



CONVERSATION IN COMPOSITION: INTRODUCING THE WRITER YOU ARE TO THE WRITER YOU AREN'T QUITE YET

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A year ago I limped into the Writing Center frightened and broken up over a terrible experience with a professor. Looking back, I don't know how I mustered the audacity to apply for *Cultivating Voice*, the course that trains Writing Center tutors, when I was so insecure. Whatever my motivations, my experience in the class actually mended a lot of the damage done—but only gradually. I was still struggling when it came time to write a paper titled “How I Write,” and I realized I didn't consider myself a writer. My classmates seemed so certain, poetic, creative, and sure that they were Writers, Artists. Meanwhile, I was just a nerd who really liked reading books by dead people and writing essays about them.

I finally completed the paper, which was a major step in the growth that the Writing Center has been nurturing in me since last spring. Yet as wonderfully at home as I now feel in the Writing Center, I got a little stuck and nervous when I began to draft my *Inkwell* article. So, as I often do when I am called upon to be a writer, I wrapped myself especially tightly in the role of a reader—with rewarding results. Exploring my biggest bookshelf, I noticed a little slip of white paper jutting out between the burgundy spine of a collection of Rainer Maria Rilke poems and the turquoise cloth of a copy of *Ulysses* that I inherited from my grandmother.

Somewhere in the gradual bookshelf shuffle, a little zine landed between those two literary giants. The zine is named *Listy* because it is composed entirely of lists. Some lists are author submitted, like “Andrew's Fave Dance Moves.” Others are found, like “Eleven Tips on Getting More Efficiency Out of Women Employees” from 1943, or an email of driving directions from 1998. Shopping lists have their own section. My favorite: “Found Grocery List Reviews.” I love seeing a column of scribbled cleaning supplies analyzed, admired, and critiqued, almost as if it were intended to be art. The lists reveal so much about their authors, and I think that says a lot about the everyday ways we express ourselves.

We write all the time. Emails to our professors. Emails to our moms. Letters with stamps. White board notes left for our roommates. Sticky notes left for our faulty memories. Field notes. Lecture

notes. Lecture “notes.” Covertly-passed-in-class notes. Book margin notes. Thank you notes. Christmas cards. The little folded square of paper in a bouquet. Diary entries. Agenda entries. Calendar jottings. To-do lists. Whatever you write on that line where you say what the check you’re writing is for. Text messages. Recipes. Yelps. Scrabble turns.

And that’s writing in the most literal sense. Really, every act of speech is a composition. Jokes, seminar contributions, curses. The piece of your mind you plan to give so-and-so but don’t. The one you do. Reasoning with pets. Negotiating with malfunctioning technology. Prayers. Songs. Instructions. Hints. Outbursts. Requests. The half of a conversation you have when you’re driving alone. The other half you imagine when you’re driving alone. White lies. Worse lies. How you explain something to a little kid, a teenager, an adult. Gossip. Political debates. Pep talks. Pick-up lines. Less gross kinds of flirting. Compliments. Criticisms. Clichés.

Everyone has mastered a language. We have the right words a million times a day, but something so common is easy to overlook. We tend to only take notice when our words don’t work or when we know they are being judged. In a struggle with academic writing, we are especially self-aware. As a result, we often base our whole identities as writers on this one particular context. If it’s difficult, we might not see ourselves as writers at all.

But we are writers, all of us. The languages we learn from our families and use with our friends are crucial and healthy and immediately rewarding. They are what we learn first, learn best, and think about least. Meanwhile, school has its own language, but it isn’t very social. It’s written more than it’s spoken, for instance. The writing isn’t even *for* anyone the way a letter is. But it isn’t for ourselves, the way a diary is, either. It’s a lonely language, and that makes it hard to learn.

How much learning students have to do depends a lot on their backgrounds. For some students, the ways they express themselves outside classrooms are totally different from what their professors expect in papers. They have abundant ideas and at home or with friends can express these ideas naturally, confidently, comfortably. But when it comes time to sit down and write, all those communication skills are stifled because they don’t match standard academic English. A student may know what she wants to say, but not know how to cite sources or punctuate subordinate clauses. I have met many students in positions like this while working in the Writing Center, and it has been great to work with them through conversation: to experience their amazing brains and to collaborate to transfer the complex thoughts, intensity, and personality that come out in our discussion onto the page.

As a writer, I locate myself in a different position from that of the writer described above. The language of my family and friends was not too far a cry from standard academic English. I have the kind of brain that remembers grammar rules and word spellings pretty easily. In fact, I can put on a formal and impersonal tone, tie it up with complicated but correct syntax, and cite the hell out of it, no problem. For years I avoided the red markings so many students dread, buried anything recognizably me in superficial correctness, and employed an attitude of certainty and cool logic that kept my biases, inner conflict, passion, and complexity off the page. At Evergreen I learned I could write without being totally soulless. At least until my nightmare junior year when

my bloodthirsty professor sent me right back into the writer I thought I'd left in the halls of my high school: the boring AP exam-acer who would rather use papers to hide herself than to express herself. I started to dislike the act of writing and outright hate my own. The activity I had enjoyed as a freshman and sophomore was suddenly miserable. Because I thought the Writing Center was only for students seeking an editor, I robbed myself of an experience that could have enabled me to reconnect with composition as creative, rewarding, and personal.

Once in *Cultivating Voice*, being trained in the Writing Center's philosophy and meeting with tutors regularly, I realized that a tutoring session cannot only move ideas toward a polished paper. It can also enliven writing that is superficially proper but actually hollow—lacking the meat and meaning that make papers worth composing in the first place. I think what's most important, though, is that a session does everything through conversation. It makes school language less lonely, more learnable. It makes language what it is supposed to be: social.