



## REDEFINING AUTHORITY

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Here's a dose of reality: every one of you is going to be asked to write something during your college career. Each of you will be asked to become a "writer," and one of Evergreen's expectations is that you will graduate with writing as an intact skill to serve you well. I'm reminded of a scene in one of my favorite films of the 80s, *Broadcast News*. Fifteen-year old Aaron Altman is delivering the valedictorian speech at his high school graduation. Cut to the next scene. On the playground a scrum of boys still clad in robes hold Aaron down while the lead bully pummels him to the ground. The future network news reporter rises defiantly, and with a swollen, bloodied lip and loose tooth hurls the biggest insult he can muster: "Okay, take this: . . . You'll never know the pleasure of writing a graceful sentence or having an original thought. Think about it."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, think about it. Along with "pleasure," I'd like to add privilege. To write is a privilege. During your time at Evergreen, which is also a privilege, you have the opportunity to hone this craft that separates you from millions of others in the world who are unable to write or to claim a voice because they lack access to education or because a tyranny of political power renders them silent.

Yes, think about it. I'm thinking about the student who stood in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square. Through his single act of autonomy, this student helped tell the world a powerful story. This student defied authority by creating his own authority. Through the writing process, you, too, can change the direction of authority and change how we view a particular story.

There are millions of important stories to tell and an equal number of ways to best tell them: personal essays, persuasive essays, research papers, lab reports, poetry, etc. An assignment, therefore, is an invitation for you to practice being an author, a person with authority. This doesn't, however, mean you are an expert. It does mean that you have the privilege to share your ideas and imagination. Faculty at Evergreen invite you to put your authentic ideas before them and others in your program. Every time you participate in the conversation through writing, you cultivate a new definition of authority.

The responsibility to tell your truth as you see it rests with you. The ability to know the best way to render the telling rests with you, and the humility to write in the service of creating rather than destroying rests with you. Any telling, any story, carries with it an awesome responsibility.

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1 James L. Brooks, *Broadcast News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 9.

Yes, think about it. Writing anything worth sharing can be a long, arduous process. Take for example, this article: I've spent the latter part of four months struggling to discover what I've wanted to say. I've struggled long past my deadline and watched while all the other articles in this publication have come into being, withstood the storm of revision and review, and reveled in their final edits. Four months is a little more than the span of time you might have to write a research paper, and many of your assignments will have shorter deadlines. Nevertheless, I've taken the time I've needed for four months to think about the relationship between four powerful words: author, authority, autonomy, and authenticity. I've taken the time because I'm not an "authority" on this subject; instead, I've taken seriously the responsibility as an author asserting my authority to speak authentically about what I'm beginning to know in a way that respects my audience, including myself.

Who will you decide to be as an author? How will you assert your authority? Will you claim autonomy over your original thoughts? Will you stand up and shout your authentic voice in the face of bullies who seek to silence you? What relationships will you create between these four powerful words: author, authority, autonomy, and authenticity? Only you can write this story. Think about it.

#### THE AUTHOR'S NOTE

Poet, essayist, and activist Muriel Rukeyser reminds us: "We need to know our resources and ourselves. In a time of suffering, the long war, and the opening of the horizon, there is no resource which we can afford to overlook or misunderstand."<sup>2</sup>

A powerful resource designed to lend support to your authority as a writer is a document I recommend you write along with each piece of writing you share with your faculty and peers. The Author's Note will take you ten minutes to write. However, these ten minutes of writing will assert the authority you have over your work. The act of documenting your authority over your authorship is too powerful for your faculty to ignore. To download a copy of an Author's Note, go to the Writing Center's Website at [www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter). Of course, the Writing Center is also a powerful resource to support you in your endeavor to claim your authority as a writer.

#### WORKS CITED

Brooks, James L. *Broadcast News*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.  
 Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996.

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2 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), 8.