



THE SLACKER'S GUIDE TO WRITING EVALS

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Ready, set, reflect?

I've always struggled with writing my evaluations, and while there are a wealth of resources available to help students with the process of reflection and revision, my issue is not about asking myself good questions, or about reflecting deeply, but just some sort of mental block around the enormity of the self-evaluation. I know that it's really important, that I might need to provide it to someone as some sort of evidence of my education, that it's my chance to capture and frame my education. I genuinely do believe that it's supposed to be empowering. I know and believe all of this, and yet for four years I wrote drafts of my evaluations and never really wrote an eval that I was satisfied with. I "filed" my drafts with the evaluations from my professors, or with my other work from the program, or somewhere else that I thought was clever; was thankful that I wasn't on top of my game enough to apply to grad school or a professional job (and thus actually need my transcript); and trained my creative energy on my school work.

When senior year came, I started thinking that a transcript would be a nice thing to have, and I suddenly had seven evaluations to write. Even though I had drafts of most of them (which ranged in tone from perfunctory to tortured to super analytical), it was a painful, painful process to write seven evaluations at once. But I learned things. In reading through the various drafts I had written, I realized that by my junior year I had actually cobbled together a process that worked pretty well for me, but this process could have been so much better if I was conscious of what I was doing at the time. I also learned that many, many other students shared similar blocks around writing evaluations, and that sharing my evaluation hang-ups could be useful to others.

PROCRASTINATION AND PERFECTIONISM

I'll talk more about perfectionism later, but procrastination and perfectionism have a particularly unhelpful way of reinforcing each other. There's always something more immediately satisfying to be done than writing your self-evaluation, especially if you think that you're not going to do a good enough job on it anyway. It's really easy to not write your eval when it's so wise and rewarding to get excited about your next program. Recognize these tendencies. Call them out. Now move on.

TIME TO REFLECT

Yes, consciousness and empowerment can be about continual awareness and reflection, but it's not that easy. I need some distance, and the best thing I've done for myself is to give myself permission to take time. Here's the thing about Evergreen: you don't actually have to *submit* your final evaluation at the end of the quarter (unless otherwise specified by your professor). You need to submit your perfect, signed evaluations before you want your transcript to go out to grad schools or potential employers, but until that time comes, you can have your almost-perfect evals (or your as-good-as-they-can-be evals) sitting at the ready on your my.evergreen.edu account. By God, make sure you have your best draft saved on that my.evergreen account, especially if your filing system is anything like mine. Drafts on paper get lost. Flash drives get lost.

PRESSURE TO HAVE SOMETHING REALLY REALLY GOOD BECAUSE YOU KNOW IT'S REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT

Don't. Don't feel the need to write something transcript-worthy, especially not during week ten, when you might be finishing an actual academic project, and trying to make your academic content as good as possible. Your project needs to be as good as it can possibly be by the end of the quarter so that the work can be reflected in your professor's evaluation of you. Your own self-evaluation, however, only needs to be *conference-worthy*.

I finally hit upon the idea of a conference-worthy evaluation during the final quarter of my junior year. By conference-worthy, I mean that none of this matters: length, things being too listy or bullet-pointed, things being out of focus or mis-focused, being too self-critical or critical of the program, talking too much about academic content or how much you hated everybody else in the class or that one book you read. The first conference-worthy eval I wrote was four pages long and included a page about my father's recent death, my embrace of academics as emotional escapism (and subsequent surprise at the inadequacy of that escape), and the tension of traveling home for very personal reasons while studying that same home. In this far too personal page, I unraveled questions about where I belonged as a daughter, as a native scholar interested in the institution of education, and as a person. It was far too navel-gazing for anything that I would want to present in my transcript, but it was honestly where I was at, and set the ground for a genuine, affirmative evaluation conference with my professor.

Yes, the whole thing was too long, too personal, had too many unanswered questions, and even had too much academic content. But it was obvious that I knew all of this when I handed it in, and my professor didn't waste time talking about any of these things. Instead, she affirmed strengths, pointed out themes that could be refined and used to frame the eval as a whole, and highlighted where my self-evaluation echoed and complicated things that she had written about in her evaluation of me.

I'm convinced that we had such a rich conversation because I wrote a "conference-worthy" eval instead of attempting to hand in a "transcript-worthy" eval. And I eventually did write my transcript-worthy eval. The page of writing I talked about earlier was eventually reduced down to,

“Family obligations necessitated that I made four trips home during the course of this program,” followed by a tighter discussion of ethnographic trauma and native scholars.

The conference-worthy eval works for me as a procrastinator and a perfectionist, because it forces me to do something very specific and have it done for a specific time. I know that it's not going to be the version that goes in my transcript, and I can be hopeful that what I write will actually provide a foundation for a really good conversation that I can use as I move towards that transcript-worthy eval. Writing the conference-worthy eval is also necessary because of what I risk losing if I don't: That moment.

My favorite evals go beyond simply presenting my education and somehow capture something essential—a moment in my development as a person, a photograph of something that would be impossible to draw from memory. I became more skilled in editing these photographs (learning, for example, to pay attention to tensions, to honor my authority in my experience), but first I had to learn to see the conference-worthy eval and the transcript-worthy eval as two completely different animals. I learned all of this pretty late in my academic career, but I hope that some of you are reading this a bit earlier and that you might be able to recognize your own process for writing evals.

So don't panic; let yourself take the moment, and let your writing go all over the place; you will revise it all later.