



MAKE IT YOUR OWN: TURNING AN ASSIGNMENT YOU HATE INTO A PIECE OF WRITING YOU LOVE

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I once worked with a writer who was struggling with his final paper, an overview of project management. His research was leading him down a dead end; he was frustrated and overloaded with information. I pulled out a blank sheet of paper and said, “Okay—let’s start over. What do you want to say about the subject? At the end of the day, what do you want from this piece?” As he talked about his own ideas, he realized it would be easier to write about his personal experience with project management than an overview of the theory or history. By the end of our session, it was clear there was a paper inside him after all, it just wasn’t the one he’d been anticipating.

As students, we’ve all had assignments like this, the kind that make you grind your teeth, roll your eyes, and wonder why you took the class. You get through it because you have to: do the assignment or risk losing credit. Maybe you find yourself procrastinating as long as you can and then spitting out a piece of writing that technically fulfills all of the requirements—but it’s bland, beige, two-dimensional, and there is no living *you* anywhere to be found.

My high school English teacher once told us about a student who, instead of turning in a paper on the book they had read, handed in a jar containing the burned ashes of the book. “This is how I feel about this book,” the student said. I consider this a success story because the writer took an assignment they hated and made it their own. I’m not suggesting you take such a drastic route, but it’s okay to start out hating an assignment and let that intensity inspire you to create something powerful, unique, and unexpected.

You still have to do the assignment, but you can do it in a way that you find satisfying. The parameters of an assignment are like a professor saying, “Construct a house in this appointed location. It must contain a kitchen, at least one bedroom, and at least one bathroom.” Boring, right? But it’s still your house. Build secret passageways, a ball pit, a room with a trampoline floor, and a dungeon filled with vicious rats armed with tiny laser guns. Okay, you need a kitchen, so turn it into your dream kitchen with a talking espresso machine and a robot butler. You need a bedroom, but you can include a bumpin’ sound system and a disco ball above the bed. In the bathroom, add a water slide into the pool/dolphin tank.

Years ago in a community college writing class, the professor gave us an assignment to define a word and convince the reader that our definition was valid. I hope I didn't visibly roll my eyes when we received the assignment because I remember thinking it was strange and unnecessary. Imposing my definition felt arrogant, like we were supposed to say "I'm right, you're wrong."

I decided to define the word *creativity*. I thought about why the subject of creativity meant a lot to me, and why it offended me when the word got thrown around in an exclusionary way. I felt that the word had been unfairly co-opted by people who used it judgmentally. "Oh, it's so not creative," someone might say about the latest pop song. "Yes, it is," I defended in my paper. "Someone *created* it." To illustrate how the creative force can come from any circumstance and in any form, I described a time when my mother and I had to open a can of SpaghettiOs with no can opener. We ended up hacking the thing open with a kitchen knife—it was a dangerous and inefficient method, but it worked. We kept the mangled can as our own avant-garde artwork. By choosing a subject I felt strongly about and adding some real-world examples from my own life, I was able to take an unengaging assignment and have some fun with it.

Throughout my academic career, I've unconsciously customized my assignments. Because I was usually a teacher's pet, I was rewarded, not punished, for doing this. When I graduated from my small, artistic high school and began attending a traditional four-year college, I was stunned at the change. My professors didn't want to hear opinions that challenged theirs. No longer a unique individual with something important to contribute, I was a number on a piece of paper, a score to be counted. The new rule was, "Sit down, shut up, do the assignment the way I say, and get out." It took me a long time to learn how to deal with this shift in reality, and it eventually led me to Evergreen, where I can personalize my education to my heart's content.

When you first get an assignment you dread, figure out exactly what you don't like about it. Does it feel too narrow or confining? Is it structured in a format that doesn't work well with your learning style? Does the subject matter make you feel bored, angry, or limited by a lack of knowledge?

Next, shift to what you do like. What makes you feel passionate or curious? What values do you believe in standing up for? How can you connect the themes of the assignment with ideas that excite you? If you disagree with an author you're reading, what do you want to say instead? As you start to brainstorm, use mindmaps and freewrites to let your ideas run wild and find sources of potential energy.¹

Approach your professor and talk about what you have in mind. Make sure you thoroughly understand the details of the assignment so you know where you have the freedom to expand, take some risks, and inject your personality into the piece. Be ready to explain your ideas and how they fit within the framework of the assignment. This approach may not work every time or with every professor, but I believe it's important to try. There's usually a way to work with your faculty member to find a creative solution that allows you to do the necessary work and still be true to yourself.

1. For helpful tips on brainstorming, see the article "Beingstorming" by Grant Miller in *Inkwell 2* at http://www.evergreen.edu/writingcenter/inkwell/docs/Inkwell02/TESCInkwell2007_Volume02_Miller_Beingstorming.pdf.

Many students don't feel comfortable approaching their professors, but I cannot recommend it highly enough. Your professors *want* to hear from you as soon as you start struggling, or even if you just have questions. As you go through your writing process, keep talking to your faculty, the Writing Center, your classmates, the trees, whomever. You're not doing yourself or your faculty any favors by floundering alone until the last minute.

The liberties I've taken over the years have made me a better writer and student, and I think the same can be true for you. Keep going with your exploration until you find that sweet spot where you fulfill the requirements of the assignment and find meaning along the way. The pedagogy of progressive education at Evergreen exists to help each student facilitate their own learning in a way that is unique and appropriate to their needs. We have a lot of freedom here—let's put it to good use.