prompt

a journal of academic writing assignments

SPECIAL ISSUE
Writing Programs as Intellectual Ecosystems: Traditions and Innovations from New York University

ARTICLES

Part 1: Reimagined Heritage: Prompts that Expand Our Program's Distinctive Character

Part 2: New Horizons: Assignments that Push the Boundaries of Process and Form

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We are excited to publish this first special issue focused on assignments from a single writing program, the Expository Writing Program (EWP) at New York University. We hope this and future special issues focused on writing programs as intellectual ecosystems will serve as a valuable way of understanding writing prompts not only at the classroom level but also as part of larger conceptual, institutional, logistical, and embodied historical systems.

This special issue is guest edited by Ethan Youngerman, an associate editor for *Prompt* who served in faculty and leadership roles in EWP for many years. We are deeply appreciative of Ethan's enthusiasm in working with us on this new special issue format, a process which included his substantial effort in managing a call for applications, selecting submissions, managing a review process, and coordinating additional logistics.

We encourage readers to treat Ethan's introduction as its own scholarly contribution: in setting out parameters for this special issue, we asked him to describe the program ecosystem within which the intellectual lineages of individual assignments fit. In broad terms, an ecosystem is a geographic or spatial area in which organisms interact together with one another and with non-living factors to form a "bubble of life" (Rutledge et al., 2025, para. 1). We did not ask Ethan to draw specifically on influential ecological frameworks offered by writing studies scholars (e.g., Dobrin & Weisser, 2002; Inoue, 2015; Reiff et al., 2015), instead encouraging him to interpret the term as he wanted. However, we did ask him to set out some of the program's history, an overview of its aims, and a sketch of the space within which the individual assignments circulate. We likewise encouraged Ethan to speak to considerations of range: that is, what kinds of diversity does he see reflected in the program and in the essays selected for inclusion? What contextual elements constrain that diversity? In what ways does the assemblage of essays push boundaries of genre, identity, disciplinarity, pedagogy, and more? Ultimately, we hoped the introduction would describe the assignments in a way that helps illustrate how they (individually and collectively) function as social actions that reinforce (and/or complicate) the work of the system.

As readers will see, the notion of *essay* is an especially important feature of New York University's Expository Writing Program. Nearly every author in this special issue emphasizes the distinct role of this genre in their program, encouraging students to embrace uncertainty and personal reflection rather than produce purely thesis-driven prose. We think this is a relatively unique aspect of their program, one no doubt influenced by the fact that the faculty hold a mix of MFAs and PhDs from multiple fields. As editors with PhDs in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies, we admit that we were sometimes at odds with the more open-form, exploratory essayistic approach used by some contributors to this special issue, but with time we have come to see its power, particularly in the meaningful writing NYU students produce and that the authors describe in this issue.

We are incredibly grateful to Production Editor Liz Hutter, who nimbly and graciously adapted to a variety of hurdles during the final phases of setting this issue.

prompt
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Other Notes

In other housekeeping business, we are happy to report that Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Stephanie Kerschbaum, and Michael MacDonald have each agreed to renew for another three-year term on *Prompt's* editorial board. We are likewise enthusiastic to welcome Joseph Saufley, a University of Wyoming graduate student in writing studies, who will join the journal for a 9-month internship, during which he will work with our associate editors from across the country and across the disciplines to determine whether to send out submissions for peer review and to help identify appropriate peer reviewers given the content of the submission. We are eager to have Joseph help us promote the journal to a national and increasingly, even an international scholarly audience. Welcome aboard, Joe!

We have also updated *Prompt's* author and reviewer policies to reflect our current preferences related to generative AI. Comments from board members—especially their concerns about intellectual property—were especially valuable in our decision to bar reviewers and associate editors from using AI in their evaluation processes. All essays published in the next general issue should adhere to the new author guidelines.

Finally, in 2024, after consultation with *Prompt* editorial board members and WAC Clearinghouse advisors, we began exploring ways to increase technical support for the journal—a need that was exacerbated in late 2024 by glitches within the journal's back-end system that were well beyond the editorial team's capacity to solve. In March, we signed an MOU with University of Wyoming Libraries that has included the migration of the journal from a commercial web host to a new location supported both by UW Libraries as well as by Public Knowledge Project, the developer of the open-source editorial platform on which *Prompt* operates. We are especially grateful to UW librarians Chad Hutchens and Sierra Pandy for their expertise and support in navigating the migration. We believe that this move contributes to the long-term sustainability of the journal and we apologize to readers, authors, and our editorial team for any frustrations the somewhat disorganized migration process may have caused. Thank you for your patience—we are optimistic we have now gotten most of the bugs out of the system!

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Guest Editor's Note

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Painting a portrait of the New York University (NYU) Expository Writing Program (EWP) runs into the old cartographic conundrum: the only way to produce a perfectly precise map of the world is for the map itself to be the size of the world; when we make complexity more useful, we run the risk of reducing it.

Still, there are major intellectual landmarks which might help sketch out a shape of the EWP terrain: *idea* as an inductively crafted and animating force of a text; *form* as a crucial set of writing discoveries and decisions in conversation with idea; the *essay* as a tradition and form capacious enough to encourage all those discoveries and decisions and conversations; all of this fostered by drafting processes, influenced by creative writing, so scaffolded they can themselves become evidence for students' writing. At NYU, these principles are developed and revised within a faculty community that values pedagogical inquiry by colleagues as much as it values essayistic inquiry by students. My hope is that this introduction will make those landmarks – idea, form and essay, process, and pedagogical inquiry – more legible within this special issue, and that the special issue in turn will help EWP contribute to the national composition landscape. My hope is also that this first of many(!) *Prompt* special issues about individual institutions will open up new ways of conceptualizing the conversations and innovations *within* writing faculties.

About that institution. Though NYU is a private research university, the undergraduate population is markedly diverse: 22% of undergraduates are first-generation college students, 24% are Pell Grant eligible, 22% are international students, only 22% identify as white (New York University, n.d.); this year, NYU accepted just 7.7% of applicants (Saadah, 2025). EWP, housed in the College of Arts and Science, comprises the largest full-time composition faculty in the country: over 100 faculty (plus another 30 in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi[1]) teach over 4,000 students a year in small seminars, across six different schools ranging from performing arts to engineering. The faculty are on continuing contract lines; by my count, over 80 faculty have been teaching at EWP for more than a decade, and over 30 have been on the faculty for more than two decades. Mapping this world is, also, mapping years-long relationships, friendships (I had a table of EWP colleagues at my wedding), and marriages (there are currently five married EWP faculty couples). If it seems like I'm belaboring the personal, it's because at EWP it's part of the intellectual.

And so (with caveats that this whole is missing parts) these eight assignments written by nine colleagues – reviewed by another eight EWP faculty and eight scholars from outside EWP – have to stand in for the full majestic coastline of the EWP landscape; they don't so much represent this land as lead you into it (which is, of course, the etymological root of "introduce").

Within these eight assignments lie many of EWP's central tenets and preoccupations, including the concept of idea. Historically, many EWP faculty value a process of inquiry and induction which ultimately leads a student, in their mind and on the page, to an idea. An idea, in EWP pedagogy, shifts and grows; it may "only [be] revealed by the end of the essay" (NYU Expository Writing Program, n.d.). An idea, in my synthesized understanding of these EWP

prompt
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prompts, is the record of a writer and essay figuring something out; when an essay provides pieces of evidence which help articulate an argument, the idea is a more generalized set of discoveries that evaporate from each piece of evidence, drop by drop, almost unseen, until the essay is so saturated with thinking that a legible, numinous nimbus of meaning finally forms. Many of these prompts explicitly push students toward such a sense of significance in their writing. Teaching students how to grow and move an idea is, I'd argue, one of the distinctive contributions NYU writing faculty make to the landscape of teaching composition.[2]

Inextricably linked to idea is form. While several of the assignments here culminate in a convention-bound, generically defined form (e.g. an abstract, an encyclopedia entry), the more crucial emphasis here is on formal invention, on structure as both a path to and record of exploration. Many of these assignments offer up the essay as the necessarily versatile formal vehicle for such exploration; in particular, Courtney Chatellier and, separately, Zach Udko, give eloquent voice to the searching, ever-shifting quality of essays. Certainly there is a rich history, on display here, of EWP faculty engaging with the tradition of the "personal essay" (see Hoy, 2012); the personal is part of the intellectual. But even in assignments with no interest in personal evidence, EWP conceives of essay as the personal expression of the writer, a form that only they could shape.

With that idiosyncratic goal in mind, many of the series of assignments here attempt to create writing experiences which could themselves become evidence, giving fuel to students for their essay writing. The insistence on students writing an essay only after several smaller assignments (typically called a *progression*) is a marker of EWP's focus on writing process as experiential learning; Amanda Kotch's prompt takes this to a brilliant, logical extreme by creating a finished product (an abstract) which is also part of the process toward another finished product (the student essay it is written for). To highlight this focus on process, we have published many of the prompts in this issue along with the progression's preceding mini-prompts. Amira Pierce and Justin Warner are both invested not only in the student writing process, but also in understanding the student experience of and attitude toward writing. Along with that comes an investment in student well-being, which helps to motivate Jono Mischkot and William Morgan's piece; Zach, too, speaks of the student writer holistically. Megan Murtha's progression, grounded in each student conducting an experiment on their own behavior, fuses all of these interests; her work foregrounds process, highlights student affect, and teaches students that only they can write their essay by curating experiences that only they will have on the way to the writing. Experience becomes evidence, process contributes to form, all of which shapes and is shaped by idea.

Nor are these experiences strictly confined to the writing process as such. In these pages are glimpses of the EWP classroom, particularly the classroom practice of sustained observation: beyond just a penchant for visual evidence, many EWP faculty (including Justin, Amira, and Zach) evince a belief that if you train students to notice the small it will more firmly ground their thinking in evidence. This noticing is fact-based, and yet what emerges out of it is ultimately deeply personal; factual and human are deeply intertwined. In fact, you could argue that this twinning is elemental to the form and history of the essay.

Though several colleagues here position the human, exploratory, evidence-driven work of writing as a means of combatting AI (Courtney, Zach, Amanda), these principles long pre-date this latest challenge to the expository curriculum. Large language models (like ChatGPT) could lead to a loss of learning by removing the student's experience of writing, but EWP has always elevated the experience of getting lost in writing as a form of learning.

In addition to pedagogical principles, these prompts shed light on pieces of the EWP curriculum. Some of these assignments are innovations on typical EWP progressions – like jazz

improv on a songbook standard, the melding of the new and the traditional is itself, in EWP, the *ur*-tradition. So, Jono and William's progression reveals the crucial skill of making surprising connections, in this case between a text and a larger positionality story, that is at the heart of what EWP long called a "deepening progression"; and Amira's prompt suggests the recursive power at the heart of a "reckoning progression" which asks students to return again and again to a central, confounding text – only this time transposed to a class-wide shared source. Justin's work is an inventive tweak on a familiar progression, which goes by many names and typically teaches students the skills of organizing/ordering a large amount of evidence (the oeuvre of an artist) alongside researching skills (necessary to contextualize the oeuvre); what better way to get to the heart of a creator's work than by trying to recreate it with humor? (Though it could be woven into any progression, Amanda explains how her work also emerges from this "reviewing" tradition.) Though every professor crafts their own syllabus, most EWP syllabi, I suspect, contain at least one improvisation on these particular standards and so these are crucial landmarks for any curricular map of EWP.

Other assignments here are innovations that seem to stand on their own. Megan's focus on behavior-changing is not a widespread practice within the program; Zach was an early adopter in EWP of video as a means of essayistic composition. Chen Lin and Courtney each push for genres/forms (encyclopedia entries and think papers, respectively) which are not widely focused on in EWP (or, to my knowledge, at NYU Shanghai's writing program); the common academic task (the abstract) which Amanda reinvigorates is not commonplace to many EWP courses. I trust that the creativity across this issue portrays the program I know: one that is endlessly innovating, tinkering, playing (on that, see a *Prompt* article by former EWP-er Natalia Andrievskikh, 2024) with the endlessly exciting challenge of teaching first-year writing.

* * *

Less explicit in this issue but no less crucial, are the interpersonal bonds that form amidst a longstanding faculty. These may emerge in part because NYU writing faculty are so often working *together* through a large pedagogical smorgasbord of workshops, assessment projects, working groups, scholarship of teaching and learning studies (e.g., DasBender et al., 2023). Additionally, new faculty in EWP are placed in small learning communities led by more senior faculty. When I started teaching there, in 2001, new faculty participated in six semesters of these mini-cohorts (it's since been reduced to four); the make-up of each group changes semester to semester. Beyond the pedagogical training, the result is a tightly woven intellectual community made up of faculty who have thought about teaching in structured ways alongside other newer and older colleagues, who shared previous mentors with a yet wider circle of professors, each educator acting as an intellectual link on a chain but also a node in a network.

A typical essay in *Prompt* will use citations, in part, as a way to claim and communicate an intellectual lineage. Many of the essays in this special issue reference an internal EWP lineage, fueled by new teacher cohorts, faculty convenings (twice-semesterly full-program workshops collaboratively run by the program's Director of Faculty Development), and years of collegial sharing and building of assignments, syllabi, courses. There has been remarkable (and remarkably stable) leadership within the program. The current Director, Jenni Quilter, was herself a longtime member of the faculty; she was preceded by Dara Regaignon, who in turn took over from Pat C. Hoy II; Pat began directing the program in 1993 and retired in 2013. Denice Martone is currently the Associate Director of the program . . . and was when Pat was hired. Nate Mickelson, the current Director of Faculty Development, replaced Ben Stewart, who started teaching in EWP in 1997; Ben took over the role from Darlene Forrest, who led faculty

development for approximately two decades. William, one of the authors in this issue, stepped down from directing the program's Writing Center in 2025 after over twenty years of leadership. Nor is claiming the EWP lineage confined to current faculty. The old offices of the program had a series of cubicles arrayed around a long table; colleagues would eat, respond to student work, meet with students, and share tips and tricks of the trade there. Many alumni of this era, long-since teaching elsewhere, are still members of a Facebook group called The Center Table.[3]

Alongside these communal interpersonal aspects, the program is characterized by an intense and persistent exchange with creative writing as a field. For at least the last 25 years, the program's faculty has had a near split between MFAs and PhDs (with multiple colleagues holding both). The academic traditions faculty were trained in run across the disciplines, though there is a core of English and/or writing studies scholars. As for the MFAs: former EWP faculty of the last two decades include three Pulitzer Prize finalists in drama, another Tony-nominated dramatist, a National Book Award finalist in poetry, and a novelist short-listed for the Booker Prize; their own creative works are, in my opinion, shot through with an EWP-ish emphasis on idea. But a belief in the *academic* usefulness of creative writing practices has also long been a hallmark of EWP pedagogy, with a focus on process, on formal invention and belletristic attention to language, to sentences, to rhythms.

* * *

Maybe, then, there's no way to map a program, at least not one this big, with this many people and disciplines and traditions. Maybe eight prompts can be evidence for nothing more than those eight prompts. Or maybe precise mapping is a precisely wrong(headed) metaphor, a fool's errand to prove a shape that's always shifting anyway. Maybe, instead, these pages don't trace a terrain so much as explain an ecosystem – a moving, swirling set of people, practices, principles, parasitic and symbiotic, paradoxically ever-evolving and yet equilibrious. Maybe each prompt here is just a drop of water which, under the proper introductory microscope, reveals evidence of so many more organisms. You're invited to remember that any piece of an ecosystem may behave differently in a new environment, though I confess a hope that many readers will import something from these pages to their own institutional ecosystems only to discover a beneficially invasive species.

Prompt has always had, as its mission, this kind of importing, the circulation of teaching. The journal takes seriously the ephemera of exercises with the hope that, by publishing them, these pedagogies won't perish. This new era that editors Kelly Kinney and Rick Fisher have established, one in which special issues are devoted to one school, expands this act of cultivation; the performance of teaching and prompting can be fleeting, and the intellectual communities that grow up around them are no easier to preserve. It's deeply influential ephemera all the way down. But I hope this special issue, at least in part, helps to preserve this special program at NYU. How lucky I was to map my intellectual home in this essayistic ecosystem for over two decades. How grateful I am to these nine colleagues for these assignments, and to all the colleagues whose thinking influenced these nine. How happy I am to introduce this ecosystem to you; read on in, the water's fine.

Notes

[1]NYU Shanghai and NYU Abu Dhabi are degree-granting institutions. Both schools had their writing programs founded in the last 15 years by EWP faculty who left the New York campus to teach in and establish these sibling programs; some of these faculty returned to EWP after a year while others stayed much longer. There continues to be circulation amongst the three campuses, not just through visits and projects (e.g., a collaboratively run symposium) but also through faculty taking term-long teaching assignments at non-home campuses; Amira Pierce's prompt in this

issue, for instance, emerged while she was teaching in Shanghai, although she is a faculty member at the New York campus. In short, all three NYU campuses' writing programs are part of the intellectual community that this special issue is devoted to.

[2]Such idea-based significance is not fully at odds with the more typical composition term "thesis" and the disciplinary traditions which require it (Chen Lin's essay explicitly references this in terms of genre), but I note that you'll barely find the word thesis in these pages; the assignments in this issue suggest a view that "writing a thesis statement" is a static enunciation that limits student exploration. If idea emerges and gracefully twists across the page, thesis is its boring cousin who doesn't even know how to dance. Courtney Chatellier's essay in these pages espouses this belief; Amira Pierce's goes a step further and exemplifies it – her work is formally complicated and animated by idea.

[3]People construe this history in different ways, of course; indeed, having such a visible program history at all allows for interpretation. Sometimes I think all this meaning making, albeit divergent, also binds colleagues together.

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Renovating the Personal
Positionality Stories in the Global Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Our sequence of exercises represents a version of an essay we often assign our students in the Expository Writing Program (EWP) at New York University. Borrowing the concept of "the positionality story" from Christina V. Cedillo and Phil Bratta (2019), we advocate for reconceptualizing the personal (writing about personal experience) as the positional (confronting the social, cultural, and linguistic factors that shape and differentiate one's personal experience from another's). While drawing on the personal to embolden a student's voice, motivate probing analytic work, and create innovative writing communities has been a long standing practice of ours, the move to the positional is a new approach that, we find, helps today's NYU students become more rhetorically and culturally "attuned" to our globally and linguistically inclusive institutional writing environment (see Leonard, 2014).

We designed the assignment and exercises below (what we call "The Positionality Progression") in AY 2022-2023 as we pivoted entirely back from the twilight of the Zoom world to authentic, in-person teaching after the pandemic. In this specific context, we especially wanted to address the culture shock and dislocation that many of our students—especially multilingual international students and American students from first-generation or underrepresented backgrounds—were feeling as they stepped into the university writing classroom while returning to in-person learning on the first day of college. The shock and dislocation our students experience generally comes in many forms (the pressure to write in Standard Academic English or SAE; imposter syndrome accompanied by self-perceptions of unpreparedness and deficit; discomfort about unfamiliar pedagogical or rhetorical practices or with the predominantly white legacy of higher education), and, whatever the cause, the result is often similar: a sense of disbelonging, the feeling of being an outsider. In turn, when students feel unwelcome or unfamiliar with being in the college writing classroom, they lose confidence in their abilities, resulting in a lackluster engagement with and analysis of texts. Thus, especially after the pandemic, rather than ignore such distress, we attempted to draw on the feeling of being an outsider as a way to nurture deeper analytical work and build more inclusive writing communities.

The general goal of this sequence is to allow students the freedom to brainstorm, reflect, and experiment via scaffolded exercises that invite a variety of approaches to the assignment before writing a final essay. The more specific goal is to encourage students to analyze a text about bias and cultural belonging through the lens of their personal experience and positionality (i.e., the various contexts, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc., that shape and inform one's sense of self). The selection of professional texts is open to the instructor's choice and preferences, although we recommend assigning short personal essays where diverse authors engage with bias and their shifting sense of cultural belonging.

Using the personal to teach more probing analytic writing and cultivate student voice and belonging is nothing new. Our field has a long history—from Peter Elbow to Ira Shor and many others—of encouraging students to tell stories drawn from their experiences as a way to cultivate student voice, agency, and belonging (Cedillo & Bratta, 2019, p. 217). Further, from Gloria Anzaldua to Jacqueline Jones Royster to Felicia Rose Chavez in her recent text *The Anti-Racist*

prompt
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Writing Workshop (2021), the value of listening to and honoring stories from students of all backgrounds and experiences remains central to anti-racist research and inclusive writing pedagogy. Likewise, in the program where we've taught for the past twenty years, many of our colleagues have long believed that one of the most effective ways to ease students into university writing and provoke them to undertake more motivated and probing analytical work is to allow them to mine and reflect on their experiences. Our prompt below, for example, evolves from an EWP unit that was once called "The Deepening Essay," in which students closely read a complex professional essay, come to clear understanding and thorough articulation of its main idea and/or argument, and take some aspect of that idea as a focus for their own essay, attempting to extend (or *deepen*) its meaning through the lens of personal experience. For many years, this unit came first in the shared curriculum for the foundational course. In some form, many EWP faculty still teach this unit first in EWP's foundational course today, *Writing as Inquiry*, believing that it introduces students to the fundamental work onto which more advanced practices will be scaffolded.

Yet, just as NYU has transformed—its brand wasn't always as global as it is now—our approach has also evolved. Today in Washington Square, which is just one of three degree-granting NYU global campuses, international students make up more than one-fifth of every incoming class, and among students identifying as American citizens in the class of 2025, 19% self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 22% as Caucasian/White, 17% as Hispanic/Latino, 8% as African American/Black, and 10% as Other/Not Indicated ("NYU Facts," n.d.). In this highly diverse context, we have aspired to cultivate a more fully inclusive approach—one where considering the problem of belonging and the value of exploring one's positionality are central to our renovated pedagogy.

We borrow the concept of a "positionality story" from Christina V. Cedillo and Phil Bratta's essay "Relating Our Experiences: The Practice of Positionality Stories in Student-Centered Pedagogy" (2019), where they distinguish it from the more common, "uncritical use of [personal] stor[ies] in educational settings" (p. 218). A positionality story, they argue, specifically emphasizes "that meaning is constructed through interaction and in context; in other words, meaning is relational and must be understood as such lest we make assumptions about where students are coming from and what they need" (p. 218). Whereas the personal may simply mean relaying an experience, the positional asks students to account for the layers of their identity as they unpack their experiences in specifically situated contexts. Since positionality stories take on their "meaning" only when writers carefully situate their experiences in intersectional contexts (cultural, educational, familial, racial, etc.), Cedillo and Bratta argue—and we agree—that a pedagogy that values the telling of such stories can help students to learn how to challenge dominant narratives. As they put it, "Particularly for students whose backgrounds do not reflect traditional notions of academic identity, positionality stories may offer a way to self-position within the classroom and academia as a whole" (p. 219). EWP's recently updated webpage states that our mission now includes helping all students to "develop their understanding of writing as a situated practice" and "expand their awareness of their own distinct writing voices in relationship to their classroom community of writers" (Expository Writing Program, n.d.). It's in this specific context, then, that we advocate for reconceptualizing the personal (writing about an experience) as the positional (accounting for the social, political, cultural, and linguistic factors that shape one's experience) as a crucial strategy for cultivating student belonging and motivating them to undertake more rigorous analytic work.

As teachers, we know students need to feel seen, heard, and valued to get comfortable showing up as themselves in their writing. Thus, we work concertedly to foster an inclusive class-

room space—one where students who initially hesitate or choose not to disclose aspects of their identities often come to feel safer taking such a risk[1]. Foremost, as Chavez insists in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* (2021), we aim to institute a practice of generous, inclusive listening among our students, because we want to establish a classroom context where it feels safe to be brave, take risks, and share stories. In such a writing classroom, Chavez writes:

> We invest in one another as complex individuals. We confront the voices in our heads that tell us our stories are unimportant. We honor the sidelined narratives of people of color, women, queer, differently abled, and gender-nonconforming artists. We listen to one another's writing, read aloud in workshop, ever conscious of our body language. We ask questions with the intent to understand instead of retort. . . . And we adhere to the author's agenda during feedback sessions. It requires self-discipline to be sure, but cultivating listening. . . makes us better writers. (pp. 18-19)

While cultivating generous, anti-racist listening among our students, we also try to model pedagogically a kind of vulnerability and honesty about our own—and others'—positionalities and experiences. Cedillo and Bratta (2019) write of how they tell positionality stories from their experience that "highlight the tensions accompanying their own difficult processes of academic acculturation and invite students to confront and contextualize the often-unquestioned norms that bolster their feelings of 'dis-belonging' " (p. 216). More specifically, Cedillo, who identifies as "Chicana," explains how, when teaching a first-year composition course with primarily Hispanic students, she noticed they were struggling to adapt to the conventions of academic writing. She then decided to share the following with her class: "despite being an outstanding student in [high] school and an L1 (English as a first language) speaker, things had changed for me when I entered college. Suddenly, my writing never seemed to fit some arbitrary standard that I did not feel privy to . . . . I felt a pressure to prove myself without knowing what I was trying to prove" (p. 223). Phil Bratta, who identifies as "white working class male," tells an analogous story of when he decided to speak with his students about his dad's expectation that he would go into a trade rather than attend a traditional four-year college and how it affected his confidence and sense of belonging when he was a student (p. 228). Though it can feel risky to disclose stories of one's positionality as a faculty member teaching a class, Cedillo and Bratta advocate that at times we do take this risk in order to destabilize our authority and, in the process, start to "destabilize many of the dominant narratives with which students from marginalized communities must contend as they enter academia" (p. 219). However, because we identify as white, male, middle class, straight, and cis, we usually position ourselves more as allies than models, taking deliberate care so that our students might come to trust that we won't assume anything about their experiences from ours. Still, even then, we sometimes insert personal narratives into our discussions with our students that gesture to our past challenges, such as admitting why we got Cs in several of our undergraduate classes despite considering ourselves talented, or disclosing our childhood challenges with dyslexia when we struggle to spell something on the board.

In addition, we turn to diverse professional essays, student essays from a collection called *Mercer Street* (EWP's annually-published anthology of exemplary first-year writing), and student drafts-in-progress from our classes to encourage the value of writing about and interrogating our various positionalities. Take the professional essays from the assignment below, for instance. All three, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013), Cathy Park Hong (2020), and Zadie Smith (2014), are writers of color who describe urban places—a Manhattan deli, Los Angeles' Koreatown, and NYC's Soho district, respectively—where they ostensibly should feel like they belong. However,

in each case, the author's sense of belonging is compromised and complicated by their experience of their positionality and the biases they contend with in different contexts. Coates, for example, is troubled by an incident at his local deli where an employee is guilty of racially profiling and falsely accusing a famous black actor of shoplifting. His interrogation of his mixed feelings in response to the incident evolves into a cogent, motivated analysis of the history of "invisible racism" that often accompanies white denial, including the excuses that are often made for the "good people" who perpetuate racist bias. Similarly, Hong and Smith also reckon with their complicated positions in the context of their experiences of cultural biases, language, urban spaces, and writing.

As Exercise 1 below suggests, we focus some class discussions on the moments where Coates, Park Hong, and Smith show up as embodied analysts and thinkers about their positionalities in their writing. During these discussions, we listen for the moments when our students start to speak out from their positions as part of their analysis, and we ask students to listen for and value what they hear others say about their experiences. Because we want students in the classroom to start feeling more comfortable speaking authentically, we also create various low-stakes opportunities for students to share and listen to each other's responses: in small groups, via anonymous surveys, in shared Google Docs, and through reading randomized excerpts of student work. For example, we might ask students to read one another's work in three ways: first, highlight moments where their peers are representing their selected writer's evidence and ideas; then, highlight (in a different color) moments where their peers seem to be expressing their own thinking and positions in response to the selected writer's ideas; finally, reflect on the difference between the two highlighted moments and what this difference reveals about their peer's positionality, perspective, and voice. We also often prompt students via the series of questions in Exercise 2 below and other moments of freewriting to critically unpack different aspects of their constructed selves, pushing them to see through the cracks in their own and others' veneers.

We approach this work carefully and in so many different, layered ways because we've found that many students arrive in our classes thinking that their voices and experiences will not be valued in their university writing. Whether it's because they learned too well the rules of timed AP writing or because of a deeper sense of being new or an imposter, many students are surprised when they discover that we really want to listen to their stories and views, and really want them to listen to one another. Having been taught that writing is either academic or personal, formal or informal, and believing that expository writing is different from creative writing (it's academic and formal, according to their pre-conceptions), many will leave out themselves—their feelings, experiences, identities, and voices—when asked to analyze a text unless they are encouraged to do otherwise. This problem of silencing one's feelings, languages, experiences, and identities when one is called on to write analytically at college is compounded, as Chavez reminds us, for many students of color by their everyday experiences of being silenced in predominantly white institutions. It's compounded for queer students by heteronormative, cis-gendered assumptions, and for differently abled people by ableism. On top of this, today's NYU first-year students, in their responses to the annual CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) Freshman Survey, frequently reveal themselves to be less confident in their "abilities to take risks" than in any other self-assessment of their academic abilities (writing, math, artistic, etc.) and attitudinal qualities (drive to achieve, creativity, etc.) (*NYU CIRP Freshman Survey*, 2020; *NYU CIRP Freshman Survey*, 2021).

Further, we also work with published student writing from previous years to help new students become more attuned to the kind of embodied analytic writing we value. We might show them, for example, Brooke Nguyen's "Taking Up Space" published in *Mercer Street* (2021/2022),

where she writes keenly about feeling embarrassed in second grade eating a lunch of "the leftover bò lúc lắc and phở áp chảo [her] grandmother packed." To "hide every trace of [her] parents' culture" and blend in, she begins to eat Lunchables, despite "secretly despis[ing] the cold array of bland carbs and mushy toppings." The Lunchables story, she admits, "is one that many Asian Americans recognize instantly," but she uses it as a lens to understand and unpack the "feelings of alienation" and "shame" that Hong describes in "Bad English" when hearing her Korean mother "speak to a white person" with an accent like "a crush of piano keys" (Hong, 2020, as cited in Nguyen, 2021/2022). We may also pair our reading of Nguyen's essay with Ashley Kang's "The Audacity to Hate" published in *Mercer Street* (2022/2023). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Kang writes with brutal honesty about the final step—the citizenship interview—in her family's uncomfortable experience of becoming naturalized American citizens. Condemning the entire process as inauthentic and performative, she draws on experience to extend James Baldwin's interrogation of American myths in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" (1959) and build her critique of the overwrought immigrant narrative she's felt forced to play, writing: "I am tired of reading about immigrants. I am tired of reading about our Lunchables sob stories and rickety-boat ancestral tales" (2022/2023). Taken together, these writers craft positionality stories that, although very different in tone and feeling, allow them both to claim ownership over their thinking as part of their textual analysis. Many other published examples in our program's magazine of student writing accomplish similar outcomes. When students in our classes see and unpack these moments in the published work of diverse, risk-taking peers from previous years, they become more "attuned" to the rhetorical and cultural "writing environments" of our classes (see Leonard, 2014).

At the same time, while *Mercer Street* examples are useful to model risk-taking, voice, and the writer's thinking "presence," these essays are also polished pieces that may seem out of reach. Thus, while listening to our students read their work in class and while commenting on our students' early exercises, we search for moments where we see students tapping into a voice and insight that may feel "messy" but is also a place of potential. Sometimes, we'll hear them start to cultivate their voices through the very act of writing about how they have felt silenced. Other students may admit that they are feeling a shift in their consciousness as they realize that their stories and voices have authentic value, and we'll encourage them to include these meta-reflections in their essays. Still other students will start to articulate a self-reflexive insight about the complications of their position but then stop, and we will remind them how important such insights are to finding their voice, interrogating their and others' assumptions, and being heard.

When students, like the one Bill (William) worked with in a recent section of *Writing as Inquiry*, realize that their stories and voices have authentic value in the global writing classroom, it can shift their rhetorical consciousness and, as William B. Lalicker observes in his article on teaching translingual writing courses, cause them to want to "influence the rhetorical acts and rhetorical consciousness of their [fellow students]" (2017, p. 51). In her positionality essay,[2] Isa, the eldest daughter of two undocumented Mexican parents from a post-industrial city in the Northeast, grappled with Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's essay "Ground Zero." In this professional essay, Villavicencio tells a counter-story to the prevailing narrative of 9/11 tragedy and patriotism. She traces the mistreatment undocumented workers went through during and after they were hired to clean up Ground Zero. Gathering together and recounting the stories of various workers who labored in the wreckage without protective gear and subsequently were forced into the shadows and silenced because of mainstream narratives about illegal immigrants, preventing them from receiving health benefits when they became sick, Villavicencio exposes the hidden truth of the US economy that both relies on people of undocumented status

to do dirty work and stigmatizes them, rendering their contributions invisible.

After analyzing the text and recounting her own parents' analogous story and experiences, Isa reflects in her essay on what analyzing this text and thinking about her positionality means to her.

> To be honest, I found it a little astonishing to find a text like one written by Villavicencio in this course. I thought the "diversity and inclusion" was a front to get more students to view this university and want to attend it. Or how a PWI [Predominantly White Institution] may be seen as more inclusive and can gain more funds for being "saviors" to the people of color [....] As I further break down Villavincencio's text, it doesn't become any easier to read these stories. I wonder if anyone else is in the same boat as me. I very much hope that those who don't have to wonder about these things can see the truth behind Villavicencio's text. I mainly hope that the people in my class come to terms that this essay isn't just another immigrant sob story but real human suffering.

As Isa writes to figure out what she believes, she uses her experience to motivate and deepen her critical analysis of Villavicencio's complex text; her analytic writing grows increasingly trenchant because of her willingness to reflect on her stake in its subject. In similar ways to how Villavicencio and the other model texts challenge cultural assumptions to arrive at more complicated understandings of belonging and disbelonging, Isa too finds her footing as an authentic thinker when she embraces—rather than silences—her positionality in her writing. We see this accomplishment most clearly as she reconsiders her suspicion that NYU's talking point about "diversity and inclusion" is merely "a front to get more students to view this university and want to attend it." Just as importantly, however, when she goes on to wonder if her peers, by "see[ing] the truth behind Villavicencio's text," might in turn become more attuned to a genuinely inclusive narrative about "real human suffering," she ventures to hope that her position will also be acknowledged as something more than just another "immigrant sob story."

While this work remains difficult, and not all of our students are as brave as Isa was, we have found that this approach to renovating the personal—reframing it as the positional—motivates many students today to want to show up and be heard in their university writing. Indeed, as our students learn to lean into and unpack the complications of their positions, others join them, and they start to develop both individually and collectively that elusive quality of ethos in their writing that Nicole Wallack calls the "presence" (2017). While articulating where a writer's distinctive presence might arise from in their writing, Wallack borrows from Peter Elbow to note that "presence often 'correlates with places where the text has a hole or crack or disjuncture' " (Elbow, 1994, as cited in Wallack, 2017, p. 31). This is why, despite the challenges, we encourage students to slow down and notice where their initial writing breaks down so as to continue wrestling with "complication, confusion, false starts, and contradiction" they've begun to sort through (Wallack, 2017, p. 31). As teachers, our primary aim is to encourage our students to develop in their work the " 'important dimension[s] of perception or thinking or feeling [that were] formerly kept out' " (Elbow, 1994, as cited in Wallack, 2017, p. 31)—namely their own embodied and distinctive analysis and reflections. Our Positionality Progression, the associated readings, and our pedagogy all aim to encourage students to confront moments of tension or misalignment because, it is in these moments, that they may start to find voices and take a step toward claiming their presence—and position—in their work.

ASSIGNMENT
The Positionality Progression (in three stages)

Exercise 1: Representing and Analyzing a Moment of Change

Read Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Good, Racist People," Cathy Park Hong, "Bad English," and Zadie Smith, "Find Your Beach." Then, select the text that speaks to you—that reaches inside and somehow resonates with your feelings and thinking. You will work with this text for our first unit.

As you reread it, look for a moment when the writer describes, analyzes, and reflects on an experience or situation in the city that changed how they understood and saw themselves—whether as an insider, an outsider, or somehow as a little of both.

Finally, write 2 paragraphs representing and analyzing this chosen moment. After introducing the reader to the text with a bit of summary, context, and particular detail, slow down, represent, and analyze this textual moment for a reader who has not read the essay. Zoom in especially on several passages where the writer considers how a change comes over how they feel in this neighborhood or place. Where and how does the writer interrogate their complex feelings about feeling like an insider or outsider? Where and how do they consider their blind spots and biases and those of others? As you analyze and start to reflect on these passages, what strikes you as significant, thought-provoking, and why? Try to suggest what you see that others might not consider in passing. Yet, don't worry very much: this is just a start. **Total: 1-2 pages, double-spaced, typed.**

Exercise 2: Interrogating Your Positionality, Core Myths, and Relations

Take a moment to do a brief self-inventory by considering the following. More specifically, choose **three questions** below to respond to (whichever ones you're most intrigued by), **writing one or two paragraphs per question**. *NOTE: This writing is just for you. No one else will be reading it. However, you will be asked to discuss your insights with a smaller group in our class.*

- When writing, it's common to use the universal pronoun "we" to make universal claims. But when you say "we," whom are you actually imagining? What is your "we"? Meaning, what communities/places do you consider yourself to be a part of? Try to name 3 to 5 different kinds of communities.
- If you had to compare your own life story to a myth, a story from a popular song, or a character in a film, what would it be and why? What does that myth/character capture about yourself? What does it miss or preclude?
- Reflect on an experience when you've felt like an outsider among others in some familiar or new place (at home, in your travels, here at NYU). Tell the story. What was it about the mindset/values of others that made you feel this way? What questions about your values arose?
- Reflect on an experience when you felt like an insider among others in some familiar or new place. Tell the story. What was it that made you feel this way?
- Consider your various affiliations (class or status, linguistic, race or ethnicity, gender and sexuality, culture or nation, etc.). In what ways do you believe these values/identities/communities shape your engagement with the text you chose and analyzed in Exercise 1? In what ways are they influencing your participation so far in the classroom or social conversations at NYU? Describe an experience when your sense of self enhanced your understanding of classroom content or

our engagement with others. Now, describe a time when your sense of self has impeded your understanding of classroom content or your engagement with others.

In-class work: Writing prompt: Which questions did you choose to answer and why? What are the most surprising insights that came out of this work? How might you frame this insight as a question that could motivate the writing of an essay?

Ask students to discuss in groups and then share with the class.

Exercise 3: Writing a Scene from Experience

As you think further about your work in Exercise 1 and your self-inventory from Exercise 2, brainstorm and write down 2-3 specific *memories from your own experience that feel connected* to a problem or tension considered in your primary text.

Then, select and write one of these memories from your personal experience as *a scene* (or represent your experience in a place). This is *non-fiction, drawn from your experience and not made-up*.

A scene from experience (a story of your experience or your sense of place in the world) amounts to a brief, single moment when something happened. Your scene should suggest a tension and change that you experienced, one that feels related, conceptually, to the idea or question your chosen writer considers and takes account of your own positionality (how your experience takes on meaning in context and in relation to others). Your primary work, however, is descriptive/representational, not reflective: set up your scene vividly and slow down to describe closely the moment that you want your readers *to see*, sharing details to evoke its *emotional power*. You need not explain the relationship between the scene or your experience in a place and the idea or question of your primary text. Just show us the scene with attention to particular detail (show don't tell). **Total: 1 to 2 pages, double-spaced, typed**.

Essay Draft: Bias and Cultural Belonging: A Deepening Essay

Our work thus far has focused on two things: 1) A close reading of a text that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging; and 2) A close reading of yourself that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging. Now, it's time to put these two strands in conversation with each other in an essay that attempts to answer a question that came out of your prewriting. More specifically, you are to deepen a primary idea from your chosen text through the lens of your own positionality story. Remember: this is just a draft. Don't worry about constructing a perfect beginning, middle, and end. Allow yourself to brainstorm, take a risk, and experiment. Your basic aim is threefold: to introduce us to evidence from your chosen text that raises a motivating question; to represent and analyze important moments in your chosen text as a means of illuminating the idea/insights that come out of the writer's investigation of that question; and to deepen/extend our understanding of this idea and its implications by considering related evidence from your own experience. **Total: 3 to 4 pages, double-spaced, typed.**

Notes

[1] Although we co-designed this assignment sequence, we do not co-teach; these reflections stem from teaching our own sections of the same course.

[2] Isa is a pseudonym, and her essay is unpublished work. She has given us written permission to cite from her work.

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.v9i2.246.

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Teaching Writing with "A Cyborg Manifesto"

Using One Conceptually Rich Common Text as the Basis for an Engaged Classroom Research/Writing Assignment

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Abstract

Historically, in NYU's Expository Writing Program, we tend to use a pre-selected array of texts as a basis for major essay assignments, to allow students a variety of choices of style and subject matter to engage while maintaining control over the selection. Here I show how using one rich text as the foundation in a major first-semester-writing assignment is useful and interesting for teaching reading and maintaining an overall sense of cohesion and centeredness to the course, and I also demonstrate my process of asking about and exploring this particular practice. My own writing process for this piece – inductive and recursive – mirrors the process I have scaffolded for my students; my own essay – driven by idea more than thesis, structured in conversation with my idea – also mirrors the kinds of prose I encourage my students to craft. It is my hope that the culmination of the following progressive sections shows possibilities for using one foundational, rich text to teach a classroom of students to write an essay that is truly driven by inquiry rather than thesis, one that highlights the process of discovering and creating ideas and thrives in doubt.

Introduction

I considered the idea of teaching with one anchoring text for a while before I actually did it. It seemed like a tough pivot from the Expository Writing Program's "handful of texts" approach. Again and again, my faculty agreed that students should have a variety of assigned essays to choose from. Giving options allowed for them to feel they were reading something they liked instead of having a specific theme or short story or essay or book forced on them, especially in a class they'd been required to take. This would get them more engaged, make them write a better essay, our logic went.

On one hand the assignments we give at EWP are meant to be capacious and generative, but they also have very particular parameters; a foundational parameter that has persisted until today is reading together three to four essays for students to pick from for their primary source text, which they go on to examine in our research assignment with the goal of asking questions that both take the writer beyond that text and allow them to return to it and see it anew, showing this shifting understanding and its greater significance to their reader. In the past, these source essays were limited to our assigned course reader and tended to be belletristic, personal (some deeply so), and expansive in their ideas. But, over the course of the last decade, we've shifted what's permissible to assign. Still, we've continued sharing groups of essays with our students at once, as the beginning of a progression of exercises. (In EWP, "progression" is used to refer to the sequence of assignments that begins with close reading and leads up to a final graded essay.)

Teaching an array of texts and having students work in this way in my own classroom has gone well but also it has been a strain in terms of how our collective energy as a class is spent,

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especially when conversing about readings, and grappling with particular themes and ideas.[1] And so I continued to fantasize about teaching just one common written text as the basis for the largest writing assignment in the course. This assignment asks students to consider and reconsider specific concepts and references from a central text, and select ancillary texts to put into context with that primary text. The challenge is to create a conversation between texts that nonetheless moves toward the student's own idea; the challenge is to do a lot of reading and researching but then structure and order that reading process into a written essay. And so I kept asking: was there a single text we might originate our progression's work in that contained many possible paths of further explorations for students to take on, which would lead them to many possible connections to outside texts, connections they might then take ownership for when they led to other research and original claims and then ultimately their own ideas? Was there a text rich enough and approachable enough to appeal in some way to all of us?

Visual Beginning

"I'm anxious about speaking in front of the class too," I tell my students, "even after over a decade of being a teacher here." They look at me, incredulous.

They are floating on the high of just having turned in their first essay after a month in this room together, and I'm trying to get them interested in the next thing.

I tell them I'm just like them, but I have a little more experience, some tricks up my sleeve. We are going back to the skill of reading, and we are focusing on reading one big essay together for a while. "It'll be fun," I shrug.

Up on the screen in front of us, I project an image that I've used in front of classes just like this for a handful of semesters now, asking if any of them have seen it before. They shake their heads (Figure 1).

One thing I know for sure is that using a visual image to open a writing class is quite often successful in engaging the group. Much scholarship has explored the benefits of using visual images and other multimodal works to mediate the learning of writing, including Fleckenstein (2004). Most interesting to me as someone who has spent a majority of classroom hours working with international students is understanding how this is an especially beneficial approach with English Language Learners (Lee et al., 2021). So, as I did on the first day of this class and several times since, in classes both meant for fluent and non-fluent students, I begin by writing my *observation questions* up on the board and referencing Figure 1:

1) What do you see? (Minute Particulars)
2) How does it work? (Form)

These prompts are simple and addressing them slows down the process of looking, turning it into a group activity of generating language together. I write their observations up on the board, or, better yet, ask for two volunteers to write them. I tell them they should be writing them down in their notebooks too.

"A woman," one student says, calling out.

"Really?" I say. "What makes you think that?"

"Oh," the student says, "right," scratching their brow, squinting, as if gender works like that. And they might indicate the figure in the digital image's long hair, their facial structure, acknowledging now that it only *might* be a woman.

"Ok," I say, noting I am glad to see we are learning to be honest about what we observe, to allow doubt in what we first assumed. "What else?" By this point in the semester, they know each other well enough to feel somewhat comfortable. And they know I expect them to be genuinely curious, to contribute. "Come on," I say. "Name the minute particulars!"

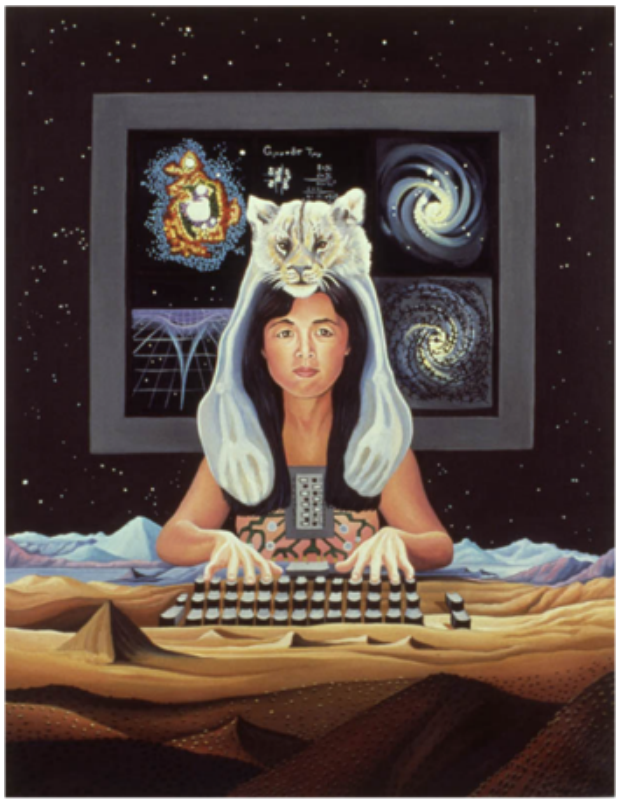

Figure 1. *Cyborg*, by Lynn Randolph (1989), a painting inspired by and created for "A Cyborg Manifesto."

Each student takes a turn, and some go multiple times.

There are so many things in this image to point to: the white wildcat with skeleton showing through its skin that the seated humanoid figure wears as a headdress, the computer chip breastplate they wear, which serves as the canvas's center, the white (snowy?) terrain behind them, the keyboard they are using that is set up on a desert terrain that stretches across the foreground. And behind the figure is a curious mosaic of images, featuring a blackhole, a galaxy, what looks like a heat map of a cell, some sort of a mathematic equation. All this set against a vastly starry sky.

It's not particularly complex or beautiful, rather like a childish sketch with a simple palette of paints taken to it, and yet the various symbolic elements, and the being's placement in the middle, is larger than life—"like they are programming the universe" a student of mine once said. They share other notions, about the bringing together of opposites, the bridging of the binaries posed in their observations of the being's gender, in the combination of warm and cool colors, in the juxtapositions of space and earth, nature and technology, future and past.

This image provides a wealth of details that I find as a powerful tool for moving towards meaning-making, gesturing at the thing they will practice again and again, in the smaller stakes exercises and prompts that lead them to writing their research essay. Ultimately, they will lay out evidence that they have observed carefully, making meaning of it by creating a structure that leaves and returns to a central piece of evidence; they'll have to change what a detail reveals by framing it and reframing it in connection to sources; they'll have to construct an order of meanings, a provisional interpretation which they then complicate and layer in ways that both surprise and satisfy the reader. But they will only be able to do that successfully after they've practiced asking our observations questions again and again. "What makes you think that? What do you see?"

Minute Particulars

"Minute particular" is a term I first remember hearing from Pat C. Hoy II, in Fall 2013, the beginning of his last year as the head of the Expository Writing Program, and my first as a teacher there. He'd begin our training sessions for first-year teachers and workshops for the full faculty by presenting images, or music, or film clips. In a sort of mysterious way, he'd ask us to point out what we noticed in them: "Just to start there, with the *minute particulars*—it's just what it says, the tiny, specific things. Easy, right?" A lesson on more than whatever we were looking at, a lesson in teaching, I've used it in my own classroom every semester since. And the truth is I'd always just taught and assumed it meant what it said: small, specific thing.

Only now, eleven years in the future, do I type "minute particular" into a search bar and realize it's a concept that comes from the great British poet William Blake, a line from his poem, *Jerusalem*: "He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars / General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer / For Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars" (Blake, 2014, p. 752). Beyond specificity, Blake's lines show me that the minute particular seems to impart some special relationship between part and whole, some quality we can think of as true, "good" to the person who observes it, witnesses it, chooses it, takes the time to write about and explain it for an audience of readers.

These notions about teaching writing only come out of writing these very paragraphs. My own writing process—of minute particular to question to observation of an outside source to new understanding about the detail and larger meaning connected to it, written out and shared with a reader—adds to my approach in teaching my students. Note that it took me years to even begin, in this instance. And so it is by some sort of blind faith that we teach the practice semester by semester, moment by moment, more than simply by explaining it, but by shepherding our students through many chances to do it—with visual texts, written texts, aural texts, objects, working both together and alone—and by doing it ourselves, again and again.

Form and Context

In addition to direct observation and true reading comprehension - what Robert Scholes (2002) calls "to grasp and evaluate" (p. 171), at EWP we seek to add layers to our students' understanding of how the written and visual texts we are reading and otherwise looking at *work on us*, as viewers, as readers. We seek to create a vocabulary around form, and, in recent years, many of us have sought to enrich the ways we talk about the related notion of context.

"Context"—I look the word up with my students every semester, thrilled to share the etymology with them: it's Latin for "weave together." So, it is anything beyond the minute particulars, the layer around them, the web between them.

Again, I go back to my "questions of observation": "And how does it work?" I ask, pointing at the glowing figure who looks like some kind of Indigeno-futurist queen, indicating my second question: "What is it?" "What's it doing?" This one is a little harder to get to, harder to find words for. But we persist. We agree the thing itself is a painting presented here in this room in pixels, and that the mixture of elements—the centeredness, the mirrored juxtapositions—give a sense of a very powerful person, who straddles worlds: the natural and the technological, masculine and feminine, inner and outer.

Then, I share basic background—"another layer of context," I emphasize to them. Lynn Randolph painted the piece in 1989, while working in collaboration with Donna Haraway (Randolph, 1989). She called it *Cyborg*. I explain we will be reading Haraway's seminal work, "A Cyborg Manifesto", which was an essay first published in 1981 (Haraway, 2016). The painting came well after the essay, though it feels like they might have been created simultaneously, as if they were

made in some true version of our many possible futures.

Not quite long enough to be a book in its own right, but much longer than anything we have read in my class up until now, Haraway's long essay is a mishmash of words and ideas, rife with concepts that, if given readerly care and attention, weave a luxurious and fascinating web between feminism and technology and nature that shows a future-oriented world of hybridism and possibility. And all this playfully, pragmatically set against a political context Haraway warns us will take every possible advantage over all of us, particularly if we let obvious and dangerous binaries control our lives. Haraway posits the metaphorical image of a cyborg princess (perhaps something like she that Randolph depicts) as the hero/ine that can rise in such a context.

Too early to bring any of this up too. As teachers we have to remind ourselves and our students to hang back, to make the space to pay attention.

The Thing Itself

After we adequately investigate the image of our cyborg would-be goddess, I project my step-by-step library search up for "A Cyborg Manifesto" on the class's main screen, noting that it is the focus of a larger book—*Manifestly Haraway* (Haraway, 2016), which also includes an introduction by Cary Wolfe, a scholar of post-humanism, and a follow-up by Haraway that adds considerations of non-human species to her arguments, a direction she continues to take in current scholarship. We marvel at all this *context*, and then I ask my students to close their laptops, as I hand out a printout to each one.

Besides the *thunk* of an 80-page document on their desks, there is the sublimity of reading on real paper and with a pen in your hand something written in the past but about now, and also about the future.[2]

As inevitably my students begin to flip through the pages, I ask them to skim mindfully, to tell us about the section headings, as well as the charts they see. We talk about the endnotes and bibliography together—both of which are extensive. *What does what you see tell you?* I ask. *The writer has a lot of different ideas and sources she's taking from. She wants to make sure we know she's done her research.* I might say something about *research lineage*, maybe write that concept up on the whiteboard, and they flip through the pages.

With the thing itself in front of us, they cannot rely on the Ctrl-F function, cannot quickly copy-paste the whole thing into a summarizer. Sure, some will do these things on their own, later on, but at least for now, there is only the thing itself, the words on the page in front of us.

Next, I set the class to skimming, looking for "compound concepts"[3], which are the minute particulars we are on the look-out for in this observation. I describe them on a slide as follows: "Concepts are nouns that we use to define abstract ideas we cannot place in the physical world. Concepts include things like: 'artifice', 'femininity', 'science', 'knowledge', and 'apocalypse'. And compound concepts manifest when more than one concept is put together, creating a concept that is more specific, or specialized. You might make a compound concept by combining a concept with an adjective that also speaks to a concept ('abnormal science'), or by connecting concepts with 'of' ('folly of belief'), or by adding a concrete word to a concept ('cell phone knowledge')."[4]

Most texts will have two or three compound concepts that seem to unlock the rich font of the essay's meaning, but Haraway, in particular, has a dizzying amount. As we begin looking, students immediately see:

- ironic political myth
- rhetorical strategy
- political method
- world-changing fiction

- international women's movements

And this is just in the first two pages. We take time to carefully define at least one of these compound concepts together, based on what we see in the text, then what we already know, then we look them up online—using a regular search, then the *Oxford Dictionary*, then NYU's library databases to get us to the reference database *Credo*. Students then crowdsource a number of these compound concepts on a shared document, and their first short writing assignment in this progression comes after this lesson; each student is tasked with choosing a compound concept most intriguing to them and representing both the moment in Haraway's essay where they encountered their compound concept, followed by the sources they used to investigate it, culminating with their own understanding of it and further questions this new knowledge raises about Haraway's text and the world beyond it. Although they often ask if they can simply write out bullet points, generally I ask students to complete this writing exercise and all that follow in full sentences and whole paragraphs with the aim of explaining them to someone in another class like ours who is not reading Haraway's text.

This becomes each student's first unique doorway into their own writing work, an initial opportunity for observation and research. Through this writing comes a chance to consider the kinds of choices they want to make–about questions they will ask of the text, about sources of their own choosing they want to spend time with. This practice of observe/ask/investigate/write continues throughout the progression, a cycle that grows more complex with each repetition, as they move through drafting and research again and again before they get to turn in a final essay.

Over the following weeks, the generative work of research, reading, and writing happens increasingly alone, while together we continue to check in about our work and weave a common web of context. We go to older texts Haraway cited and future texts that have cited her. We look her up on YouTube, on Ticktock, on Instagram, to see how she is and what she's up to now. We look for texts that don't directly mention Haraway but seem to be about her ideas and write about them. We look up news articles about robots, climate change, and women's collectives. Often, I will divide up the class into smaller groups to consider a few thematically disparate readings I have selected in connection to Haraway.[5] We listen to snippets of electronic music, watch scenes from *Black Panther* and *Black Mirror*, and though each student will each go very far out on their very own paths, always, we return to Haraway's words, that packet of photocopied pages which becomes entirely marked up and dog-eared for most of us by progression's end.

Dinner Party in the Burkean Parlor

Students often struggle to create a draft in a way that doesn't simply feel like a chain of events (e.g., first I read this, then I noticed this, then I asked this, then I looked up this). Still, we've created such webs of sources that it becomes clear we must make real choices about structure. During drafting phase, in the journal writings and short class conversations that begin our class meetings, I turn to prompts about our readers and what they might need as they learn about our ideas and discoveries. We examine closely together Kenneth Burke's Parlor metaphor, and I ask students to write about a setting—whether online or in real life—where they have experienced something specific Burke describes, namely that they have "put [their] oar" into the "interminable […] discussion" that is happening around them, "so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before" (Burke, 1973, pp. 110–111). Together, we note the participants' urgency to exchange. Students recognize this tenor of conversation sometimes appears in their classrooms, on online forums they read and sometimes participate in, in article comment sections, in family WhatsApp groups. We consider what it might mean for them to craft such a conversation between the sources in their essays. Some of them mention talks about politics they had around family dinner tables, conversations about

Figure 2. Author generated using IG AI, Fall 2024, after suggestion by one of her students at Tandon, NYU's School of Engineering.

religion in the Dining Hall. I show my students an image that could be out of a Crate and Barrel catalogue—of a bunch of beautiful airbrushed people of various skin tones gesturing over a table with tea candles, food in ornate dishes with silver serving ware, tea candles. And in the last few semesters I have begun to pair that with an AI-prompted image of cyborgs sitting down to dinner together (Figure 2).

The dinner party metaphor adds a lightness to considerations of structuring an essay for a reader. It's a fun exercise to imagine an essay as a dynamic conversation, how Haraway begins the conversation while another one guest (or source) dominates, and another offers a controversial retort, and yet another asks for clarification, and etc. Who is rude and who is the peacemaker? Who adds the truly pivotal piece of unexpected evidence? I ask them to create their own dinner party, whether in images or words or some other form. In their reflection on the assignment, many write about the Dinner Party as the thing from the semester that will stay with them. The image invites the students to consider themselves as host of the party. Who will sit next to whom? Where will you put Haraway? What will they talk about? *Sex work? Veganism? Sustainable super-cities in the desert?* And, most importantly: how do you want to craft this conversation for your reader to keep them interested? To help their understanding?

Ending/Conclusion/A Letting Go…

Towards the end of the progression, students' questions and all of their writing choices have become their own. They continue to refine their essay through a group workshop meeting with me and two other students, as well as one final peer workshop based on my own evaluation rubric—regarding things like form, signposting research, idea. When finally they turn in their essay, they take some time in class to read over it once more and write me a note about their process of writing it and what they learned, which I read as I evaluate each essay, in turn. As a final group ritual, I also ask them to each choose their favorite sentence from their essay and read it out loud, with no commentary. The run of sentences from each of their mouths might not be essayistically connected, but the echoes are overwhelming. In this way, we create a sort of

beautifully cacophonous closing conversation that ties all their disparate essays back together.

The essays students turn in can be complex and meandering like Haraway. Some are sparse in their thinking and representation, but more of them delight and surprise me, as their reader, their teacher. Last semester, this included an essay connecting the digital hustle economy to future feminisms, a project the student claimed made her realize that she wanted to devote herself to studying culture and narrative instead of science. Another writes about new possibilities for ecological cooperation to strengthen communities, a topic also addressed by an engineering student in the Fall, looking at specific examples of adaptation by smaller human communities. Another engineering student, who said she appreciated that our class was the only place she felt supported in discussing cultural and political issues, wrote an essay about the transformative power of the experiences created by popular artists like Beyoncé. The array is exciting, many of them enjoyable to read in their own right, all of them showing a sense of accomplishment.

When I ask students to reflect on this assignment, on how it fits into the semester, they report feeling really proud for writing such a thing, and that they read Haraway in the first place. One student from the engineering school writes, "I have become a stronger writer [...] my analytical skills have improved because of difficult sources." Another says, "Haraway's ideas required me to move beyond a singular text and embrace a broader array of perspectives. [...]. This shift pushed me to not only gather information but also critically analyze and synthesize it." This kind of self-reflection feels like some of the best confirmation for the value of our classroom work that I can hope for, and it was anchored by the greater force of the class's cooperative work with Haraway's text, which steadied the students' dizzying recursive movement between research, thinking, writing, sharing, research, writing, steadied the teacher's dizzying dance of thinking that your students need you, then that they are getting it, that you are guiding them through, and all you have to do now is find the right moment to let go.

ASSIGNMENT
Investigating the Cyborg

Essay Task

You will write an essay to build your own rich argument by considering thoughtfully chosen evidence from a number of sources. Your final idea will show your reader a new way of thinking or a course of action based on your own thinking/connecting/questioning, and source choices. You will base your essay around considering and reconsidering specific concepts and references that come up in your reading of "A Cyborg Manifesto," by Donna Haraway. Following research will lead you to new knowledge regarding your question/problem and your focus. Your resulting essay will significantly engage with the first two texts (Haraway, plus an additional "larger conversation" text), as well as at least three additional texts from your own searching; one must be a scholarly (or peer-reviewed) text, and one should be an object, innovation, or other aesthetic text (total essay length: 7-9 pp).

Readings

As a group, we will begin by reading "A Cyborg Manifesto" by Donna Haraway and proceed to "How Algorithms Rule Our Working Lives" by Cathy O'Neil, "Mestizaje" by Alicia Arrizón, "The Mother of All Questions" by Rebecca Solnit, and other reader texts of your choosing from our e-reader.[6]

Progression Assignments Include

Reading and re-reading, representation plus context, textual conversation, research to create argument/idea, presentation, drafting, workshopping, and revision.

Skills Practiced

In addition to all we learned in the last progression, we will practice research, considering audience and context, and re-envisioning our ideas.

Evaluation

You will be graded based on our three basic criteria -- (1) **representation** -- as related to how concepts and references come from your sources and lead your reader through your thinking, as well as what new knowledge your research yields (2) **problem, argument, idea** -- as related to how you communicate your initial question/problem and connect the parts of your research and progress towards an overall idea that is unique to you and this essay (3) **structure and convention** -- as related to how you work with beginning, middle, and end, as well as your acknowledgement of sources

Notes

[1]Of course, there's ample scholarship on the relationship between reading and writing; Bazerman's (1980) framing of the relationship as conversational, involving "reacting" and "evaluation" (p. 659), feels particularly apt.

[2]If printing isn't favorable, teaching it as a PDF can work too.

[3]A term that comes from paired-term concepts, which many in EWP learned about from Ben Stewart, who was the technological wunderkind of our program and with us for decades before absconding out to California after the Spring 2018 semester.

[4]Although paired-term concepts might be particular to EWP, many scholar/teachers have, of course, devised techniques for teaching reading as part of teaching writing (see, for instance, Carillo, 2009, 2016; Sprouse, 2019; Wenger, 2019).

[5]My intention in presenting them with a group of essays I've chosen at this point in the writing process is for them to practice making connections between seemingly disconnected texts. As Haraway has already led us through class conversations about feminism, racism, intersectionality, planned obsolescence, and being killed off by robots, there is some leeway here for them to play around with conceptual connection.

[6]This is a sample selection. I adjust these each year depending on current cultural conversations and student interests.

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.v9i2.257.

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In on the Joke
Articulating Artistic Style Through Parody/Homage

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Abstract

This assignment encourages active, holistic analysis and articulation of the distinctive features of an artist's body of work. In preparation for a final essay interrogating a pattern across multiple works, first-year undergraduates at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts create a style parody of, or homage to, their chosen artist's work in a medium of their choice (which may or may not align with the artist's). After studying the artist's patterns of form and content, students gain a deeper perspective on those patterns by actively distilling them into a work that reflects and/or exaggerates what they've observed. The assignment engages creative and metacognitive processes, including thinking from the perspective of the artist, and gives them a tangible reference point to both consider and move beyond in their upcoming essay.

In the classic *Saturday Night Live* sketch "James Brown's Celebrity Hot Tub Party," Eddie Murphy channels a typical James Brown performance, including his over-the-top, enthusiastically heralded entrance, raspy, percussive vocals, tightly-coiled dancing, affirmative call-and-response, guttural interjections, and his signature "Cape Act," in which Brown feigns exhaustion, prompting backup singers to drape him in a glittery boxer's cape and lead him partly offstage, only to abruptly shed the cape and bounce right back, stronger than ever. At least half the lyrics are variations on the words "hot tub," and the snaky, horn-driven groove evokes Brown's "Cold Sweat" without getting too close to mimicry (Saturday Night Live, 2019). My students watch this at the end of a class in which they've heard an expedited introduction to about a dozen JB tracks, and collaboratively answered the question, "If you had to explain to a band who had never heard James Brown how to sound or perform like James Brown, what would you suggest?" (No musical jargon needed.) The "Celebrity Hot Tub Party" capstone ties many of their observations together in a concentrated form, and from their laughter, I can tell that they instantly recognize Brown-esque tropes even if they hadn't explicitly named them.

In the second semester of my "Writing the Essay: The World Through Art," NYU's core writing course for students in the Tisch School of the Arts, the first major essay asks students to create an argument about an artist's body of work. Although the essay requires research into motive, context, and discourse, the central argument must be built around the student's own observations and interpretations across multiple works; in other words, they need to identify and focus on some kind of iterative pattern (NYU Expository Writing Program, n.d.). To achieve this, students need to develop their own sense of what the artist's work is "like": not just with respect to formal details but also subject matter, perspective, style, tone, and other holistic qualities. Their first assignment asks them to extract "meta-narratives" (specific commentary about certain ideas or issues that echo across plotlines) from any three episodes of the anthology TV series *Black Mirror*, which gives them a chance to work from a common reference point and notice how different formal readings can emerge from the same body of work, as well as how these readings depend on the works one chooses to examine. From there, they propose an artist to work with and make preliminary observations about patterns of form and content that they notice.

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Many students have difficulty getting beyond the obvious, best-known, or most-talked-about characterizations of the artist's body of work. Prior to creating this assignment, as students began drafting, I had noticed a gravitational pull towards "proving" what's clearly there, or at least widely assumed or discussed, even when encouraged to look more closely. To promote more active, close observation before drafting begins, I now ask students to creatively *evoke* the distinctive features of an artist's work—rather than simply naming them—in an assignment I call the Homage/Parody Project. The goal here is to make a game of actively recognizing how the artist's work is perceived, so that they have a point of reference to write beyond in their own argument. To put it another way, they create a caricature of the artist's work—this could be in the form of a photograph, a song, a short film, a sculpture, or even fashion designs—ahead of time so that their essay can do more than that (see Figures 1 and 2). In some cases, while creating the parody or homage, students also stumble upon less obvious, more insightful patterns that can serve as a foundation for their essay.

> *We focus on two characters on their way to the gallows.*
>
> PATTY ...Quite a nice courtyard, innit?
>
> CONAN: Oh, yeah. Fine architecture. A real stunner.
>
> PATTY: Aye... And a beautiful day too.
>
> CONAN: Aye that, Patty.
>
> PATTY ...Say. Coney. You ever think we'd be hanged on a day as nice as this one?
>
> CONAN: Not a chance, Patty, not a chance.
>
> (Excerpt from a student parody of Martin McDonagh's screenplays [Student Parody/Homage Project, 2024])

The project was partly inspired by Samuel Hubbard Scudder's 1874 essay "In the Laboratory with Agassiz," alternatively titled "Take This Fish and Look at It" (a popular reading assignment across academic fields, notwithstanding some of the deeply wrong lessons Agassiz taught in other contexts) (Scudder, 1874). In it, Scudder describes his education in natural history, which began with a simple prompt from his mentor: "Take this fish…and look at it; we call it a *haemulon*; by and by I will ask what you have seen" (p. 217). What Scudder assumed would be a ten-minute exercise turned into hours and days trapped alone with the small specimen, under orders to relentlessly document its features along every observable dimension. After hours of staring at the fish with little to show for it, Scudder recalls: "At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now, with surprise, I began to discover new features in the creature" (p. 219). In other words, after a piece of evidence seems to be exhausted of analysis, new observations and insights may come through acts of creativity: we don't just draw what we see, we see what we draw. Creating a parody or homage can lead to a more complex and integrative version of this experience.

As with Scudder, the road to the parody/homage (and from there, to the essay) starts with intensive close observation. From the first class of the semester, my students practice a focused, persistent commitment to *seeing* (or, as applicable, hearing, smelling, touching) a work, well beyond their instincts to declare the task "finished." Working from both Jean-Honore Fragonard's (1767) painting *The Swing* and Yinka Shonibare's (2001) re-interpretative installation *The Swing (After Fragonard),* students are given several minutes to note as many direct observations as possible about either work, or their relationship to one another. At the end of this time, which they expect to be the end of the activity, they're given another several minutes and challenged to make at least as many additional observations, and then this repeats

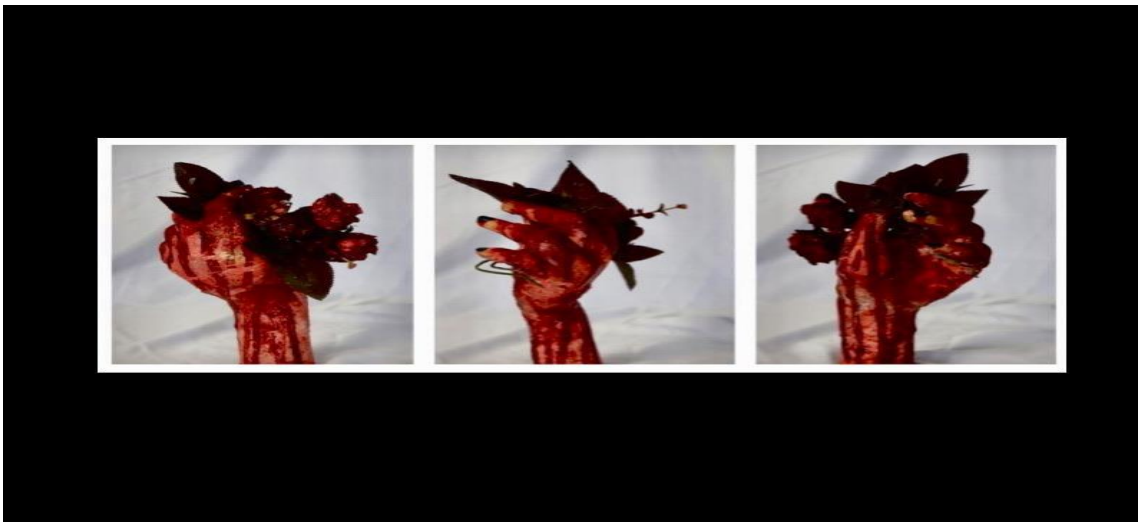

Figure 1. Sculpture homage to visual artist Louise Bourgeois, photographed from three angles" (Student Homage/Parody Project, 2023)

once more, with suggestions about how they might observe from different perspectives. Next, students merge their observations with a neighbor's, and then together they take one more crack at finding more previously-unobserved attributes. Finally, for the first time, students are given random bits of historical and aesthetic context (drawn from an envelope) and asked to reflect on their observations in light of this new evidence.

Like many of my classroom activities, the "writing" part of this process is limited to jotted notes, not complete sentences or paragraphs. This is by design: I believe that an obstacle to strong student writing is writing *too soon*, without taking sufficient time to observe, think, puzzle out, and even play. This echoes Peter Elbow's emphasis on judgment-free, unconstrained "freewriting" as a necessary step toward insightful finished work (Elbow, 1998, pp. 3–9). In my experience, as soon as they begin even a rough draft, their attention shifts to sentence structure, word choice, grammar, syntax, and other writing mechanics, which can trigger anxiety and indecision in some students and myopic over-confidence in others. Without a strong bank of at least partly-formed, semi-developed ideas, an early draft might make only minimal progress toward a fully developed essay.

The Homage/Parody Project itself, assigned shortly before the first draft, re-imagines and elaborates on Scudder's fish-drawing exercise: rather than re-create a specific work, students are asked to consider multiple works in order to create a new one in the same tradition. From "Celebrity Hot Tub Party," they learn that parody is a play on form, compressing and heightening recognizable traits, perhaps in a humorously incongruous context. For students who would rather treat their artist's work with more reverence, or simply would rather not "try to be funny," I offer the option of an homage, which I illustrate with British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's (2013) *Self-Portrait (After Warhol).* That said, I assure them that irreverence is not the same as disrespect, and that many past projects meant to be homages actually work as parody, while some intended parodies actually become very successful homages. The goal in either case is to integrate their observations into a holistic impression, and to reflect that impression back in a new work.

The educational value of parody has been recognized before, at least as far back as 1939, when *The English Journal* published "The Use of Parody in Teaching" by young Massachusetts

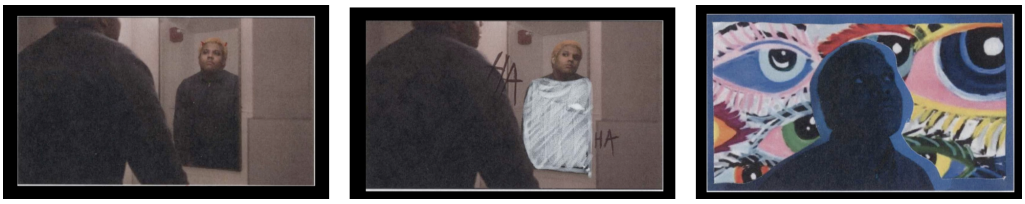

Figure 2. Stills from a short film inspired by actor/musician/filmmaker Donald Glover (Student Homage/Parody Project, 2023)

high school teacher Earl J. Dias. Feeling stymied by his class' difficulty interpreting Joseph Conrad's work, Dias turned to parody, reasoning that

> A good parody is like a telescope. It can magnify the characteristic of a writer's style to such portions that even those comparatively inexperienced in the tenets of literary criticism may be able to achieve at least a partial understanding of the peculiar qualities of the type of writing that is parodied. (Dias, 1939, p. 650)

He turned to Max Beerbohm's collection of parodic essays, *A Christmas Garland*, one of which "manage[d] to convey perfectly the little idiosyncrasies that make Conrad's writing instantly recognizable to his more avid readers." Dias' students not only were entertained, but also were subsequently "able to discuss with improved understanding the typically Conradian characteristics" (Dias, 1939, p. 651).

Although Dias didn't ask his students to write parodies themselves, he does suggest to the reader that "more talented members of the class may also be tempted to try their hand at parodies. This is to be encouraged" (Dias, 1939, p. 655). William J. Bintz (2012) describes a lesson that does just that in "Using Parody to Read and Write Original Poetry." His graduate students (mostly teachers themselves) were challenged to parody classic poems to make new statements; results included commentaries on consumerism ("She Walks in Gucci," to Lord Byron's "She Walks in Beauty") and plagiarism ("Stealing Others' Work Is a Form of Cheating," to Robert Frost's "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening") (p. 74-75). In student reflections on the activity, Bintz noted several forms of "active engagement" (p. 78). Some, like the author of the Frost parody, cited careful attendance to distinctive formal details:

> To make the parody apparent, I thought about what the most distinctive features of Frost's poem are and tried to duplicate them. These included the length of the title, the famous first line, and the repeated final line. I was able to maintain the AABA rhyme scheme and eight-syllable lines of four iambs as well. (p. 76)

In my own class, students have described many forms of "active engagement" to better understand and conceptualize their chosen artist's work and craft. For example, a student who made a short film in the style of Andrei Tarkovsky had to come up with a creative workaround to mimic Tarkovsky's camera work without sophisticated equipment:

> *[An] element that Tarkovsky utilizes a lot in his films to create tensions is a "push in". This is where the camera is pushed into a specific object in the frame. However, this requires a dolly or gimbal to shoot it smoothly, which I do not have access to. Therefore, I created the same effect with a digital zoom in post production…*
>
> *In his film* Stalker*, Tarkovksy juggles between a blueish film stock and sepia film, which has a very bronze color to it. Since I didn't have access to the film that Tarkovksy used, I decided*

> *to replicate his look with color grading. Some of the shots have a blueish/grayish tint to them, and another has a bronze tint to replicate the sepia film.* (Student Parody/Homage commentary[1], 2024)

What this student (and so many others) reminds us is that the creative act of this assignment doesn't just help students notice new things about an artist/evidence—they also gain understanding of something they'd already noticed. Relatedly, parody has, built into it, the acknowledgement that you can't be "as good" as the original—even Eddie Murphy, a good singer, can't match James Brown—but in problem-solving around the limitations of time, resources, and their own skill set, students make discoveries about how an artist works in a medium.

To expand their creative problem-solving opportunities, students are not required to create a work in the artist's preferred medium. Many do, of course, but this allows students to choose artists beyond their own field, and for students in an arts program, choosing a medium that they're not "supposed" to be good at can be creatively liberating. Crossing modalities can also lead to interesting metacognitive work, as with this student, who designed a cardigan sweater inspired by the Belgian singer and rapper Stromae:

> *This cardigan is inspired by Stromae's style and his fashion label,* mosaert. *In an interview with* Pitchfork*, he revealed that for every song on his second album* racine carrée, *there was a specific look…For example, the music video of "Tous les mêmes" ends with the camera zooming out from a house to the entire neighbourhood into a pattern of hearts. For my design, I used circles as the pattern, and pink as the main colour in reference to his revamped trademark bowtie he wore while performing on his last tour. If you look closer, you can see that the circles are actually made up of pictures of washing machines—my representation of the recurring cyclic themes present in Stromae's songs. In "Alors on danse," one dances to forget their problems, but they're still there at the end of the day. In my pattern, one puts their dirty clothes into the washing machine and they come out clean, but inevitably, they will get dirty again.* (Student Parody/Homage commentary, 2024)

In my course feedback, students often cite the Homage/Parody Project as among the most useful of the entire semester because it helped them "dive into the essence of the artist in a way that was extensive but felt fun"; another student noted it "allowed me to understand different traits" of their selected artist. A third student, echoing the analytic power of the creative assignment, also wrote that they "felt closer to [their] artist".

Another reason I keep bringing this project back is the consistent strength of the student work. More than in any other minor or major assignment, students tend to put a good deal of effort into these projects - in some cases, arguably much more than necessary! They seem very motivated to impress their peers, and greatly enjoy seeing one another's work. The projects that turn out less well than the others often simply reflect a lack of time and effort. Some students also fail to grasp the difference between homage and near-copying - an admittedly blurry line in some cases. Often, this comes from focusing too much on a single work by the artist rather than integrating multiple works into a new one. For this reason, it's important to emphasize the holistic, broadly imitative nature of an homage, as well as the difference between direct and style parody. In a few other cases, seemingly ironically, the parodies fall flat because the students don't quite take them seriously enough. They might see it as an opportunity to be merely ridiculous instead of thoughtfully ridiculous. When showing models, such as "Celebrity Hot Tub Party," it's crucial to point out the level of detailed thought and craft behind even a goofy sketch.

The Homage/ Parody Project may even have broader benefits in shaping students' worldview in the face of misinformation. In our current epistemological climate, in which everything from

homework to world news is increasingly easy to fake, University of Edinburgh digital education expert Christine Sinclair (2019) argues that "parody is important because it is used not only to generate fake news but also as an antidote to it" because "for parody to work, it needs to be distinguishable from fake news, and for the author and the audience both to be in on the joke" (p. 61). Through multiple examples, from parody news headlines to discourse about Brexit, she suggests that understanding parody can help students understand how real information is exaggerated, distorted, and manipulated, and how this differs when the purpose is humorous commentary or malicious deception—important skills in a world in which reality and parody are increasingly difficult to tell apart.

ASSIGNMENT
Homage/Parody Project

For this project, you'll draw on your evolving understanding of your artist's body of work to create a miniature riff on it, in the form of an **homage** or a **style parody.** The more of your artist's work you've encountered, the better you'll be able to do this.

The general definition of "homage" (silent h) is "something that is said or done to show respect for someone" (Oxford English Dictionary). In the arts, it's used to describe a work that alludes to, or imitates, another artist's style or another specific work, without crossing into outright plagiarism. For example, the TV show *Stranger Things* is, in part, an homage to sci-fi and paranormal films of the late '70s and early '80s, including *Star Wars, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Gremlins, E.T., Poltergeist,* etc. The Season 1 *Stranger Things* poster bears a deliberate resemblance to a famous original *Star Wars* poster. (For a video montage of more *Stranger Things* homage moments, click here.)

Parody is a more familiar concept. As we noted in Eddie Murphy's "James Brown's Celebrity Hot Tub Party," it's primarily a play on form. The form of a particular work or artistic style is compressed, heightened, and/or grafted onto arbitrary or incongruous subject matter for a comic effect. "Celebrity Hot Tub Party" is an example of a *style parody*—it mimics the *effect* of a James Brown song and performance in a holistic sense—as opposed to what one might call "direct parody," like goofy lyrics set to the tune of Brown's "I Feel Good", or a skit in which Marvel's Avengers try to manage a Burger King. If you choose to do a parody, you'll be going for a style parody of the artist's body of work, not a direct parody of one particular work.

The line between homage and parody is blurry. Often, the funniest parodies show an underlying respect for and understanding of its subject; conversely, homages are often at least somewhat funny if the style is immediately recognizable. You might set out to make an homage and actually make a parody, or vice versa. If that's what happens, that's totally fine! Choose whichever approach (homage or parody) feels more helpful to you from a creative standpoint, and let the product become what it is.

Here's what you're being asked to do: Get into the mindset of your artist and make an homage or style parody of their work. You have a lot of leeway in how you do it. The most obvious example is to create your own "work" by the artist that doesn't actually exist. But you're also not limited to the artist's original medium. For example, you could make a photographic montage in homage to a choreographer, sketch out a set design for an imaginary new play by a playwright, show us what a country & western song written by a particular filmmaker might sound like, etc.

You may present your exhibit as a stand-alone piece, or as an "excerpt" from an imaginary larger work. (If you choose the latter, you don't need to explain or map out the larger work in

detail; just acknowledge what it is.)

Some types of exhibits you might submit for this project:

- A one-minute film, or one-minute trailer for, or "excerpt" from, an imaginary new film/TV show by the artist
- A photograph, or series of up to 5 photographs (more isn't necessarily better; it depends on what you're trying to put across)
- A drawing, painting, or sculpture
- A 2–3-page written scene in screenplay, teleplay, or stage play format
- A one-minute recorded song or song "excerpt"
- A one-minute monologue (as a script, and/or performed on video)
- A one-minute dance sequence (on video)
- A one-minute "pitch" for a new video game (accompanied by some sample artwork and/or simple animation)
- A simple interactive online experience
- Anything else you're inspired to make!

Along with your homage/style parody exhibit, you must submit a short commentary (at least 200 words) explaining the choices you made in creating your homage/parody exhibit, and how those choices reflect your artist's work and interests.

Goals for this assignment:

- To articulate typical, prominent, or distinctive elements of form and/or content that characterize your artist's body of work.
- To think about your artist's body of work in a new way by attempting to create something that resembles it.
- To create your own reference point for your artist's body of work that you can continue to expand, develop, and complicate as you draft your essay.
- To do something hopefully a little bit fun for credit.

A successful project will creatively capture or allude to multiple elements of the artist's work, and clearly explain/contextualize the allusions in the commentary (which should be written for someone who isn't familiar with the artist's work).

Again, you should not parody just a *single* work by the artist –try to reflect their body of work as a whole. Similarly, avoid collage/copy and paste jobs that just string literal bits of specific works together. You may, however, include elements that playfully *suggest* specific works, and/or evoke quintessential images/motifs/themes/tropes found across their body of work (like Yinka Shonibare's Dutch wax fabrics and headless mannequins, for example).

Both the project and the commentary should be uploaded in a format that's readable or playable by most computers. We will share some of these in class!

Deliverables: Your very own homemade parody or homage exhibit (see various suggestions above, feel free to email with questions) plus a 200-word commentary (doc, pdf, etc).

Notes

[1]In a sense, the commentary requires the student not only to articulate their own thinking directly, but also to summarize that thinking from a position of removal. This parallels John C. Bean's (1986) embrace of summary writing, in which a student must "temporarily abandon his or her own perspective" (p. 344) in order to "articulate ideas different from their own," but here, the homage or parody itself "summarizes" the artist's work through artistic interpretation, not a direct summary, and in turn, the commentary asks the students to comment on and interpret their own thought process that led to that interpretation.

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.v9i2.247.

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In the Realm of the Possible
Writing Abstracts to Refine Research

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Abstract

This article looks at the practice of having first-year writing students write abstracts to prepare for drafting a research essay. Abstract writing grounds students at a moment when they may be struggling to identify a clear context for their object of analysis. The assignment asks them to read and critique sample abstracts, sourced from journals and their peers, and then write one of their own using the research assembled from an annotated bibliography. Through sharing the abstracts, students notice opportunities for expanding claims, applying evidence, and clarifying argument in their essays. In this way, the assignment enables students to develop more confidence in their ideas; it also sharpens their genre awareness, as they recognize how abstracts service both readers and writers during the research process.

For a long time, students in NYU's Expository Writing Program wrote three essays in their first-year writing course, with the third referred to as "Reviewing in Context." When I joined the program in 2015, it was common to have students focus on a single body of work for this sequence, such as an essay collection by a particular writer. Their objective would be to consider that writer's work within a broader set of sociocultural concerns, including personal experiences.

In my class, students still complete three essays, moving from the expository and argumentative modes to a more research-driven combination of the two. However, their topics for the third essay tend to vary more widely, ranging from pieces of music and works of art to public spaces and social media posts. I refer to this sequence as the "Focused Research Essay," since determining a context for the essay's main inquiry is as important as developing an argument from that inquiry. Some students choose to recontextualize an object from one of the previous two essays (for instance, a student working on the sculptures of Tuan Andrew Nguyen in her first essay broadened her third essay to a discussion of the Vietnam War and PTSD). Others select a new object related to their interests.

In both cases, students grapple with more independently sourced texts than at any prior moment in the semester. Even if they have a good idea of how their essay is taking shape—and they typically do, having just submitted an Annotated Bibliography—they often experience a forest-for-the-trees moment, wondering what type of essay their research might yield. It's at this point in the semester that I ask them to write, share, and discuss abstracts of their essays-in-progress as a method of refining the research process. Students inevitably encounter abstracts as they search for scholarly texts. Becoming more familiar with the form, through discussing examples and writing their own, enables them to fulfill the twofold aim of generating new ideas, and framing those ideas for an interested reader. To analyze a cultural object and connect it with an experience, whether one's own or that of another thinker, is an abstract process. Writing makes that process an equally embodied one, reflecting an understanding of abstraction as "generative rather than imposed" (Bleeker, 2019). In this way, the formal constraint becomes something to dissect, adapt, and transcend.

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Preparation

Initially, asking my students to write abstracts felt like compelling them to appropriate scholarly discourse, or invent the university in its own language (Bartholomae, 1986). Would they ever need to write an abstract again? Was this practice really useful for developing more wide-ranging and expressive ideas? I hesitated to formalize the assignment, and yet I'd been moving towards it in other ways, such as asking students to write and evaluate their own essay prompts. A prompt may be understood as a coercive device for students to disguise as their own line of inquiry (Bawarshi, 2003). Abstracts represent a different type of effort: since it's impossible to disguise what hasn't been fully articulated, writing them becomes a means of containing what is there at any given moment, and anticipating what may yet unfold. In this way, abstract writing serves as a metacognitive exercise in genre awareness (Driscoll et al., 2020). Since the ultimate aim of writing an abstract is not mastering the form, but addressing ideas to a range of possible audiences, the early stages of a research essay give students the opportunity to "fail better" (French, 2016) on the path to clarity and cohesion.

I typically assign the abstract as one of three formal exercises leading up to the final essay, with the third of these tending to be the draft itself, or an organizational pre-drafting activity. To date, I have assigned the abstract as the third exercise only twice, usually going back and forth between assigning it as the first and second exercise. My original reasoning was that having students write abstracts *before* the bulk of their drafts would facilitate a smoother transition from the Annotated Bibliography—a standalone assignment—but more recently, I've discovered that they prefer having more time to complete multiple drafts (we do at least two as a group). Writing the abstract is as generative as it is structural, so the timing of the exercise, and the preparatory work leading up to it, is fairly flexible. The in-class preparation unfolds over two class sessions, or one week, at any point during the first three weeks of a six-week sequence devoted to writing and workshopping the final essay.

During the first of these two class sessions, we discuss model abstracts students have read for homework: two from *PMLA* and two written by students who have previously taken my course (the student models I reference in my assignment were written before the full essay draft was due). If there is time, I may also have us look at the beginning of a prior course reading that lays out its claims in the way an abstract would; this enables me to show how differently abstracts have historically functioned across different academic disciplines, particularly the humanities. Phillip Troutman (2019) has shown that it can be tricky to find good models of abstracts for students to follow, since humanities abstracts tend to be less formulaic than those from the social sciences. In particular, Troutman notes that humanities abstracts "may be more exploratory or essayistic, in which case it may be difficult to abstract a discernable claim" (p. 24). This observation is interesting in light of EWP's programmatic commitment to the essay form, as well as my own attempts to get students to understand the abstracts they encounter as essayistic. Exploratory or expository essays might well forego making a claim in direct terms. Even argumentative essays might delay their claims, depending on their evidence. How does this help students who might be struggling to identify their central claim in a more developed research essay? Providing a range of models for them to work with is crucial.

Implementation

During our discussion of the model abstracts, I ask students to notice key terms, compile important verbs, and identify potentially unwieldy ideas that appear to have been condensed into concepts (for example—see my accompanying assignment—the student writing on "cyborg feminism" aligns this concept with the "relational aesthetic" of Frank O' Hara's poetry offered

in the first model). We look for three key components in each abstract, which may be present to varying degrees: 1) a clear sense of what object anchors the essay's analysis 2) a generative tension between concepts and 3) the writer's emerging claim. From the published abstracts, students are able to recognize that even when a claim appears to be articulated clearly, ideas must be developed through evidence in the essay as a whole. I try to offer student examples at various stages of development, so we can imagine the type of work that needs to occur during drafting. Students respond to the ballet example's accessible voice—the kind of "stylistic flourish" Wayne Booth (2016, p. 198) recognizes as permissible within the formula of an abstract—even as they look for a specific relationship between the Degas paintings and the Scarry text. They appreciate the clearly defined context of the *Ex Machina* piece while noting that one would need to read the student's essay for a fuller understanding of the debate she raises.

These student examples correlate roughly with the two types of abstracts mentioned in a *Physics Today* article from 1949: indicative and informative. An indicative abstract helps researchers decide whether to read the entire article; an informative abstract provides a thorough summary of methods, data, arguments and outcomes, so that reading the entire article is unnecessary (Gray, 1949). Some humanities abstracts may be more indicative in that the full claim is not as legible in condensed form, and others may be more informative in that the argument is positioned in clear and direct terms. I do not use these precise terms during class discussion, but I do emphasize the characteristics of each abstract type to help students balance their intentions as writers with their queries as readers and researchers. In terms of the research process, students understand that although reading an abstract can expedite the time they spend with a potential text, abstracts do not indicate all sections of a text that might be useful to them. Further, they recognize that citing an abstract in place of a full article is unacceptable (MLA, 2019). As they begin the first of at least two drafts, they learn to identify why they think someone should read their essay—and more importantly, why they should write it. Notice how the student writing on *Ex Machina* begins to inform the reader what her essay will argue, while the ballet student promises a "deeper look," holding herself to the task of providing evidence. These reader-directed gestures are inseparable from the writing challenges unique to each student's research agenda.

Once we've established the parameters of the abstract and where we might find opportunities to experiment within them, the entire class attempts a three-sentence "micro-abstract" as preparation for their own abstract, which is due the following session (the directions ask for 150-300 words, so "micro" would be 100 words or less). Each sentence corresponds roughly to the object-tension-claim model we identify in the preceding discussion. Since the students have just completed an Annotated Bibliography, my goal is to practice having them move from a bibliographic structure back into the essay form. To that end, I supply them with a pair of short pieces responding to a Damien Hirst installation. Any cultural object will do, providing that the pieces approximate the range of materials students might locate during the first phase of their research. (For ease of readability, I use a reference article and an expository essay). I give the students time to skim these articles and then, as a group or in pairs, examine how differently each author establishes a sense of fascination with the topic. Then, I have them do a Who-What-Where-When-Why-How analysis of a third piece, moving from the initial three question words they should all be able to identify with their research object—in this case, Hirst's installation—into a conversation about context: why *this* specific response exists *now* (review essays work particularly well for this exercise, recalling the "Reviewing in Context" origins of the third essay). I supply them with a pre-written "Who-What-Where" micro-abstract on the board with blank spaces for concepts related to *why* the work was made, and together, the students complete the abstract based on the readings they have just skimmed. Here is what one

class came up with (the italics represent my pre-written abstract; the bold concepts are sourced from group discussion):

> *This essay explores Doreen Lynette Garner's recent installation "When You are Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" as a response to Damien Hirst's "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living." Hirst's original installation prompts viewers to consider* **mortality***; Garner's sculpture prompts them to consider* **the violent history of colonialism and specifically, chattel slavery***. Garner's work, in this way, contributes to a conversation about* **racialized violence and suffering in the images we consume***, provocatively recontextualizing Hirst's take on the* **vanitas tradition.**

Completing this micro-abstract template in class may require some additional prompting as the students navigate between model abstracts, new readings, and a collaboratively written exercise, but it offers a way for them to explode their bibliography—to reassess what they've assembled, and to decide which texts should be identified directly in the abstract itself (Henderson, 2024).

On the second day, students come to class having written an abstract of their essays-in-progress. I have them share the abstracts in a group document, and then I assign two readers to each one. The first reader is asked to comment on the expectations their classmate's abstract creates for the full essay. Will it contain personal experience? What specific thinkers will it engage in scholarly conversation? How will the writer's cultural object provide us with an entry point into that conversation? The second reader is tasked with suggesting a title for the essay. Through this work, students apply the components discussed in the previous session, verifying the abstract's object, conceptual tension, and emerging claim. When everyone has received feedback, the students revisit their Annotated Bibliographies and rank each text in order of necessity and importance. At the end of the session, I ask them to free write about two texts that have taken on a surprising new relationship in response to this reordering. The free write offers a break from the compressing moves we've practiced in class and prepares students for further drafting.

Reflection

In the most successful realizations of this activity, students see fresh connections to their earlier work in the course, as well as their pre-college writing. Not only do some of them develop a new appreciation for a text or artwork, they see, through the concise syntax and deliberate phrasing abstracts demand, how a well-articulated problem engages readers: a key objective for each of the three essays they write. In effect, they recognize that their audience is determined by who chooses to continue reading with that problem in mind (rather than simply, say, a good hook that grabs the reader's attention—a piece of advice many students arrive at college with, but may not understand how to adapt). Writing an abstract for a reader who hasn't yet seen the entire essay is, of course, part of the protocol of submitting conference proposals. It is also a step in preparing a final essay for publication; at this stage, it is possible that someone else may compose the abstract. This distinction between author-generated abstracts and externally written ones is notable in the history of the genre (Fyfe, 2021), and it is certain to take new forms with Artificial Intelligence. Asking first-year students to attune to this difference can help them focus on what their draft says as much as how it sounds. They may even discover that earlier attempts to sound more academic do not actually suit their intentions.

Another benefit of writing abstracts is that students prioritize more complicated texts, readings they might have skimmed (say, on the basis of reading an abstract) during research. Revisiting and ranking their bibliographies lets students see which texts are doing the heavy

lifting, and encourages them to revisit complex concepts in their original context. When the exercise goes well, their ideas crystallize around these concepts. Other results, however, tend to follow one of two opposing extremes. Some students rely excessively on one book or article from their research in the abstract: co-opting a scholar's work, in effect, rather than responding to it. Other students have difficulty extrapolating more than the sum of their existing research: they generate list-like abstracts, losing the tension between concepts we identify during discussion as essential to a developed idea. (See the student who began with a great idea about creating art in wartime, but assembled too many texts about too many wars, instead of unpacking an artwork produced in response to a specific conflict.)

Continuing to revisit the abstract during class activities and conferences would be one potential response to these issues. Given that I typically assign the abstract before the bulk of the essay has been written, it would make sense to have students write abstracts of each other's full drafts, in addition to providing initial comments on Day 2 of the in-class portion of the exercise. Students could compare these peer-generated abstracts with the originals to test the effectiveness of their claims. Since students often want to rewrite the abstracts after their ideas shift, I could also make the rewrites a low-stakes revision activity. The different versions of each student's abstract would become a useful structuring tool for feedback during our one-on-one conferences. As for the assignment itself, I plan to update the model abstracts to include a greater variety of humanities disciplines and journals. Although I ultimately intend for students to benefit from writing abstracts wherever they are in their process, it is important that they understand the difference between a generative abstract that will refine their research and an undercooked assemblage of thoughts compiled from a bibliography. To that end, I will ask students to bookmark examples of abstracts they find during the initial phase of research so that we can discuss these examples together, hopefully enabling them to distinguish a generative abstract from one that is perfunctory (or even artificially generated).

The issues students encounter when crafting abstracts of their drafts-in-progress point to abstraction itself as a challenge inherent to the work of a first-year writing course. Fundamentally, abstracts lay bare the relationship between part and whole, the essential components of an essay in any genre. Defining that relationship can be especially frustrating for students navigating the scholarly essay with a breadth of personal experiences and a range of skills. But it also places them within Henri Bergson's realm of the possible: a space where the actualization of ideas coexists with their innate potential. Because of the double-facing nature of abstracts—not quite existing in the realm of "before" or "after" the formation of an idea—students recognize their ability to carry out this potential in their essays. According to Bergson's formulation, we situate ourselves in time through a continuous process of searching, which is recognizable to us "only through an artificial effort of abstraction" (Bergson, 1930/1965/2002, p. 272). This effort is comparable to an artist's conception of a picture before it is fully executed; the ultimate realization of the design inevitably transcends its original conception. Bergson frames abstraction as "stilted" and ultimately "inadequate" (p. 271). We are in a constant state of hesitation and elaboration, an inescapable push-pull between what is and what could be. Yet this makes the state of abstraction all the more necessary. When students consciously inhabit this state through the writing of abstracts, the artificiality Bergson describes brings about an intermediary form of clarity. We could contend that a good abstract might sound like a bad AI summary. But all abstracts, whether generated by authors, readers, or machines, must answer the same question: "Why would I want to read this essay?" Only a writer can answer that.

ASSIGNMENT
Abstract

Objective
To write a short abstract of Essay #3 that you will use to help determine a direction for your remaining research.

Instructions
Have a look at the sample abstracts for academic articles in this document. Then, write your own abstract. Include a tentative title for your essay. Your abstract—which needn't be longer than a short paragraph—should contain a basic sense of the problem you're exploring in your third essay, the major texts/works of art you'll use to launch your analysis, and the argument/ideas you'll be presenting. Ideally, working on this abstract will help you see which pieces you're missing, so you don't have to be completely certain about every part of your essay just yet.

Please include brief annotations for any texts you've added since submitting the Annotated Bibliography assignment.

Length: 150 to 300 words.

Sample Abstracts
Glavey, Brian. "Having a Coke with You Is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique." *PMLA*, Volume 134, Number 5, October 2019, pp. 996–1011. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.996

This essay addresses the recent reception of Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You" to examine the much-maligned concept of relatability as a potentially useful aesthetic category. If the reactions to it on *Twitter* and *YouTube* are any indication, O'Hara's Coke poem has become his most famous piece, immensely popular both online and, in a strikingly different way, in the work of contemporary queer theorists. Whatever the context—queer utopian criticism, an anarchist journal, a wedding ceremony, or even an official Coca-Cola public-relations campaign—readers tend to respond to the poem's general mood rather than to its specific content. This reception speaks to the fact that O'Hara pursues what I would label a poetics of relatability: "Having a Coke with You," like many other O'Hara poems, models ways of valuing art by relating it to other things and people. O'Hara explores this relational aesthetic by constantly negotiating between modes of reception that are self-reflective and modes that are social and intersubjective.

Bronstein, Michaela. "Taking the Future into Account: Today's Novels for Tomorrow's Readers." *PMLA*, Volume 134, Number 1, January 2019, pp. 121–136. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.121

The idea of writing for the future often seems like a selfish act: a claim for personal immortality. Yet writing with future readers in mind also requires imagining the needs of a world radically different from our own. This paper examines *Future Library*, an artwork in which authors contribute writing that will not be read until 2114, and the fiction of David Mitchell, one of the contributing authors. In these works, writing for the future is political, not because it represents the future but because it simultaneously demands intervention in the present and opens itself to the new and to unexpected future uses.

Sample Student Abstracts Written by Previous Students

Student #1: "What Happens in Ballet, Stays in Ballet"

There's something about ballet that is enchanting to the eyes. The beautiful men and women who seemingly float in the air, wear dazzling costumes, and express their emotions through movement and music. But, there is so much more that happens than what is seen on stage. So what is occurring when the curtains are closed, and when the studio doors are shut? The essay "What Happens in Ballet, Stays in Ballet" gives a "behind the scenes" view of what happens within the ballet world. Straying away from the stereotypical view of ballet that includes women spinning on the tips of their toes and wearing pink tutus and tiaras, the essay gives a deeper look at the less beautiful, less glamorous, and most definitely, less spoken about but incredibly common experiences within ballet. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* by Elaine Scarry guides the essay's argument to create a contrast of the idealized and glorified lives of ballet dancers as demonstrated in Edgar Degas's paintings "The Ballet Class" and "The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the Rue le Peletier."

Student #2 (Untitled)

This essay addresses the relationship between artificial intelligence, the female body, and subversion in *Ex Machina*. Using the film as a microcosm to explore gender and technology, I hope to examine the film's potential as an attempt at modeling cyborg feminism. Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* will serve as a critical foundation for examining to what extent Ava represents a subversive cyborg, and how empowering the idea of a modern cyborg really is, in the context of artificial intelligence and social media. With the rise of AI influencers like Lil Miquela, perhaps cyborg feminism has been appropriated by mass media; I hope to explore *Ex Machina* as a site of debate over the potentials and pitfalls of fusing gender and technology.

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.v9i2.245.

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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.

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
a journal of academic writing assignments

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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[1] 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.

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

[1]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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The Multi-Track Mind

How Video Essays Can Reinvigorate Creativity, Self-Expression, and Integrity in the Age of AI

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Abstract

This progression of assignments from Advanced Writing and Research in the Arts, a seminar for Tisch School of the Arts students, presents a model for professors seeking to incorporate multimodal composition into their pedagogy. Culminating in a video essay, students explore films, television series, documentaries, stand-up comedy, interviews, TED Talks, and blog posts representing a multiplicity of perspectives related to a chosen controversy. After sharing their initial impressions in a vlog pitch, students dive into the research process with a comprehensive annotated bibliography of the most thought-provoking and challenging videos and articles they encounter online. Throughout the process, they keep a viewing journal, a bullet-point catalogue of gut reactions and thoughts that emerge while watching the narrative art that will ultimately form the basis of their arguments. The final video essay allows students to highlight the individual nature of spectatorship and to commit to the ongoing and evolving process of situated thinking. This article examines how the playful integration of audio and visual components in a video essay can foster authentic student thinking, present a holistic sense of the student, increase attention to academic integrity, and dissuade the use of AI-writing tools.

Course Context and Framing Controversies

In the NYU Tisch School of the Arts seminar Advanced Writing and Research in the Arts, offered through the Department of Art and Public Policy, students typically write essays focused on the relationship between artists and a variety of publics their works inhabit. In this second semester course, first-year students learn how to notice non-obvious patterns related to formal elements, socio-political content, and process. In my version of the course, students keep a viewing journal, craft a short vlog pitch, and track sources through annotated bibliography tasks on their way to producing a culminating video essay. By building theories rooted in the interplay between form and content, students become more aware of the various ways they can create meaning in their own artistic practice.

Whereas in prior units of my course students were assigned a series of common readings, in this final project about a social issue or controversy of their choosing, they curate their own set of texts and artistic works during the preliminary exercises. As students create their annotated bibliographies, they continue to draw on assigned readings from earlier in the semester.[1]

During each session in this unit, while they are individually researching their own topics outside of class, we attend to a particular social issue together; we investigate a range of interventions by various artists, sharing our own views on the strengths and limitations of each approach. For instance, in a sequence of classes about racism and police brutality, we might consider the music of Nina Simone alongside the works of Diana Ross, Spike Lee, Ava DuVernay, Chelsea Handler, Anna Deavere Smith, Tate Taylor, and Ryan Coogler. With each example, the discussion becomes progressively more complex, raising new questions, and modeling the inductive form of analysis that will characterize their final video essays.

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Before we address sensitive topics, we discuss ways to preserve the classroom as a space for both critical inquiry and emotional care so that we do not retraumatize students or limit discourse. We explore the stakes and contexts of each controversy, emphasizing the need to respect potential disagreements in the room. Some controversies are certainly more emotionally charged than others, and others do not seem controversial at all within the confines of a Tisch classroom in Greenwich Village.[2] I also ask them to be mindful of their own capacity to watch difficult material that may be personally triggering.[3]

I stress that there is not a single, correct way of assessing a work of art. In NYU Expository Writing Program's annual online collection of student writing, I have previously explained an activity I introduce early in the unit to help students understand this concept:

> I ask students to share their own interpretation of William Carlos Williams' brief poem "This Is Just To Say." What images come to mind when you hear his words? Some see the Garden of Eden; others imagine a strained marriage, a slammed refrigerator, a bitter fight; some will argue that it's a metaphor for income inequality; a few insist that it's a commentary on sexual consent. The class is often relieved to learn that there is no general consensus about the poem's meaning, no "right" or "definitive" interpretation among the "experts"—and that some believe that it can function as a revealing Rorschach test of sorts. Together we reflect on the different ways we each look at a work of art based on the stored memories and personal experiences we bring to any encounter. No two spectators can possibly view an image, a film, or a text in the exact same way. (Udko, 2021, para. 56)

The video essay format embodies this core value, offering a more comprehensive view of a student's stance and perspective by showcasing the visual images they select to complement the audio narration of their arguments. Throughout the unit, I instruct students to keep a folder online with images that they connect to their chosen essays and artworks. These images, combined with YouTube and film clips, eventually form the basis of their video tracks, an additional layer that offers them more space to communicate their ideas and be more cognizant of the choices they are making as spectators, authors, and artists. Students also create an MLA list of citations that appears onscreen at the end of their videos, documenting any visual material they have incorporated into their final edits.

When our students have to read their words out loud, when they have to match sight to sound, when they know a broader audience (instead of one singular reader) will encounter their ideas, they suddenly care a great deal about developing work that showcases their authentic selves (Udko, 2024). The dual tracks of image and sound also invite a more casual tone, a space where students can express themselves as they would in a spirited conversation on this topic. The form allows for strange, funny, contradictory, complex, fascinating associations, and visual juxtapositions that can only come from the idiosyncratic mind of a creative thinker.

The Pitch and Viewing Journal

After the topic selection phase, we continue the process with a recorded pitch that students share with their classmates. This early exercise is designed to facilitate a sense of comfort speaking in their own voices, while showcasing passion for their selected topics. Together the class comments on the video pitches, suggesting films, plays, television, music, or artists each student might want to examine. A successful pitch helps us understand the story of the student's personal relationship with this social issue, introduces us to key art objects that they have already experienced, establishes the urgency and stakes of the controversy, and explains how a conversation about it *now* is different than it might have been several years ago.

Highlighting their unique personality is a central element of this project, one that advocates for a holistic sense of the student and inherently diminishes the role of tools like ChatGPT. While generative AI is certainly capable of producing scripts for this early exercise and the video essay itself, students (particularly the artists at Tisch) are more eager to sound like themselves than like AI when discussing social issues that they deem urgent. This low-stakes vlog assignment is inherently messy because it sits in the pre-research phase of the unit, when a carefully composed argument is not the goal.

Screening their pitches for their classmates, many describe an increased desire to invest in their writing for an audience beyond the singular reader who grades them. They describe feeling an increased desire to invest more time in this entire unit, knowing that they will be sharing their views with their peers, and in many cases, a larger YouTube community beyond the semester.

Once students have selected their topics, they resume by watching and taking notes about five full-length films, television episodes, or plays in their viewing journals. Our goal is to approach familiar topics with a sense of curiosity, avoiding unsubstantiated claims about well-trodden issues. The viewing journal is a real-time chronicle of each student's gut reactions (emotional and intellectual) to the full-length narratives about their chosen social issue (with 1-2 pages of informal bullet-point notes per work of art) (Udko, 2025).

The initial thoughts and emotions captured in their journals are not the types of formal summaries or descriptions offered by ChatGPT. Gathering the student's own individual observations is the chief priority of this early stage of the unit. While in the first few iterations of this assignment I mandated a particular format for these notes (three columns for form, content, and miscellaneous observations), recently I have encouraged students to abandon their notions of academic writing for this catalogue of notes. I now present students with five sample viewing journals from previous years, each with a different format, and ask them to take notes in a manner that makes most sense to them. This freedom results in a mixture of emotional responses, free associations, and an identification of patterns that strike them as notable. For instance, before breaking down observations about the formal elements on display in the film *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* one student wrote[4]: "Oh my god. This was heart wrenchingly good. I'm kind of in shock and numb immediately after watching it because a lot of my processing is just feeling." One page later, she noticed a crucial pattern in Hittman's film: "The camera focuses on Autumn and her reactions constantly. We never get lost in the wider world, we always stay with her and that in itself is so powerful and meaningful." And as she closed out her entry, she added, "I also like that the film isn't afraid to linger on unimportant moments—like the girls putting money on the metrocard machine and it not working, or having to swipe more than once and pass the suitcase over the turnstile. These moments are 'unnecessary' to some filmmakers but I feel like they hold the life of the film."

The viewing journal allows students to actively engage with a work of art, rather than passively get lost in its entertainment value. Students pay close attention to subtle choices made by artists and the impact those details have on the intellectual and emotional resonance it creates for them. They watch, carefully attending to details that might elude the casual viewer, knowing that each artistic choice carries meaning, which can be fertile ground for their own interpretations. How does the score shape the way we feel about a character's plight? How does the framing of a shot convey meaning? What conditions and ingredients are most effective in shifting or reinforcing the perspective of the student?

By the time they begin drafting the script for their video essay, they have a single document (often 20-plus pages) containing notes about all of their impressions, observations about stylistic patterns, and analysis.[5] As this document grows in size, it tends to become progressively focused

around a single central question. When confronted with voices that challenge their views, students often reflect in their journals on their own evolving stances, developing more nuanced positions and demonstrating a commitment to the process of relativistic thinking.

The Central Question: Gaining Confidence Through Uncertainty

In every class I teach, I endeavor to help students develop the confidence to carve out a place for their ideas to be heard amid a chorus of experts. They must make informed decisions about how to make meaning out of the sources they consult in the research process, while simultaneously contesting or honoring that perspective at the same time.

I encourage them to form their own unique relationship with a given text, work of art, or controversy based on their experiences and values. To nurture this sense of authority, we practice the art of constant inquiry by learning how to craft compelling questions in response to evidence. I try to introduce a challenging conceptual question we can investigate together as a community. By examining a full range of responses to these questions (both from experts in the field and from their classmates), students can begin to practice forming rich arguments of their own. In-class writing assignments (imagined dialogues, role-playing, journaling, poetry) enable students to chart the development of these ideas. In their final self-evaluation letters, students often note that they are most grateful to my class for helping them to ask questions, increase their curiosity, and release themselves from the burden of having to find definitive answers.

The central question is the north star of their research process, helping to push past superficial observations about plots and themes. These questions range from broad concerns facing all artists (e.g., how confrontational does a work of art need to be in order to initiate social change?) to more focused investigations (e.g., how can a cis-dominated Hollywood properly honor the stories of the trans community in a way that is both positive and non-exploitative?).

Whereas ChatGPT tends to provide a fixed position in response to a prompt, this process fully embraces inductive thinking. As they dive deeper into the research process with annotated bibliography tasks, they must decide if a particular source helps them to see anything *new* about their social controversy. If it merely reiterates a familiar perspective (or one shared by another source), they must keep searching for videos that add complexity to their evolving theory. These sources can be presented as explicit opinions (in a TED Talk, for instance) or as enactments in works of art (a music video, for instance, that takes a very different approach to confronting the social issue than their selected full-length works). The annotated bibliography activities, which also include exploring academic sources and other established journals, present an opportunity to see how experts and artists have responded to their central questions. Students then begin to see where they position themselves amid a range of potential stances.

The Matrix: Sorting and Developing a Stance

Before drafting a script for their video essay, students develop a matrix, which serves as both an organizing tool and a visual summary of their evaluation of each piece of evidence. Students typically select a variable for the x-axis that tracks an artistic choice or approach, while using the y-axis to depict the work's effectiveness in raising social consciousness. As I've written elsewhere, "By assigning a quantifiable (and entirely subjective) value to each work of art, the matrix serves as a visual snapshot to capture" the student's core argument and relationship to the artistic works examined in their essay (Udko, 2025, para. 37). Embracing the individualized nature of spectatorship, students recognize that there is no right or wrong way to organize their evidence and that they will be making placement decisions that could differ significantly from their peers.

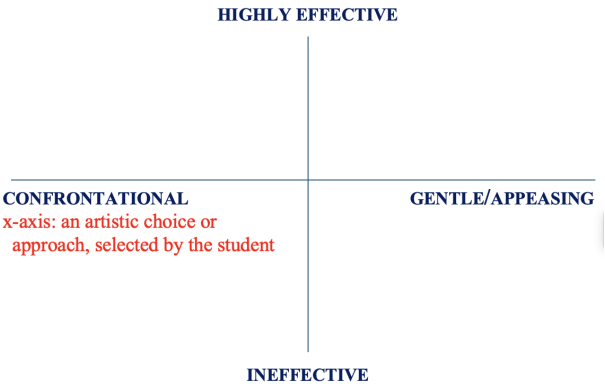

Figure 1. A sample matrix for mapping and assessing artistic works by their confrontational approach (x-axis) and their impact on raising the student's social consciousness (y-axis).

One x-axis might measure the optimistic or pessimistic tone of a piece; another might assess the strengths and limitations of departing from realism (e.g., naturalism vs. absurdism). Figure 1 shows one potential iteration of a blank matrix focusing on the confrontational relationships between artists and their audiences.

By the time students complete their viewing journals and annotated bibliographies, they should have ideally located a work of art to place in each quadrant of the matrix. Exploring why a particular quadrant lacks an example leads students to new discoveries, complications, and perhaps a revised matrix. The matrix offers a liberating opportunity to slow down and see clear links between all the evidence in an argument without getting stuck in a particular linear ordering of evidence. This visual system resists any simple method of organization (chronological, best to worst, general to specific, compare-contrast, linear cause and effect, etc.) and it requires a student to make their own crucial ordering decisions. The matrix is one way to foster authentic, holistic, synthesized ownership of their thinking that is always subject to revision and movement. Items on the matrix move around throughout the brainstorming, writing, and editing processes. "When I write," one student shared in a reflective letter, "I often feel as though I need to plan my entire essay before I write it, however, I don't want to lose the ability to add in all my new thinking. The matrix felt like the solution I was missing. I was able to plan my thought process without causing undue stress." In the final projects, this matrix often appears early on in the video essays, as students use it to lay out the groundwork for their investigations.

Drafting and Editing: Clips, Cuts, and Cohesion

Once they have all their evidence, the students begin writing their audio tracks. The act of drafting, recording, condensing, re-recording, and editing of a voiceover audio track allows students to practice writing clear and concise prose. The maximum 8-minute length requires the class to practice condensing their arguments, identifying filler phrases, and eliminating redundancy. They discover that descriptions can often be replaced by images or text on the video track; the video track can economically offer subtle visual cues with color, text, headlines, or images of previously mentioned material to convey meaning without having to write lengthy descriptions.[6]

I encourage students to draft their scripts in their own voices, as they would speak to an intelligent friend. One student described that "writing the script with the knowledge that it will be spoken and recorded shifted my perspective on what my writing voice actually is.

Despite teachers telling me my writing should always be in 'my own voice,' I think that I finally understood what that meant through this assignment."

Each new artwork introduced in the video should function as a turning point, injecting a new dimension into the student's analysis. The beginning sets up the central question of the essay, and through deeper examination with each turning point, the student should ideally end with a shift in thinking about this question. The goal is not to arrive at a definitive answer (as many AI-generated papers do), but rather to leave audiences with a deeper, more nuanced understanding about the ways artists engage with this social controversy.

While outlining their argument, I stress that each turning point should have one or more of the following elements in order to craft smooth transitions: (a) an implied sub-question attached to it; (b) a BUT/HOWEVER moment[7]; or (c) an acknowledgment that the findings of the previous turning point could be complicated further with an additional layer.

Concluding Thoughts: Innovation, Integration, and Integrity

At its core, this progression of assignments aims to cultivate authentic thinking (and discourages the use of artificial intelligence) by challenging students to confront complexity, nuance, their own individual spectatorship, and ambiguity—qualities that ChatGPT can struggle to replicate. As I compose this essay, generative AI tools still lack the capacity for true introspection, emotional resonance, and the kind of personalized engagement that defines this project. While this assignment seems to foreground one form of technology (video editing) in response to the looming threat of a far newer technology, the same skills that guided this unit when it was a written essay remain front and center: meaningful reflection, accurate representation of evidence, responsible citation, organization of turning points, recursive movement, and graceful transitions.

Our students have grown up watching video essays on YouTube and TikTok; during their lifetimes, the form has become increasingly popular for transmitting information and views about complex issues. The popularity and familiarity with this form changes their relationship to the work; they are eager to create something that resembles the type of intellectual entertainment that they enthusiastically consume in their free time. In their final evaluations, students report overwhelming excitement about creating video content that can be shared with a larger public and describe the process as "rewarding," "inspiring," "fun," "challenging," and "time-consuming."

Producing a video essay generally requires significantly more labor than writing a research paper. When I first started teaching this form, I worried that it would offer an unfair advantage to film students, and that those unfamiliar with editing software would struggle to complete the assignment. To the contrary, I have found that most students are eager to hone this skill and many have not yet had an occasion to practice the craft of video editing in an academic setting. One student wrote about how working simultaneously in audio and visual mediums inspired her to exit her comfort zone while increasing a sense of passion and investment in her topic: "I am usually vehemently against writing research essays, but this project forced me to become curious and I learned to love writing. I think it's one of the best things to ever happen to me academically speaking."

I believe that our students thrive when we give them the freedom to showcase their most authentic selves, while simultaneously offering constructive constraints that steer them towards complexity and nuance. In our current academic landscape, inventing new ways to maintain integrity can feel exhausting and futile. None of this work is AI-proof; a student could absolutely circumvent these deterrents if they wanted to use ChatGPT to write the script for their essay and Grok to generate video clips, but I find that they are more interested in representing the

idiosyncratic evolution of their own thought process (and sounding like themselves) than they are in appearing *right*.

The act of integrating evidence from a myriad of sources (films, television, YouTube, TikTok, newspaper articles, academic journals) inspires students to think about integrity. For instance, we discuss the ethical use of citations (and how to keep track of all the video and written sources stitched into their final product in an ongoing document that will form their page of works cited). Etymologically, we explore how *integration* and *integrity* share a common Latin root (*integer*, meaning whole or complete). For example, what does moral uprightness and being true to a set of common values have to do with a sense of wholeness? Students come to see the acts of curating content, viewing, note-taking, researching, composing, speaking, recording, selecting clips, rearranging sequences, and editing as highly personal experiences. Many are motivated to create work that could not sound like it was created a few years ago or created by one of their peers.

The video essay fosters not only academic growth but also a deeper sense of individuality and creative confidence. We acknowledge the courage and vulnerability involved in screening their work in front of the class—and the ways one must exit a comfort zone in order to learn and grow. My course has been built on the premise that the craft of essay writing can make our Tisch students better artists; this final assignment (an invitation to simultaneously be both an artist and a scholar) attempts to bring this promise to fruition. Screening the fruits of their labor in front of the class, they come to see that their essays can be fully realized works of art. I continue to revise this assignment each semester to create the ideal conditions for students to introduce us to holistic, more complete versions of themselves than a traditional research paper would allow.

ASSIGNMENT
The Multi-Track Mind: A Progression of Assignments Culminating in a Video Essay

Week One: Choose Your Controversy

Select the social issue / controversy you would like to explore in this unit. Make a list of films, plays, and works of art associated with your issue. You will need to have at least 5 full-length works (plays, films, specific episodes of a television series, one documentary) on this list. Be sure that a full-length documentary (or 2 short documentaries) and at least 4-5 films/plays/television shows have been made on this topic—and that you have access to them.

Come to class with a list of all relevant and available artworks that deal with this topic. Include this list as the first page of your **Viewing Journal for Unit 2 (an ongoing Google doc).**

Your Viewing Journal will document all of your notes related to the choices made by your chosen artists regarding the representation of your social issue. Include time codes and page numbers in your Viewing Journal to facilitate an easier video editing process. In addition, create a Google folder where you will upload clips and images that you may consider using on your video track.

Week Two: Fictions & Non-Fictions

Now pick **(1) a full-length documentary AND (2) *at least* TWO feature films/TV series/plays that engage with your social issue.** *If you can't find a full-length doc, feel free to watch multiple*

short docs (minimum length: 30 minutes each) *or TV specials (an episode of* Vice, *for example*). Remember: Your final Viewing Journal must contain at least 5 full-length works.

> **Examples for Climate Change**: *An Inconvenient Truth* (documentary), *Don't Look Up* (feature film), *Snowpiercer* (feature film), *The Day After Tomorrow* (feature film), *Flow* (animated film), *Earthquakes in London* (play)

In your Viewing Journal (min 1 page single-spaced notes per work), explore how these works approach the controversy through a variety of different lenses. What choices stand out to you about the various approaches to this controversy? What gets left out as you cross over from the world of documentary to fiction? What are the strengths and limitations of the documentary form? How does your chosen fictional work deal with this controversy in unique and surprising (or stale and predictable) ways? Take notes about pivotal scenes from each selection in your analysis. **(Bullet points are fine.)**

Week Three: The Pitch

Now record a **video pitch** (a 2-3 minute video of yourself talking to the camera about your social issue) to our **NYU Stream Channel**.

You will want to jot down a few talking points before you record, but this shouldn't be scripted (keep it as informal as you like). Help us to understand the problem you are grappling with (and why it matters to you): Why have you decided to explore this controversy? What do many people still not understand about this issue? What would surprise your peers?

Narrow the focus of your controversy so that you can directly address the ways that Hollywood and artistic communities (theater, dance, visual art, music, performance art) are fueling or helping to solve this problem. As you talk, try to push past any obvious claims that we would all agree with; give us something new to think about, inspired by the work you have already done in your Viewing Journal (the documentary and two feature films you have seen).

What questions remain for you concerning the ways artists can engage with this social issue? What do you still not fully understand? What are you hoping to figure out by watching and reading several more works of art over the next month?

Watch your classmates' videos and write comments on 3 of them on our Stream channel. Give constructive feedback in your comments (offer suggestions about plays, music, film, tv, dance, and visual art that engages with their controversy; ask questions that might highlight some blind spots; express any concerns that you have).

Week Four: The YouTube Annotated Bibliography

Start researching your own controversy (and its relationship to the Arts) on Twitter/X, TikTok, blogs, and in the popular press. You're interested in public opinion: what are people saying about it? What are the trends? How do perspectives on this issue vary? Try to be as specific as possible in defining your controversy; *Race* would be too broad (*police brutality and race* is better). Make a list of questions you are thinking about at the top of your document.

Then turn to YouTube and find as many pertinent videos as possible related to your discussion: documentary shorts, TED talks, music videos, etc. Aim for a mixture of artistic and documentary-based responses to your controversy. Try to have:

- At least one TED talk (or a lengthy, well-regarded presentation that resembles a TED talk)
- At least one music video or performance (sketch comedy)
- A mixture of well-known and more esoteric artistic responses to this issue (conceptual artists, visual artists, performance artists)

Select the 10 MOST USEFUL YOUTUBE VIDEOS from your search and create an Annotated Bibliography.

Below each citation, briefly describe the video and then explain how each one offers you a new perspective. If a video does not provide you any insight, it does not belong on your list. Write one hefty paragraph of original thinking for each video. Do not merely describe the video; tell me what you think about it—and how it leads you to ask new questions about your controversy (and its relationship to the art world).

Length: Approximately 1/3 of a page per entry, single-spaced.

List the Citation for the video using Proper MLA format:

> Author's Name or Poster's Username. "Title of Image or Video." Media Type Text. Name of Website. Name of Website's Publisher, date of posting. Medium. Date retrieved. Link.

Week Five: The Annotated Journal Article Bibliography

Do some further reading about your controversy from a variety of new perspectives (and disciplines) and select **FIVE** of the most useful essays you find from JSTOR, EBSCO, Project Muse, Google Scholar, *The Economist, New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Time, The Wall Street Journal*, or other established periodicals. These selections should be lengthy ESSAYS, as opposed to brief news articles or blog posts. Make sure that some of these essays directly address the ways artists have represented your issue.

Follow the same format as your YouTube Bibliography, this time with texts. List the proper MLA citation. Summarize the text in 1-2 sentences and then spend the bulk of your paragraph explaining its contribution to your evolving understanding of this controversy.

Length: **One *substantial* paragraph (approx. ½ of a page, single-spaced) for each text.**

Weeks Six-Eight: The Final Video Essay

"*The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.*"
— F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up" (1936)

This final video essay asks you to explore the ways artists can engage with a public controversy. You will need a **compelling central question**, clearly defined by the end of your beginning. Your argument will be a nuanced response to this question, as you delve deeper into the complicated issues and discourses related to your controversy. **You will be creating a video essay that will be presented to the class** (with your narration and chosen images from the art/film/documentary/plays you have studied).

While you have freedom to structure your video essay in a variety of ways, I recommend designating one *primary* artwork (a film or a play) as the anchor for your discussion (while using additional films, plays, documentaries, and visual art as secondary evidence). Demonstrating your ability to read these artworks for explicit and implicit meaning will be a crucial part of this assignment. Pay careful attention to each artwork's significance, intention, execution, and reception.

In addition to presenting the controversy's different sides and perspectives, you must ground your theory with analysis of *at least* **FIVE WORKS OF ART** (films, plays, visual art).

As you investigate this question in the middle of your video, you should reference *at least* TWO TEXTS from your Annotated Bibliography as *turning points*. These texts should transform the way you think about the intersection of art and your chosen issue in some way. You should feel comfortable articulating the complex idea from one of these texts and using it as a lens that enables you to further develop your argument.

Principles from our course to keep in mind as you draft this essay: inductive vs. deductive reasoning, recursive movement, turning points, the development of your matrix, consideration of a counterargument, effective representative moments, relationships between form + content, experimenting with complex sentence forms, resisting either/or thinking or overly broad/unsubstantiated claims, ethical and appropriate methods of citations, crafting satisfying beginnings and endings, and recognizing different modes of artistic engagement

LENGTH FOR FINAL ESSAY FILM: BETWEEN 6-7 MINUTES (no more than 8 minutes)

For Week 6: Research and incorporate work by a visual, conceptual, or performance artist. Put notes about 2 artists in your Viewing Journal (one paragraph each with visual links). Continue developing your central question and matrix.

- Write the beginning of your essay and outline all major turning points. Include your central question and matrix. Select your main artwork, status quo, destabilizing moment, problem, placement of other works on your Matrix, and your central question.
- Then: how you will develop your argument using the rest of your artwork and evidence.
- Also: Watch and take notes in your Viewing Journal about your 5th full-length work (play, film, tv show). Try to find a work that fills an empty quadrant on your matrix.

For Week 7: Keep working on your video essay script. Aim for a complete 4-page draft

For Week 8: Final draft of script for video essay due (around 3-4 pages, double-spaced). Record the vocal track for your video essay. Assemble the video track. **Maximum length: 8 minutes**

Notes

[1]These texts include "Stereotype" by Anne Bogart (2001), "Publics and Counterpublics" by Michael Warner (2002), "Against Interpretation" by Susan Sontag (1966), "Culture" by Stephen Greenblatt (1995), as well as the following films by Bong Joon-Ho: *Parasite* (2019), *Okja* (2017), and *Snowpiercer* (2013).

[2]While not every topic is political in nature, students select issues that could spark disagreements about the underlying causes, scope, urgency, or potential solutions. Because the assignment requires students to watch five full-length works of art, certain topics (traditionally ignored by Hollywood) are unavailable for selection. A few students from previous semesters have complained about this restriction. While these concerns are valid, this unit aims to develop a theory in response to art that already exists, not art that *should* exist.

[3]I added this caveat after a semester when two students struggled to complete the assignment because they found the material they had selected too disturbing.

[4]All student writing is shared with written permission.

[5]A note on AI detection: During the first two years I taught this progression, I noticed that several students were using ChatGPT to generate pages of viewing journal notes in seconds. Because I do not want to rely on potentially flawed AI checkers to maintain a sense of integrity in my classroom and because I was spending far too much time focused on catching offenders, I now use Revision History (a Chrome add-on that provides a detailed log of how a Google Doc has evolved over time); we can see when changes were made, the nature of those changes, the number of minutes a students has spent typing, and whether the document was developed iteratively. I encourage students to download this extension and complete all of their work directly in a single Google Doc (avoiding any large copy/pastes), so they too can monitor their own process. I find that this tool supports academic integrity without policing and motivates students to approach writing as a process that necessitates brainstorming, note-taking, drafting, revision, and editing.

[6]Most students use iMovie to edit their videos, although some have used Adobe Premiere, Final Cut Pro, or CapCut. For many students, this is their first experience editing a video, a skill that they are excited to refine. When navigating these applications, they turn to YouTube tutorials, and we spend very little time in class discussing the software. I have never had a student who has not been able to deliver a finished product due to technical difficulties.

[7]Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of *South Park*, preach this essential principle for television and screenwriting (MTVU, 2011).

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.v9i2.243.

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Navigating Languages and Genres in a "Global" University

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Abstract

The reflective essay introduces the culminating project from a specific iteration of Perspectives on the Humanities, the second universally required composition course at NYU Shanghai. For this project, students investigate a self-selected term of sociocultural significance that defies smooth migration across linguistic boundaries, especially between English and Chinese. Students can convey their research and insights through one of three genres: a "traditional" argumentative essay, an extended note, or a historical narrative. Inspired in part by Raymond Williams, this assignment aims to enhance students' rhetorical, linguistic, and cultural awareness by navigating the complexities of language and genre in a globalized context.

This reflective essay introduces the culminating project for a theme-based composition course, titled Perspectives on the Humanities, that is mandatory for all New York University Shanghai undergraduate students during their third semester. The course focuses on "untranslatables," which the project prompt defines as socio-culturally significant terms that defy smooth migration across languages, particularly between English and Chinese. For the project, students apply content knowledge and composition skills acquired in the first half of the semester to explore a self-selected term as an untranslatable. They may choose this term from a curated wordlist or propose their own, subject to instructor approval. Their main task is to present their research findings and insights in one of the recommended writing genres that they determine to be most suitable for their topic. Additionally, they also submit a reflective essay where they explain their goals and the rationale behind their choice of genre.

As the prompt makes clear, the assignment is partly inspired by Raymond Williams' seminal work *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Williams, 1976/2015). Unlike other scholarly endeavors that focus on the circulation of discipline-specific terminology within academia (Bal, 2002; Culler, 2000), Williams' vocabulary is "significantly not the specialized vocabulary of a specialized discipline . . . but a general vocabulary ranging from strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday language to words, which, beginning in specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience" (Williams, 1976/2015, p. xxvii). The suggested terms in the prompt cover a similar range. While some readily find use in specialized areas, they all retain significance as verbal vectors of general social and cultural change.

However, the assignment diverges from Williams' project by shifting the focus from the complexity of linguistic evolution within a primary language or cultural tradition, (namely English), to the complexity of interlinguistic transfer evident in the translation of specific words (or the verbal representation of particular concepts) from English, or other European languages, to Chinese, often via Japanese in the modern era, and vice versa. Notably, the distinctions between the two approaches—interlinguistic and intralinguistic—are not always clear-cut, as the semantic complexity of terms in one language often complicates their transfer into another. Essentially, this assignment invites students to extend Williams' efforts by bringing other

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languages into their terminological investigations in order to address the issue of translatability in intercultural studies.

Different Languages

The awareness that terms and concepts do not easily cross linguistic borders is not new. In the West, it dates back at least two centuries to German scholars such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his seminal 1813 essay "On the Different Methods of Translating," for instance, Schleiermacher (2012) observed that in philosophy, more than in other domains,

> any language . . . encompasses within itself a single system of concepts which, precisely because they are contiguous, linking and complementing one another within this language, form a single whole—whose several parts, however, do not correspond to those to be found in comparable systems in other languages, and this is scarcely excluding 'God' and 'to be,' the noun of nouns and the verb of verbs. (pp. 59-60)

This insight resonates with the mid-twentieth-century Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits a connection between linguistic structures and the worldviews of their users. Although extreme interpretations of this thesis have been largely abandoned by scholars in relevant fields, its moderate versions have gained traction in recent years (Boroditsky, 2011; Deutscher, 2010). Philosopher Charles Taylor (2016), for instance, contends that the issues raised by the thesis of linguistic relativity are "most pertinent and alive . . . when we are looking at divergent ethical or religious ways of life, or distinct political structure and social imaginaries" (p. 328), for in those cases, we are not dealing with universally shared physical realities but distinct human realities that are shaped by and reflected in the languages we use. Taylor further notes that these differences exist not only between languages but also manifest themselves among modes of diversity of discourse within languages.

The untranslatables assignment is designed, in part, to help our linguistically diverse students gain firsthand insight into the complexities of linguistic and cultural diversity. According to Barbara Cassin (2014), chief editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, untranslatables should not be taken literally to mean that they cannot be translated, but are

> what one keeps on (not) translating . . . [because] their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem . . . [the untranslatable] is a sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual frameworks can simply be superimposed. (p. xvii)

The assignment also serves as a practical enactment of a translingual approach to teaching writing, one that is simultaneously more conservative and more progressive than approaches typically advocated by sociolinguists and literacy scholars (Canagarajah, 2012; Lu & Horner, 2013). It is more conservative because it invites students to explore cross-language relations without challenging the underlying monolingual orientation or questioning the independent status of individual languages. At the same time, it is more progressive in its emphasis on interlingual rather than intralingual practices. Unlike approaches that focus on varieties of English or the inherently translingual nature of communication through English, this assignment centers on the productive challenges of cross-language communication, spotlighting individual terms and expressions with sociocultural significance.

As an illustration in class, I use Lydia Liu's (2004) classic theorization of the super-sign *yi*/barbarian. The Chinese term yi was banned in a treaty signed between the Qing government and the British in the aftermath of the Second Opium War (1856-1860) due to its presumed

connotation of "barbarian," which the British claimed insulted their honor. Liu's argument is that regardless of the semantic complexity of yi, the British interpreted it narrowly and used that interpretation as a pretext for their aggression against the Qing. This imposition was so effective that it not only led to the disappearance of yi as a reference to foreign others, whether neutral or derogatory, but reshaped Western perceptions of traditional Chinese views on the outside world and gave rise to the "theory of Chinese xenophobia that has prevailed for so long in modern historiography" (Liu, 2004, p. 39). Yi/barbarian is thus a super-sign in that the meaning of one term ("barbarian") is superimposed as the signified of the other, but in the context of the class, yi is also an untranslatable because of its cultural importance and its semantic richness. As we continue to talk about Chinese relations with the external world, we continue to find it difficult to capture yi's full complexity through a single English word.

For the final project, the multilinguals in the class are encouraged to probe such problematic cases linking two or multiple terms from different languages, particularly Chinese and English. This is feasible in the specific demographic and linguistic context of NYU Shanghai, where English is the primary language of instruction, yet the majority of students are Chinese nationals. Non-Chinese students, on the other hand, typically complete a four-semester Chinese language program during their first two years. By the time they enroll in Perspectives on Humanities, most have gained sufficient exposure to engage with Chinese terms without undue intimidation. With such an audience, it would feel pedagogically inadequate to dwell solely on intralingual practices. Instead, I aim to strike a balance by encouraging native Chinese speakers who are all functionally competent in English and other multilinguals to shuttle productively between the languages they know well while making allowances to ensure that monolingual English speakers don't feel disadvantaged. Through listening to peer presentations, responding thoughtfully, and reviewing each other's work, students in such a class not only engage in serious intellectual exploration of course topics, but collaboratively create a pedagogical environment that reflects the ethos of a "global" university, as NYU brands itself (New York University, n.d.).

Multiple Genres

The second key feature of the assignment is its emphasis on specificity in the academic genres students should use to present their research and ideas. They can choose from three options: (i) a "traditional" argumentative essay; (ii) a substantial note or entry modeled after Williams' (1976/2015) notes on keywords such as "culture" or "society"; or (iii) a narrative essay exploring the process by which a foreign concept is assimilated into another language or culture. Why these three? One way to understand the options is to see them as a means of helping students develop a more nuanced understanding of what is often vaguely referred to as "academic writing." Gerald Graff (2004) once claimed that "all academics, despite their many differences, play a version of the same game of *persuasive argument*," which he terms "arguespeak" (pp. 21-22). Be that as it may, it would be an oversimplification to assume that academic writing is necessarily argumentative. As Kenneth Burke's (1974) famous parlor metaphor suggests, academics often join an ongoing conversation mid-way: then "someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance" (pp. 110-111). Yet this is not the only mode of academic operation. Oftentimes, academics may just as well steer the conversation in a new direction by sharing new perspectives or providing new information without explicitly agreeing or disagreeing with others. In those cases, they still build on other's ideas—otherwise there is no way of telling what is "new"—but they can do so without employing the tactics of attack or defense.

The prominence of argumentation as a mode of academic writing is no historical accident. Its origins are rooted in the classical concept of rhetoric as persuasive discourse. Although classical rhetoric emphasized speech, while contemporary academic argumentation is predominantly a matter of written or printed words, the continuities and connections remain undeniable. In contrast, modes of writing centered on information processing and sharing are relatively modern developments. Historians of rhetoric and composition trace these modes back to the early modern period, emerging alongside the rise of science, when natural philosophers, such as Thomas Sprat and John Locke, advocated for a discourse characterized by clear, accurate, and objective description and explanation rather than one that uses "encrustations of verbal ornament to try to mold mere opinions" (Connors, 1997, p. 211). Recently, the antagonistic relationship between this new discourse and the old rhetoric has been explicitly addressed by John Guillory (2022) who suggests that the decline and death of rhetoric as a form of knowledge (techne) in the modern world should be linked to the emergence of the idea of information as knowledge that has become completely detachable from the knower (pp. 150-153).

The research essay assignment encourages students to engage with the inherent multimodality of academic writing by prompting them to reflect on the distinctions between different academic genres. A key aspect of this reflection is understanding the crucial difference between modes and genres; at risk of excessive reduction, modes are logical constructs whereas genres, as understood in writing studies over recent decades, are rhetorical forms. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), for instance, define genres as "a typified rhetorical way of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and thus participating in the reproduction of, recurring situations" (p. 213). Notably, there is no one-to-one correspondence between modes and genres. A single genre can incorporate multiple modes, while each mode can appear across various genres. For example, an argument essay is rarely purely argumentative. It may have an argumentative framework but feature analytical or informational content in its main body. Similarly, a research-based narrative essay might well contain elements of argumentation without losing its primary status as a narrative essay. In a writing class, students need knowledge of the discursive modes in order to better conceive of and execute the genres they want to work within.

This goal explains why, in describing the three genres in the prompt, I am reluctant to prescribe rigid rules or narrowly define what each should look like but prefer to proceed inductively by redirecting students' attention to the generic features of course readings that can serve as models for imitation. In doing so, I follow the advice of scholars like Amy Devitt (2004) who advises teaching genres as "both constraint and choice so that individual awareness can lead to individual creativity" (p. 191). In other words, in handling any genre, writing instructors should address both its governing norms and its inherent flexibility, and strike a balance between recognizing constraints and empowering writers to adapt the genre to their content and rhetorical goals. Take, for example, the relatively well-defined genre of the dictionary entry. Students should understand that they must remain invisible throughout, avoiding the first person as an unwelcome intrusion, and strive to convey information fairly and in an unbiased tone, following guidelines such as Wikipedia's policy on neutrality, which states that writers may "describe disputes, but not engage in them" ("Wikipedia," 2025, para. 4). Yet, even within these boundaries, there is still significant room for creativity and variation, particularly in deciding how to frame the entry's focus or emphasize specific details.

Two Illustrations

To conclude, I will briefly examine two successful student projects that demonstrate how the themes of translation and genre intersect in the translingual practices fostered by this

assignment, projects I actively engaged with as a co-participant throughout their research and drafting processes. The first project focused on the frequently used Chinese term *yuan* 缘, which has its roots in Buddhist philosophy but has evolved to signify the idea of a preordained connection between people, events, or circumstances, often imbued with a sense of inevitability. Commonly translated as "fate," "destiny," or "serendipity," the term, however, fits the category of "simple untranslatables" named in the assignment prompt, as it lacks a near equivalent in English. While the student was very aware of the translational gap surrounding this word, and hence her word choice, she initially struggled to identify the thesis of her essay, a challenge many students face when rethinking their rigid yet vague notions of what academic writing ought to be. It is only through the examples provided by Williams (1976/2015) and Cassin (2014), which she learned to approach as writings belonging to a distinct genre, that she recognized that an encyclopedia-style entry does not necessitate a traditional thesis statement in the same way an argumentative essay does. Instead of looking for an argument in the narrow sense, she decided eventually to concentrate her writerly energies on addressing key factual questions: What did yuan originally mean as a Buddhist term? What factors contributed to its evolution into an everyday term? How do contemporary conditions further complicate its use and understanding especially among today's youth, with their growing sense of control and individualism on the one hand and their passivity in an increasingly competitive urban environment on the other? It turns out that these questions served as a foundation for her inquiry and helped her identify a logical structure for her entry.

The second student chose the contemporary Chinese term for democracy, *minzhu* 民主, and was keen to explore the tensions surrounding the nature of the Chinese regime. He initially framed his inquiry as a response to a polarized debate: Is China's regime authoritarian and therefore bad, as Western critics argue, or is it meritocratic and more authentically democratic, as its defenders claim, given the government's professed mission to "serve the people"? Yet he was held back from pursuing this topic for two reasons: his lack of confidence in his ability to tackle such a politically charged topic persuasively, and his struggle to connect it to the theme of translation. He ultimately overcame these challenges by shifting focus from the polemical aspects of the topic to its factual and translational dimensions. Recognizing that China's discourse on minzhu has been shaped by Western ideas of democracy, he reframed his project around critical questions: How did minzhu become the accepted translation of democracy? Who introduced the concept into Chinese political thought? How did they understand it? How was the term instrumental in driving political transformation in China? These questions, he realized, were critical prerequisites for any substantive discussion of the contemporary Chinese political system, and addressing them would constitute his contribution to the conversation. And since his writerly focus was not primarily on the evolving meanings of a term, but on the figures from the late Qing to the early twentieth century (W. A. P. Martin, Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, and Mao Zedong) and on how their ideas, aspirations, and struggles shaped the term's trajectory, it was natural for him to adopt the historical narrative as his genre.

The selection of these student samples is deliberate, not random. They illustrate, albeit implicitly, as many students have come to realize in completing their projects, that the traditional argumentative essay is neither the sole nor necessarily the most prevalent form of academic writing, contrary to their long-held assumptions. These projects also prompt students to see English not as a frictionless vehicle for global communication, but as a site of complexity shaped by cultural and linguistic particularities. While such insights may not really surprise multilingual students in a diverse writing classroom, they are particularly striking in an era saturated with news and hands-on experiences of artificial intelligence's linguistic prowess. In a moment when AI appears capable of delivering seamless, fully automated translation, these reflections on the

generative potential of untranslatability offer a timely reminder of the enduring importance of cultural difference in an ostensibly flattened world.

ASSIGNMENT

Untranslatables

The task for the final project is to investigate an untranslatable of your choice: i.e. a socially or culturally significant term or concept that does not easily migrate across linguistic boundaries without undergoing significant changes or transformations. They are "keywords" in Raymond Williams' sense, and should be approached as such.

However, our focus is not on the history of conceptual evolution within one language or cultural tradition, but on the complexity or difficulty of interlinguistic transfer. This is where Lydia Liu's notion of super-signs becomes relevant, for in many cases, what you will be dealing with are hetero-linguistic signs that are thought to be semantically equivalent or interchangeable, and yet whose equivalence or interchangeability, upon closer examination, is established on problematic grounds. The three compound terms God/Shangdi, yi/barbarian, and China/Zhongguo all belong in this category. We can easily expand this list to include others that are equally complex and worth investigating: art/yishu 艺术, economy/jingji 经济, feudal/fengjian 封建, humor/youmo 幽默, logic/luoji 逻辑, nature/ziran 自然, race/zhong or zhongzu 种族, right/quanli 权利, romantic/langman 浪漫, science/kexue 科学. . . If you have no particular word in mind, feel free to choose from this list. However, these are not the only possibilities for the project. Simple untranslatables, words that present difficulties in translation from one language into another, do exist. For example, gender or sexuality does not have an easily recognizable "equivalent" in Chinese while Chinese concepts such as *guanxi* or *minzu* have entered English untranslated. These are no less suitable for the project than the "super-signs" mentioned above.

If English is the only language you are proficient enough in to explore linguistic nuances, you can instead investigate how everyday words take on specialized meanings, how these meanings vary across different fields of knowledge, and how they, in turn, influence common usage. For instance, the word "romantic" in everyday language may differ significantly from its meaning during the "Romantic" period; "realism" conveys one set of ideas in literature and the arts but something quite different in business or politics; in philosophy, "identity" holds meanings that are often far removed from its current everyday usage. Can you clarify these differences through the perspective of historical semantics, as Williams does in *Keywords*?

Genre

This is again your choice, which should depend on your writerly goal, your target audience, and the information you are able to gather through your research. You may do any of the following:

- Craft an argumentative essay on a super-sign, aiming to expose the underlying issues in equating the terms that form this super-sign (Liu/Wong);
- Develop a substantial note/entry on a keyword or a cluster of words used across multiple areas or contexts, with the goal to explicate their semantic differences (Williams/Auvray-Assayas);
- Write a historical narrative detailing how a foreign concept was first introduced into another language or culture and how it eventually found a semantic "equivalent" there (Hayton/Wu).

The final submission will include both the main project and a reflection in which you discuss your

goals and the rationale behind your choice of genre. In the reflection, explain what motivated you to select this particular genre over the other options, why it is an effective medium for presenting your research findings, and how your choice of genre influenced the content or structure of your writing.

Basic Requirements

- Main text: 5-10 pages
- Reflection: 2-5 pages
- Research: Use a minimum of 5 academic sources
- Format: MLA or Chicago

Please note: The total page count, including both the main text and reflection, should be at least 10 pages.

GenAI use

You can NOT use GenAI to compose any part of the essay. While you may seek limited language support such as asking for an alternative word choice, you must never use it to revise or polish your essay. You will not receive a higher grade for sentence-level fluency if it is suspected that GenAI was used. More importantly, copy-pasting AI-generated content or language constitutes academic dishonesty. Any suspected instance of GenAI-related plagiarism will be reported, and depending on the severity of the violation, may result in penalties ranging from grade deductions to failure of the essay or course.

Evaluation Criteria

- Goal-Genre-Audience fitness
- Depth of understanding and critical insight
- Organization and paragraph development
- Use of research findings
- Clarity and effectiveness of language
- Citation and format

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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.v9i2.241.

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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

prompt
a journal of academic writing assignments

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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 reported[1] 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

[1]This 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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