

The Subject Is **Writing**

Essays by Teachers and Students

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Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes or One Reader's Confession

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In some ways I see this essay as a confession. I have been teaching writing and theorizing about how it should be taught for almost fifteen years now. During those fifteen years, you, the students reading this essay, have been in school, taking English classes and writing compositions. I have been teaching those classes and reading those compositions; plus I've been teaching some of your teachers for the past ten years, and so I feel responsible to you even though I've never had you in one of my classes. Now I'm going to tell you something you might already know. Since you started school in the first grade, there's been a revolution in the way you've been "taught" to write. It used to be that teachers focused on and evaluated your writing according to two main things: its structure and its correctness. Those were the days of diagramming sentences and imitating types of organization. In the 1960s and '70s, however,

many people who studied writing began to talk about teaching the “process” of writing rather than the “products” of writing. In other words, the focus has shifted in the 1980s from organization and correctness to generating ideas, appealing to audiences, and developing a “voice” in writing.

Composition or “rhetoric” as it used to be called, is an ancient discipline going all the way back at least to Plato and Aristotle in the third century BCE. You are the most recent in a long, long line of students sitting in classes where teachers assign writing tasks and evaluate your ability. In ancient times, the art of writing was divided into five steps: invention (coming up with ideas), arrangement (organizing them), style (making them sound right), memory (remembering speeches), and delivery (oratorical ability). One way to think about the history of writing instruction is to look at the different emphases that different eras have put on these five steps. Today, with computers and photocopy machines, we don’t worry much anymore about memory, for example, but it was terribly important in the time before the printing press. And we don’t “deliver” what we write orally very much anymore, although the kind of font you choose from your word-processing program might be considered a matter of delivery. Of course all writers have to think about invention, arrangement, and style, no matter what age they work in. However, different eras have emphasized different parts of composition. Plato and Aristotle were upset by what they saw as an enchantment with style; they worried that writers could dazzle audiences without caring much about telling them the truth. And so they focused on invention, on figuring out issues by thinking and writing. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the focus had shifted back to style, going so far as giving students manuals that provided hundreds of ways to say “I enjoyed your letter very much.” How a person sounded was more important than what a person had to say.

I see the shift from “product” to “process” while you’ve been in school as a reaction to that overemphasis on style. Once again, the focus has changed back to make *invention* the most important step in composition. Writing teachers who are up-to-date these days (including me) tell you (our students) not to worry, for example, about grammar or spelling or organization as you write your early drafts. We invite you to choose your own topics for writing and to get feedback from responsive small groups in your classes. We don’t grade individual papers, but instead ask you to write multiple drafts and submit for final evaluation the ones you think best represent you as a writer. We don’t lecture on punctuation or topic sentences. It’s what you say, not how you say it, that counts. No doubt you all are familiar with this kind of teaching—I doubt you’d be reading this essay right now if you weren’t in a class with a thoroughly “new rhetoric” teacher. Obviously this whole collection is focused on the *processes* of writing, the main theme of writing instruction in the 1980s.

But here comes my confession. Your teacher, and I, and all the others who were part of this latest revolution in rhetoric, haven’t been exactly honest with you about the matter of style. We say we aren’t overly interested in style, that

your ideas and your growth as writers is uppermost in our minds, but we are still influenced by your writing style more than we admit, or perhaps know. In other words, despite all the research and writing I've done in the past ten years about composing, revising, responding, contexts for writing, personal voice, and all I know about the new rhetoric, I'm still rewarding and punishing my students for their writing styles. And here's the worst part of my confession: I'm not sure that I'm teaching them style. Of course any teacher quickly realizes that she can't teach everything in one semester, but I worry that I'm responding to something in my students' writing that I'm not telling them about—their style, the sound of their voices on paper. This essay is my attempt to atone for that omission in my own teaching. Despite that selfish motive, I also want to suggest to you ways in which you might become aware of your own writing styles and your teachers' agendas about style, as well as show you some strategies for studying and improving your own style in writing.

Let me stop to define what I mean and what I don't mean by "style." I don't mean spelling, grammar, punctuation, or usage, although if I'm going to be completely honest, I'd have to tell you that mistakes along those lines do get in my way when I'm reading. But those can be fixed, easily, by editing and copyreading. By style, I mean what my student, Margaret, said last semester after another student, Paul, had read a paper out loud for the whole class. She got this longing look on her face and cried, "I want to write the way Paul does!" You know students like Paul. He's clever, he surprises with his different perspectives on his topics, and he has a distinctive voice. I call this "writing where somebody's home," as opposed to writing that's technically correct but where there's "nobody home," no life, no voice. Let me give you some examples of these two kinds of voices.

Much Too Young to Be So Old

The neighborhood itself was old. Larger than most side streets, 31st Street had huge cracks that ran continuously from one end to the other of this gray track that led nowhere special. Of the large, lonely looking houses, there were only six left whose original structures hadn't been tampered with in order to make way for inexpensive apartments. Why would a real family continue to live in this place was a question we often asked and none of us could answer. Each stretch of the run-down rickety houses had an alley behind them. These alleys became homes, playgrounds, and learning areas for us children. We treasured these places. They were overgrown with weeds and filled with years of garbage, but we didn't seem to care. Then again, we didn't seem to care about much. (Amy)

The Dog

In 1980 I lived in a green split level house. It was a really ugly green but that is beside the point. The neighborhood was really rather pretty, with trees all over the place and not just little trees. They were huge. My friends and I

played football in my backyard right after school every day. The neighbors had a white toy poodle that barked forever. You would walk by the fence and it would bark at you. I had no idea whatsoever that the dog was mean.

(Corey)

Even though both these writers begin these essays by describing the settings of their stories, and both end with a suggestion of what's coming next, Amy's opening paragraph appeals to me much more than Corey's. I could point out "flaws" in both openings: I think Corey's suffers from lack of concrete detail, and he takes a pretty long time telling us only that the trees were "huge." Amy uses too much passive voice ("hadn't been tampered with"). However, I'm much more drawn into the world of 31st Street than I am to the neighborhood with huge trees. And I think that's because I know more about Amy from this opening—her words and her rhythm evoke a bittersweet expectation in me—whereas I'm not sure what Corey's up to. In other words, I get the distinct feeling that Amy really wants to tell her readers about her childhood. I don't see that kind of commitment in Corey. I know Corey's going to write a dog story, and usually those are my favorites, but somehow I don't very much want to read on.

But teachers have to read on, and on and on, through hundreds and hundreds of drafts a semester. So I can't just say to Corey, "This is boring." And, being a believer in the "new rhetoric," I'm interested in the process that leads to these two different styles. How does Amy come up with this voice? Was she born clever? And why does Corey make the decision to take himself out of his writing? I can think of many reasons why he would choose to be safe; in fact, he admitted to me later in that course that he had "copped out," choosing to write in what he called his "safe, public style" rather than take chances with what he thought was a more risky, personal style. That makes sense, if you consider the history of writing instruction up until the last fifteen to twenty years. Certainly it's been better to get it right, to avoid mistakes, than to get it good, to try for a voice. And it makes sense that Corey wouldn't want to expose his personal style—writing classrooms traditionally have not been places where students have felt safe. Writing and then showing that writing to someone else for evaluation and response is risky, a lot like asking "Am I OK? Am I a person you want to listen to?"

And so, to play it safe in a risky environment, it's tempting to take on a voice that isn't yours, to try to sound like you know what you're talking about, to sound "collegiate," to be acceptable and accepted. There's also a sort of mystique about "college writing," both in composition courses and in other disciplines. To write in college, this thinking goes, means to be "objective," to make your own opinions, your own stake in the subject, completely out of your writing. That's why people write, "It is to be hoped that" rather than, "I hope" or, "There are many aspects involved" rather than, "This is complicated." And then there's also a real fear of writing badly, of being thought stupid, and so

it's tempting simply to be bland and safe and not call too much attention to yourself.

And teachers have encouraged you, I think, to remain hidden behind your own prose. Remember when you got a "split grade" like this: "C+/B"? One grade for content and another for style. That sends a clear message, I think, that what you say and how you say it can be separated and analyzed differently. That's crazy—we can't split form and content. But teachers tend to encourage you to do that when they ask you to read an essay by Virginia Woolf or E. B. White from an anthology and then tell you to "write like that." Or, we teachers have been so concerned with form that we've discouraged you from real communication with another person. One of my students just yesterday described her English classes this way: "I wanted to learn how to write and they were trying to teach me what my writing should look like." Preoccupation with correctness, with organization, and with format (margins, typing, neatness, etc.), all get in the way of style and voice. So, too, do prearranged assignments, where each student in the class writes the same essay on the same subject ("Compare high school to college," "Discuss the narrator's attitude in this short story," "My most embarrassing moment"). Such assignments become exercises in competition, in one sense, because you've got somehow to set yourself apart from the rest of the essays your teacher will be reading. But they are also exercises in becoming invisible, for while you want to be noticed, you don't want to be too terribly different, to stick out like a sore thumb. And so you write safely, not revealing too much or taking many chances.

I used to teach that way, giving assignments, comparing one student with another and everyone with the "ideal" paper I imagined in my head (although I never tried writing with my students in those days) correcting mistakes and arriving at a grade for each paper. The new rhetoric classes I teach now have eliminated many of these traps for students, but I've also opened up new ones, I'm afraid. Now my students choose their own topics, writing whatever they want to write. And sometimes I'm simply not interested in their choices. In the old days, when I gave the assignment, naturally I was interested in the topic—it was, after all, *my* idea. Now I read about all sorts of things every week—my students' families, their cars, the joys and sorrows in their love lives, their athletic victories and defeats, their opinions on the latest upcoming election, their thoughts about the future, etc. Frankly, I don't approach each of these topics in the same way. For example, a dog story almost always interests me, while a car story might not. Or, a liberal reading of the latest campus debate on women's issues will grab my attention much more quickly than a fundamentalist interpretation. That's simply the truth. But, as a teacher of "process," I try my best to get interested in whatever my students are writing. And, I'm usually delighted by how much my students can move me with their ideas. So what makes me interested? I'm convinced it has to do with their style. And here I'm defining style not simply as word choice or sentence structure, but as a kind of

“presence” on the page, the feeling I get as a reader that, indeed, somebody’s home in this paper, somebody wants to say something—to me, to herself, to the class, to the community.

Mine is not the only response students receive in this kind of classroom. Each day, students bring copies of their work-in-progress to their small groups. They read their papers out loud to each other, and we practice ways of responding to each writer that will keep him or her writing, for starts, and that will help the writer see what needs to be added, changed, or cut from the draft. This can get pretty tricky. It’s been my experience that showing your writing to another student, to a peer, can be much more risky than showing it to a teacher. We’ve all had the experience of handing in something we knew was terrible to a teacher, and it’s not so painful. People will give writing to teachers that they’d never show to someone whose opinion they valued. But sitting down in a small group with three or four classmates and saying, “I wrote this. What do you think?” is, again, like asking “Do you like me? Am I an interesting person?” And so my classes practice ways of responding to one another’s writing without being overly critical, without taking control of the writing out of the writer’s hands, and without damaging egos. And they become quite sophisticated as the semester goes along. Still, one of the worst moments in a small group comes when someone reads a draft and the rest of the group responds like this: “It’s OK. I don’t see anything wrong with it. It seems pretty good.” And then silence. In other words, the writer hasn’t grabbed their attention, hasn’t engaged the readers, hasn’t communicated in any meaningful way. What’s the difference between this scenario and one where the group comes back with responses like “Where did you get that idea? I really like the way you describe the old man. This reminds me of my grandfather. I think you’re right to notice his hands”? I think the difference is in *style*, in the presence of a writer in a group who is honestly trying to communicate to his or her readers.

But I know I still haven’t been exactly clear about what I mean by style. That’s part of my dilemma, my reason for wanting to write this essay. All of us, teachers and students, recognize good style when we hear it, but I don’t know what we do to foster it. And so for the rest of this essay I want to talk to you about how to work on your own writing styles, to recognize and develop your own individual voice in writing, and how to listen for your teachers’ agendas in style. Because, despite our very natural desires to remain invisible in academic settings, you *want* to be noticed; you want to be the voice that your teacher becomes interested in. I think I’m telling you that your style ultimately makes the difference. And here I’m talking about not only your writing styles, but the reading styles of your audiences, the agendas operating in the contexts in which you write.

I’ll start backward with agendas first. There are several main issues that I think influence English teachers when they are reading students’ writing. First, we have a real bent for the literary element, the metaphor, the clever turn of phrase, the rhythm of prose that comes close to the rhythm of poetry. That’s

why I like sentences like these: “As the big night approached I could feel my stomach gradually easing its way up to my throat. I was as nervous as a young foal experiencing its first thunderstorm” (from an essay about barrel racing) and “Suddenly the University of Nebraska Cornhusker Marching Band takes the field for another exciting half-time performance, and the Sea of Red stands up *en masse* and goes to the concession stand” (from an essay about being in the band). I like the surprise in this last sentence, the unexpectedness of everyone leaving the performance, and I like the comparison to a young foal in the first one, especially since the essay is about horses. I tell my students to “take chances” in their writing. I think these two writers were trying to do just that. And I liked them for taking that chance.

But you don’t want to take chances everywhere. Of course this kind of writing won’t work in a biology lab report or a history exam, which brings me to another troublesome issue when we talk about style in college writing. You move among what composition researchers call “discourse communities” every day—from English to Biology to Sociology to Music to the dorm to family dinners to friends at bars—you don’t talk or write the same way, or in the same voice to each of these groups. You adjust. And yet many professors still believe that you should be learning to write one certain kind of style in college, one that’s objective, impersonal, formal, explicit, and organized around assertions, claims, and reasons that illustrate or defend those claims. You know this kind of writing. You produce it in response to questions like “Discuss the causes of the Civil War,” or “Do you think that ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’ plays the most important role in a child’s development?” Here’s a student trying out this kind of “academic discourse” in an essay where he discusses what worries him:

Another outlet for violence in our society is video games. They have renewed the popularity that they had earlier in the 1980’s and have taken our country by storm. There is not one child in the country who doesn’t know what a Nintendo is. So, instead of running around outside getting fresh air and exercise, most children are sitting in front of the television playing video games. This is affecting their minds and their bodies.

Why wouldn’t Jeff just say “Video games are popular again” instead of saying that “they have renewed their popularity” or “Kids are getting fat and lazy” rather than “This is affecting their minds and bodies?” Besides using big words here, Jeff is also trying to sound absolutely knowledgeable: he states that every child in this country knows Nintendo, they are all playing it, when if he thought about that for a minute, he’d know it wasn’t true. I don’t like this kind of writing very much myself. Jeff is trying so hard to sound academic that “there’s nobody home,” no authentic voice left, no sense of a real human being trying to say something to somebody. I prefer discourse that “renders experience,” as Peter Elbow (1991) puts it, rather than discourse that tries to explain it. He describes this kind of language (or style) as writing where a writer “conveys to others a sense of experience—or indeed, that mirrors back

to themselves a sense of their own experience, from a little distance, once it's out there on paper" (137). Here's an example of that kind of "rendering" from Paul's essay about a first date:

Her mother answers the door. My brain says all kinds of witty and charming things which my larynx translates in a sort of amphibious croak. (Ribbitt, Ribbitt. I can't remember what it was I actually attempted to say.) She materializes at the top of the stairs, cast in a celestial glow. A choir of chubby cherubim, voices lifted into a heavenly chorus, drape her divine body with a thin film of gossamer. (No, not really. She did look pretty lovely, though. I tried to tell her as much. Ribbitt. Ribbitt.)

Now, perhaps Paul goes too far here, trying a little too hard to be clever, but I like this better than the discussion of video games. (And not just because I like the topic of dating better—since I've gotten married, I don't date anymore and I confess I'm addicted to Mario Brothers 3). Paul here is conveying the *feeling* of the moment, the sense of the experience, and he's complicating the memory by moving back and forth between the moment and his interpretation of it. In other words, he's letting me into the story, not explaining something to me. Paul is involved in what he's writing while Jeff is detached. And Paul's funny. Besides dog stories, I like humor in my students' writing.

Now, this brings me to another issue in the matter of style. I prefer the rendering style over the explanatory style, perhaps because I'm an English major and an English teacher, and therefore I like the allusion over the direct reference, description over analysis, narrative over exposition. But perhaps there's another reason I like the more personal style: I'm a woman. There's a whole body of recent research which suggests that men and women have different writing styles, among all sorts of other differences. Theorists such as Pamela Annas and Elizabeth Flynn suggest that women writers in academic situations often are forced to translate their experiences into the foreign language of objectivity, detachment, and authority that the male-dominated school system values. Women strive for connection, this thinking argues, while men value individual power. Feminist theory values writing that "brings together the personal and the political, the private and the public, into writing which is committed and powerful because it takes risks, because it speaks up clearly in their own voices and from their own experiences" (Annas 1985, 370; see also Flynn 1988). Here's an example of that kind of writing, an excerpt from an essay titled, "Grandma, You're Not So Young Anymore":

My grandma was always so particular about everything. Everything had to be just so. The walls and curtains had to be spotless, the garden couldn't have a weed, the kolaches had to be baked, and the car had to be washed. . . . Each spring she was always the first to have her flowers and garden planted. She could remember the littlest details about our family history and ancestors. . . . There were always kolaches in the oven and cookies in the refrigerator. . . .

I really didn't notice the aging so much at first. . . . When I would come home from college Mom would always say, "Grandma's really lonely now. Grandpa was her company, and now he's gone. You should really go and visit her more often. She won't be around forever."

I had to admit I didn't visit her all that often. . . . I didn't notice how much slower she'd gotten until Thanksgiving Day. Grandma took us to Bonanza because she didn't want to cook that much. I noticed the slower, more crippled steps she took, the larger amount of wrinkles on her face, and most of all, her slowed mental abilities. She sometimes had trouble getting words out as if she couldn't remember what she wanted to say. She couldn't decide what foods she wanted to eat, and when she did eat, she hardly touched a thing. I didn't think my grandma would ever get old. Now I don't think she will last forever anymore.

Here, Deanna uses her own experience and observations to go on and talk about how the elderly are treated in our culture. She could have written a statistical report on nursing homes or a more formal argument about how Americans don't value their old people. But she chose instead to draw from her own life and therefore she draws me into her argument about the "frustration" of getting old. I like old people, and I can identify this woman's deterioration with my own mother's several years ago. But I still think it's more than my personal history that draws me to this essay. I suspect it's Deanna's willingness to explore her own experience on paper. Deanna definitely needs to work on editing this draft to improve her style (something more specific, for example, than "larger amounts of wrinkles" and "slowed mental abilities"). But she doesn't need to work to improve her style in the sense of her commitment to this topic, her presence on the page, or her desire to figure out and to explain her reaction to her grandmother's aging.

Each of these three issues might lead me to advise you that you should write metaphors for English teachers, formal explanations for male teachers in other disciplines, and personal narratives for your women professors. But you know that would be silly, simplistic advice about style. You have to maneuver every day through a complex set of expectations, some of which aren't made explicit, and the whole idea of teacher-as-audience is much more complex than simply psyching out a teacher's background or political agenda. "Style" in writing means different things to different people. I have to be honest and admit that my definition of style as presence on paper is simply my own definition. I hope this essay will lead you to your own thinking about what style means, in all contexts. But I am going to end by giving you some advice about your own style in writing anyway—the teacher in me can't resist. That advice is: Work on your style without thinking about school too much. Here are five suggestions to help you do this.

In School or Out, Write as if You're Actually Saying Something to Somebody. Even if you're not exactly sure who your audience is, try to imagine a real

person who's interested in what you have to say. Probably the most important thing I can tell you about working on your style is: Think of your writing as actually saying something to somebody real. Too often in academics we can imagine no audience at all, or at the most an audience with evaluation on its mind, not real interest or response. When I'm able to get interested in my students' writing, no matter what the topic, it's because I hear someone talking to me. My colleague Rick Evans calls this kind of writing "talking on paper," and if you keep that metaphor in mind, I think you'll more often avoid the kind of "academese" or formal language that signals you're hiding or you've disappeared.

I can illustrate the difference in style I'm talking about through two journals that Angie gave me at the beginning and the end of a composition and literature course last year. All through the course, I asked students to write about how the novels we were reading connected to their own lives:

January 24: Well, I'm confused. I haven't written a paper for an English class that wasn't a formal literary analysis since 8th grade. Now, all of a sudden, the kind of writing my teachers always said would be of no use in college *is*, and what they said *would* be, *isn't*. Go figure. Now, if Kate had asked me to churn out a paper on some passage or symbol in *Beloved*—even one of my own choosing—I could get out 5–8 (handwritten) pages easy. But this life stuff? Who wants to know about that anyway?

May 1: This portfolio represents the work closest to my guts. It's *my* story, not *Beloved's* or Carlos Rueda's. I hasten to point out that this may not be my best work or even my favorite work, but it's the work that sings my song. My goal was to communicate a set of ideas, to spark a dialogue with *you*, as my reader, to inspire you to think about *what* I have written, not *how* I have written it. So here it is, bound in plastic, unified, in a manner, ready for reading. I hope you like what I have woven.

Notice how Angie's attitude toward me as her reader changed from January to May. At first she referred to "Kate" as if I wouldn't be reading what she had written, even though this was a journal handed in to me; later I become someone she wants to engage in a dialogue. (She had expected the kind of writing class I described at the beginning of this essay, but she found herself writing for a new rhetoric teacher.) Notice, too, how at first she talks about how she could write five to eight pages *even if she had to choose her own topic*. The implication is clear—that it's easier to write when someone else tells her what to do, what to write about. In other words, it's easier to perform rather than to communicate. Notice, finally, Angie's relationship to the literature we were reading in these two journals. At first she wants only to write about the symbols in Toni Morrison's (1987) novel, *Beloved*, focusing all her attention on the literary work and not on herself. At the end of the course, she subordinates the novels almost completely to her own stories. This is an engaged writer, one with a clear sense of her own style, her own presence.

Write Outside of School. Play with writing outside of school. You'll need to write much more than just what's assigned in your classes to develop a beautiful writing style. (Sorry, but it's true.) One of the truisms about good writers is that they are good readers; in other words, they read a lot. (And they were probably read to as kids, but we can't go into that right now.) So, here's an exercise in style that I recommend to my students. Find an author whose writing you admire. Copy out a particular, favorite passage. Then imitate that style, word for word, part-of-speech for part-of-speech. Here's an example from one of my students last semester. We were reading *Beloved*, and Sarah used its opening passage to talk about the first day of class. I'll show you Morrison's passage and then Sarah's:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873, Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more. (3)

Andrews 33 was quiet. Full of a new semester's uneasiness. The students in the room knew it and so did the teacher. For a few minutes, everyone took in the tension in their own way, but by 12:45 the roll call and Kate's lame jokes broke the ice a little bit. The course, a new program, was explained, and the syllabus, papers and papers, looked simple enough by the time Kate explained her marvelous approach—as soon as really deciding on a topic excited us (that was the reason for the authority list); as soon as four friendly voices read to each other (that was the reason for small groups). No students lingered too write more. (Sarah)

Sarah told me later that doing this imitation surprised her—she had never written with parentheses before, nor had she stopped sentences in the middle this way (“the syllabus, papers and papers”). She wasn't sure she liked this imitation, but it showed her she could write in different ways. And playing with different voices on paper will help you make choices about your own style in different situations.

Read Your Work-in-progress out Loud, Preferably to a Real Person. Looking back over this essay, I realize that so much of what I've said about style revolves around the sense of sound. Teachers have good ears, and so do you. Listen to your own voice as you read out loud. Do you sound like a person talking to someone? Or a student performing for a grade?

Practice Cutting All the Words You Can out of Your Drafts and Starting from There. This is one of the hardest things for any writer to do, and yet I think it's one of the most effective ways to make your writing more interesting. Most

of the time there are simply too many words getting in the way of your meaning, making too much noise for you to be heard. Look closely at your drafts and be hard on yourself. Let me give you a few quick examples:

The first thing that really upsets me is the destruction of our environment due to ignorance, capitalism, and blindness in the world. The attitude that most people take is that by ignoring the problem it will go away. An example of this attitude is the turnout for elections in America.

Revision: Ignorance, capitalism, and blindness destroy our environment. Most people look the other way. Many don't even vote.

Once Jim revised this opening sentence from an essay on what worries him, he realized that he hadn't said much yet and that he was moving way too quickly. He learned that he had several ideas he felt strongly about, ideas worth slowing down to develop. Here are two more examples:

I also think that we need to provide more opportunities for the homeless to receive an education so they can compete in today's job market. Another reason for educating these people is because the increasing numbers of unemployed persons is a factor that is contributing to homelessness in our country. There are declining employment opportunities for unskilled labor in today's job market, and since many homeless are unskilled laborers, they are not able to acquire a decent job. Therefore they cannot afford to buy a home. I think it is critical that these people be educated if the homeless problem in our country is going to be resolved.

Revision: We need to educate the homeless so they can compete in a market where jobs are becoming more scarce.

There are so many things that a person can fill their mind with. I find that when talking with friends the majority of their thoughts are filled with worries. I don't really believe that it is all negative to worry unless it becomes an obsession. So many people are worried about so many different things. Some of which are personal while others are more societal. When I try to figure out what worries me most I find it to be on a more personal level.

Revision: I'm sort of worried that I worry so much about myself.

Each of these last two writers realized that they hadn't said much of anything yet in their initial drafts. Going back to cut words, asking themselves questions about what they meant to say to a reader, allowed them to start over with a different, clearer perspective. I know this isn't easy, especially in school, where you've been trained to "write 1000 words" and, by God, you'll write 1000 words whether you have one or 1000 words to say on the subject. Try to stop padding and counting words in the margins. Cut words. This is probably the most practical piece of advice I have.

Finally, Write About Your Own Writing Style. Keep a record of your reactions to what you write, a list of your favorite sentences, and a reaction to the reactions you get from readers. Most of all, forgive yourself for writing badly from time to time. One of my professors in graduate school told me that I was capable of writing “awkward word piles,” and here I am with the nerve to be writing an essay to you about style. I’ve tried to practice what I preach, and now I’m suggesting that you throw out more than you keep and to notice and remember what works for you. Writing about your own writing is another piece of practical advice.

This is really my last word: don’t let *me* fool you here. Even though I understand what Angie meant in her last journal to me about my being more interested in what she has to say than *how* she said it, I’m still very in tune with the *how*, with her style, I’m happy that her focus has moved away from me as evaluator toward herself as a creator. But I’m still influenced by her style. Don’t forget that. And I’m happy that the emphasis in composition has shifted from style back to invention. But I still reward and punish style in my reactions to students’ writings. Yes, I try to be an interested reader, but my agendas also include listening for the sound of prose I like.

I suppose what I’m really confessing to you all in this essay is that I am not only a teacher, but I’m also a reader, with her own tastes, preferences, and phobias about what I like to read. And, as a reader, I look for style. There’s a play that I love that I think can show you what I mean by style, by presence in writing. *The Real Thing*, by Tom Stoppard (1983) is about real love and real life, but it’s also about real writing. At about the end of Act One, Henry, the playwright/hero, talks about good writing. He’s picked up a cricket bat (could be a Louisville slugger, but this play is set in London) to make his point. (Read this out loud and listen to the sound):

This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It’s for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you’ve done is give it a knock like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a fly. What we’re trying to do is write cricket bats, so then when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . *travel*. (22)

This image has stayed with me for seven years, ever since I first saw and read Stoppard’s play, and it’s an idea that I think all writers and readers understand. “Ideas traveling”—surely that’s what I want for myself as a writer and for my students. I love the image of the dance floor too—the idea of a piece of writing as an invitation to movement, a place to join with others, a site of communal passion and joy. But I don’t think people in school always think of writing as something that travels, or as a dance floor, and I would like somehow to help you a little toward Henry’s vision. Later in the same speech he picks up a badly written play that he’s been asked to “fix” and describes it:

Now, what we've got here is a lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat, and if you hit a ball with it, the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting "Ouch!" with your hands stuck in your armpits (23).

I've read writing, my own and my students' and professionals', that makes me want to do this different kind of dancing. Many of your textbooks read like "lumps of wood," yes? Henry tells us that no amount of simple editing will fix something that has no life or passion to begin with. But how to transform lumps of wood into cricket bats? It seems to me the key lies in this play's other theme—the "real thing," meaning real love and real passion. When I encourage you to develop your style in writing, I'm inviting you into the game, onto the dance floor, encouraging you to commit yourself to your ideas and to your readers. That's the essence of *style*, which, without knowledge and passion, amounts only to a performance that dazzles without touching its readers, and which, without practice, amounts to very little. In that sense, Plato and Aristotle were right to say that we shouldn't emphasize style over invention, ideas, and voice. And in another sense, my last piece of advice would apply to students in ancient Greece as well as modern America: write about something you care about to someone you care about. Even if you are writing in school, try to have a presence—show them that somebody's home, working. Writers must know and love not only their subjects but their audiences as well, so that ideas will dance, so that ideas will travel.

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Sharing Ideas

- In different eras writers have been encouraged to pay more or less attention to style. In fact, style doesn't just manifest itself in our writing but in our living, also. We often talk about lifestyle and style of dress. Do you see any connections between your writing style (or the style you'd like to attain) and your lifestyle and style of dress?
- Don, Ellie, and Kate all talk about a shift from product to process. But Kate's article indicates such shifting can be problematic. She reminds you

that “mistakes along those lines [spelling, grammar, punctuation, or usage] do get in my way when I’m reading” and then she suggests that writing teachers tend to listen for certain types of difficult-to-describe writing voices. What do you think of her discussion?

- Looking through some of your writing, find samples of pieces where you, the writer, are “not at home” and where you, the writer are clearly “at home.” Do Kate’s discussions of style and voice explain differences in voice in your own writing?
 - Have you ever taken a piece of writing to class to share and had it flop? Why do you think that happened? Did you ever take a piece to share that you felt lukewarm about and it was a hit? Again, what do you think was going on, what were readers responding to in that piece of writing?
 - Kate tells you that English teachers tend to like certain types of writing—writing that renders, writing that uses allusion, narrative, and (particularly for women teachers perhaps) personal style—do these attributes help you understand past teachers’ responses to your writing? Explain by using examples of your own writing with the teacher’s response if you still have them.
 - Do you think it’s silly to think that you might write “metaphors for English teachers, formal explanations for male teachers in other disciplines, and personal narratives for your women professors,” or do you find yourself already making some of these shifts?
 - How do you learn what type of writing a professor expects from you? How able or willing are you to deliver writing in that style? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable when meeting teachers’ demands?
 - Look at Kate’s five writing suggestions, offered at the end of her essay. What in your own writing practices would you have to change to follow her advice?
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