay] encouraged me to confront something head on that I never imagined I would, and because of this [...] I couldn't be anything but honest and the reader could discover these things with me.

This student similarly speaks to audience awareness and essay structure as a dramatized journey of understanding, suggesting that embodied writing results in a relationship with the reader that demands honesty and nuance, engendering student writers to do what George Saunders (2007) urges any writer to do: to own one's prose by “[w]orking with language [as] a means by which we can identify the bullshit within ourselves (and others)” (p. 63).

Sanctioning time and space for students to engage in this kind of honest, reflective work is an essential part of facilitating this prompt. Once students engage in embodied reflection, a shift begins to take place from what they *ought* to want to know to what they *actually* want to know, from the neoliberal template of high school writing to the less certain, self-motivated line of inquiry college writing asks for. Resisting a fatalistic acceptance of “the way things are” (as expressed by many of the students Shankar interviewed) and moving towards a more open,

questioning approach allows students to challenge what they have previously taken at face value. These revelations inspire them to delve deeper into understanding the nature of the forces at work so they have a greater potential to resist what does not align with their values.

## Reclaiming Agency

Through practice, students learn to internalize the art of reflection, helping them better frame and understand their lived experience and develop an awareness of, in Shankar's words, "regimes of value" (2020, p. 107). In his essay "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation," Moffet (1982) describes using mindful writing practices to teach students how to sit on the riverbank of the mind and objectively observe the flow of inner speech that occurs there to reveal "unexpected connections that illuminate both oneself and the outside objects of one's thought (p. 235). Moffet argues, "Only when the individual brings some consciousness to the monitoring of the stream of experience does she start to become the master instead of the dupe of that awesome symbolic apparatus that, ill or well, creates her cosmos" (p. 235). Mindful writing has the potential to decolonize the mind and disrupt ways of thinking and being that become habitual and fatalistic rather than critically engaged.

In early iterations of this prompt, I noticed a tendency for some students to name the reason for their failure at forming their new habit as laziness or a lack of willpower. This moment of limited, fatalistic reflection became an opportunity to discuss and emphasize how taking sole responsibility for failure implies an internalization of the overarching systemic causes and conditions contributing to their behaviors. I came to realize that explicitly asking students to identify these overarching causes and conditions is essential to developing this essay, from what could be a mere navel-gazing piece of writing into an essay that identifies sites of tension between the self and culture and thus results in powerful insights regarding one's sense of agency and universal resonance.

To help students identify sites of tension, I guide them through an in-class outlining practice prior to writing first drafts. Students are given one section at a time, with five minutes to generate writing in response to each section. Each section focuses on a specific area for reflection. For example, students are asked: "What was your *modus operandi* (i.e. way of being/way of doing things/autopilot mode) before you started your behavioral change? Paint a picture for your reader of where you were personally starting from, including what values you held in your previous way of being." Through this kind of personal, value-based writing, students are encouraged to take stock of the wealth of evidence they now have at their disposal in the form of both personal observations and academic resources. Throughout the guided outlining students are asked to consider where they might zoom out to relate to their reader via substantiating evidence, to not claim the personal as the universal, but to earn that move through grounding research that also deepens their own reflections through theoretical lens work. Here, a student makes that move in their final essay about taking time to draw every day (despite not being, according to them, very "good" at it), and realizes more about their previously held beliefs as a result:

On some level, I always knew "talent" was an excuse [not to draw]. It was easier to blame some mysterious, unchangeable factor than to admit I just didn't put in the effort to change it. In reality, no one was born knowing how to hold a pencil; most, if not all, artists developed their skills through years of effort. When research professors Michael Howe, Jane Davidson, and John Sloboda examined the literature on "talent" (defined as an innate ability with a genetic basis, identifiable at an early age, usually domain-specific and only present in a minority of individuals) they found little evidence that it exists at all. (Howe [et al., 1998], p. 399, 405)



The student reflecting through the lens of a text transforms their own way of seeing, a thinking move that is valuable, and even transgressive in a capitalistic culture, as it fosters genuine engagement with outside information to evaluate overarching systems that are too often mistaken for truth.

## Deeper Depths

The Behavioral Change Essay was initially a 3- to 4-page assignment. I had thought there was value in teaching students to be concise and economical with their language by limiting the page count in this way. After hearing for a few semesters from students that it needed to be longer, that they needed more space to explore further what they were observing, I changed the length to 4 to 5 pages (and still receive thoughtful 5- to 7-page essays). This request from students for more space to unpack their findings demonstrates how this prompt facilitates motivated exploration and reflective engagement as students strive to question and understand, rather than fatalistically accept, the capitalistic framework they are conditioned to compete in.

The most aspirational learning outcome of this prompt is to inspire students to become more active participants in their own lives, to learn “how to resist, to be a fugitive, to begin asking challenging questions that make us feel like we can change the situations that we are in” (Shankar, 2020, p. 122). To confront students with their autonomy is visibly jarring, and the value of this confrontation is immediate. Once students learn how to pull back the veil—to question and challenge what they are told is good for them when their embodied experience tells them otherwise—rather than molding themselves into marketable commodities, they begin living in a way that honors who they are as whole people.

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## ASSIGNMENT

### The Behavioral Change Essay

For your final essay this semester, you are invited to choose a personal habit that you wish to change (e.g. I want to try to be off my phone from 4pm-7pm every day for the next four weeks) or a new habit that you wish to adopt for yourself (e.g., I want to try to eat one vegan meal a day for the next four weeks).

Whatever you choose, it should be specific, concrete, and personally valuable to you. It should be challenging enough that you will learn something about yourself and the social forces at work in your life. It should not be something so challenging that you are doomed to fail before you even begin (e.g., I will stop using my phone for four weeks). It should also not be so easy to adopt that there is no friction at all (as you will not have much to write about!). Choose something reasonable, meaningful, and fun for you to challenge yourself with!

The purpose for this final assignment is for you to narrate your own experiment/experience and position what you've observed within fields of study via research. How does your own firsthand experience of attempting this habit-challenge face outward? What advice do you have for your reader after engaging in this experiment? What realizations or insights into your own experience resonate universally? What social theory are you realizing that your own experience serves as evidence for?

The final draft should be **4-5 pages in length**, have a clear logical flow of thinking on the page, include **at least 2 academically verified sources** that help contextualize your experience, and offer insightful lenses to support your reflection on your own experience. As always, please

follow MLA formatting and citations.

### *Skills Practiced and Assessed*

- Attempts to represent and analyze concrete personal experience for deeper layers of personal meaning and significance.
- Attempts to search for and identify a cluster of sources **via NYU Library databases and other reputable databases**, in relation to the sites of tension identified in the Observation Log.
- Attempts to develop a *conceptual conversation* between first-hand experience and at least 2 conceptually-related texts via reflective lens work to help uncover and articulate deeper meaning and larger sociocultural resonance.
- Attempts to provide conceptual transitions that smoothly guide your reader through your flow of thinking, resulting in a clearly-organized essay that develops a compelling insight of larger significance you leave your reader with.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Student reflections and writings are shared with their written permission; reflective comments shared here are responses to this question: “What surprised you when writing this essay?”

## 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.v9i2.244>.

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