



TO THE WRITER

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Have you ever received a writing assignment only to feel that special kind of whatthefuckness—a niggling at the pit of your stomach that metastasizes into all-out panic? So you take the assignment home but treat it as if it's got the plague, stuffing it into the dark recess of some drawer for later. Then you decide to write the thing, but first you gotta take a shower and watch some embarrassingly bad reality TV show and then go outside and gaze into your backyard thinking it would be hilarious if the Messiah fell out of that tree over there, and then, *finally then*, you drag yourself back inside, lift the assignment out as if it were a dirty rag, sit down, and stare at it—not reading—just staring for some unidentifiable length of time because you're now descending into a swirling abyss of terror where time collapses into itself. I know you feel me.

The whole scenario is funny, sure, but the reason this type of fear exists is not nearly as comical. What I mean to say is that we've been processed. The Standardized American Experience does writers a disservice. It squeezes people between the narrow lines of pass and fail. Starting at the tender and imaginative age of four, standardized education discourages us from exploring our own ideas, and instead asks us to exchange our creative intuition—vibrant hodgepodes of our collective and individual experiences—for something in a can.

Think about your high school experience, the five-paragraph essay, the red pen, every bright idea you've had that didn't meet parameters. Think about the very word *assignment*, memories of unhelpful feedback, and feelings of defeat and discouragement. That deep echo of dread that some of us feel when we hear the word essay is not natural apprehension. Educational and social conditioning alienate us from our ideas while cultivating fear around making the grade.

In the first grade, I had an imagination that defied lines. I would color outside of them and doodle along margins, sometimes even writing straight off the page onto some forbidden beyond like the desk, the kitchen floor, or the wall. Paper couldn't hold me. My teacher would assign an essay on cats and mine would be written upside down. The cats would have horns; they could talk, even fly.

My disregard for the rules drove the teacher mad. I nearly failed the first grade. I was identified as a problem child, yet there had been no real offense. My first-grade teacher openly chastised me, often. She told me I would be held back if I didn't "get with the program." By the end of that year, I didn't think I was very smart. I began to feel ashamed of myself.

Eventually, I began to write in those lines, use topic sentences, obey word counts, stick ruthlessly to the assigned theme. By the time I graduated high school, all semblance of voice had been wrested from me. The task of writing began to make me panic. I avoided writing, and even felt lousy about writing that received good marks. Every time I wrote, it was as if I were being squeezed through a vice.

I once visited a friend's private high school in an affluent neighborhood. The contrast was shocking. Where I came from, the posters on the walls delivered directives: "Follow rules," "Listen," "Be on time." At my friend's school, the posters said things like, "Lead" and the ever-surprising "Question authority." My friend told me about classes where students were encouraged to take risks, invest in their own thoughts, be creative, and reflect on their experiences. Here was a place where education didn't amount to the reproduction of arbitrary standards of "good," "right," and "passing."

If you had an experience closer to that of my friend's, consider yourself lucky. Maybe your parents had enough money to assure that you received an education that encouraged agency. You hit a lottery of sorts, that's for sure.

Yes, people deemed lower class are often discouraged from unique and personal thought and action and, instead, expected to learn to follow rules—yet that's only one strand of a very tangled web. Many people on the margins will have their own variations of this story. Some were told that their cultural dialect wasn't the correct way to write. Some were taught that their voice, because it wasn't a man's, was not valid. These are just a few realities; there are more. The details and the damage vary, yet, for many of us, the fact remains the same: we are the heirs to a legacy of trauma surrounding our writing and expression.

Writing is a form of thinking, and when your thinking is tethered, so is your writing. And it's not just the rules, grammatical or otherwise, that bind us. It's the culture of fear and punishment that holds these structures up. Explicitly and implicitly, we learn that there are real consequences, real stakes, for writing beyond the lines. By the time many of us reach college, we've internalized this without even realizing what happened to us. Thought and expression become a special privilege, reserved for the few that social hierarchy designates as smart and having something real and valuable to say.

When we become aware of the actual situations within which we live, we begin to operate with concepts and language that allow us to take possession of our selves. Then, we can reach out to others who struggle to recover their voices. Personal liberation feeds collective liberation.

So what does it look like? How do we begin to claim agency over our voices?

Know your worth. Your writing and thinking are valuable and you deserve to be heard. Your writing does not fall into the binary of good and bad. You are moving along at your pace of refinement and skill. Give yourself a chance to be human in your process. You will improve, be challenged, and at times be impressed.

Branding yourself the worst writer ever or claiming you're so good that you don't need feedback isn't helpful, nor is it honest. Maybe say to yourself, "I'm learning, and that's okay."

Imagine a linear writing process as a set of stairs. It moves you up in increments. Could you imagine trying to jump the distance between the first and second floors of a building? Use the stairs. F. Scott Fitzgerald drafted *The Great Gatsby* over one hundred times. Polished writing rarely happens in one sitting—most often writing must be crafted, massaged, shaped. A linear process will take you through the stages of refinement: brain - storming, drafting, revision, editing, and proofreading.¹

Writing doesn't have to happen in isolation, even though American individualism would have us believe that writing and thinking are solitary endeavors. I once had an instructor tell me that "writing is a social act." Writing communities exist to support you in your work. If you're an Evergreen student, the Writing Center is a great starting point. If not, find a person or group whose approach to writing resonates with you. Find the people who will listen to your ideas and value your writing. Find the people who will help you realize your vision.

Read the writing you love and imitate it. There are many ways to do this. You could try analyzing how an author organizes information in a particularly powerful essay, and then use the same information organization in your own writing. Or you might try isolating beautiful sentences from your favorite book and then inserting your own nouns, verbs, and adjectives into the sentence structure. This is reading as a writer. Imitating the writing you love allows you to figure how that writing works.

Begin a writing practice. This means sitting down at a specific time, every day. It doesn't matter what you write. You could write the F-word a hundred times for all I care, so long as you're writing. It gets you into the habit and lets that fearful part of you know that the act of writing isn't going to kill you.

Take a stand. Let's say you submit an essay and the instructor's feedback tells you to cut a certain paragraph. But you love that paragraph. It's your favorite. It's essential to your whole point, dammit! To cut the paragraph would be akin to severing your own arm. Then do not cut it. Who cares if you look back in two years and think to yourself, "Oh, that paragraph doesn't belong there after all." I understand that successful writing is successful communication, but this is about your authority as a writer, about cultivating confidence in your intuition. Accepting feedback is an art, yes, but trusting yourself is one too.

I've watched many of my student colleagues sink in their chairs at the sight of writing assignments. Many of us are processed through a wounding educational experience and told that we aren't smart enough when we can't meet arbitrary standards. It doesn't have to be this way, though. We can recover from the effects of these standards while learning new ways to act in concert with our ideas, our writing, and ourselves.

¹ For more information about the writing process, see Tommy Chisholm's article in this issue, or check out *Inkwell 2* for an in-depth discussion of each stage of the process.