

Writing In Graduate School

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“Strive for clarity. Pray for grace.”

Bob Bain

If you're in graduate school for Literature or English, you were probably a pretty good writer during your undergrad years. You tossed off papers glibly, with a bit of work and a deadline to goad you. You were used to getting good grades on them, and you had your little secrets and shortcuts. A nod toward the professor's favorite critics, a subtle rephrasing of something said in class, a strict following of the guidelines laid out in the prompt, and you were well on your way to a high grade and marginal comments that supported your view of yourself as one who possessed great critical acumen and a graceful style. Drafts? Those were for weaker writers. Outside reading? For those who didn't have thoughts of their own. Models? Only for those who didn't know the discipline.

But now you're in grad school, and things are a bit different. The work you did before isn't getting the grades you thought it would, and, worse yet, your writing is being criticized as unclear, unfocused, or unlettered. Maybe it's not your fault. Maybe it's our fault, your professors, who haven't taught you how to write at the graduate level. So, in case that's the truth, here's this little guide, where I'll try to set down what I know about academic writing as a professional.

And that's the first lesson, that this is writing as a professional. You're no longer a dabbler or a dilettante, you're beginning to embrace this field, where we read and write and get paid for it. That makes us professionals, with all the trappings, like pay (not much, as I'm sure you're aware) and professional pride in our work. Here's what our work is: we read a text, we see things in that text, and we tell others what we see in that text, in the hope of making them see the text our way. Sometimes we do it orally for groups of students and sometimes we do it in writing for other audiences, including other academics.

When I talk about this, the only thing I can point to as evidence is my own career, which, while not of the cookie-cutter variety, can be seen as fairly typical. Unfortunately for you, there may be a few anecdotes in this text. They'll all eventually get around to a point, so indulge me with them.

Before You Write

Academic writing is informed by other academic writing, by what has been said before. Period. There is no way around this. You may feel that your insights into a particular text are so profound that their brilliance is self-evident, and therefore you don't need to do any real research. As much as it pains me, I'll grant you that point, but I won't grant it to you now. The only way that people will know how good you are, or even read those pearls which drop from your honeyed lips, is that you have to prove your worth. And how do you do that? By doing the scut work now, by being thorough in your research and demonstrating your promise as a scholar. Right now, those intellectual diamonds which you toss off so glibly, which your professors have praised and your peers have envied, are (and trust me on this) not going anywhere unless you can address what has been said before about the text at hand.

Imagine the blinding literary insights that someone like Einstein could have had. Can we imagine that they would have been great? Perhaps. Do we know what they are? No. We don't know them because Einstein never entered the discipline; he never treated writing about literature as a professional activity, and therefore nobody has ever read what he might have thought about *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or the poetry of Rilke. As Thomas Gray said several centuries ago, “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air.” So too will it be with your dazzling interpretations, if you can't begin as an apprentice. When you reach the stature of Stanley Fish or Martha Nussbaum or Henry Louis Gates Jr., people will publish your every thought, you'll quote your own previous work, and undergrads will ask for your autograph. Until then, however, you'll have to slog through like the overwhelming majority of us literary professionals.

Joining A Conversation

You're familiar with the guy who comes late to the conversation, overhears a bit of what you're talking about, then offers up an opinion which you had hashed through over fifteen minutes ago. Don't be that guy. Especially, don't be that guy who gets caught and embarrassed for being that guy. So do your research. Know what's been said before you. That means, when you pick a topic or a work to write about, you need to be as familiar as you can with the conversation. You need to use your research skills to decide a number of things. First, you need to see if this idea of yours is a viable topic. This requires doing online research as well as spending time in the library, going through the indexes of books to see if your topic is in there.

Many of the graduate students I have worked with believed that they could get every bit of information they needed on their desktop, just by searching both the web and online databases. They were inevitably proven wrong. Don't mistake me; I like computers. In fact, I love computers. They make my professional life so much easier. But they are not the panacea for the hard work of academic research. Looking through online databases is not the totality of a research project; it's merely the prologue. There is no substitute for walking to the library, finding a book on your chosen topic, going to the stacks, and then looking at all the other books on that topic which are nearby. This may sound unsystematic and reliant upon pure serendipity, but it's not. The process itself is logical, given the nature of the library cataloging system, and, better yet, it invariably yields results.

Beyond your personal work in researching a topic, you should also enlist the help of others. Talk with your friends, imagine an outline of the work you'd like to produce, and think about the conclusions you can derive from it. Once that's determined to your satisfaction, you need to see who else has said something like what you want to say. I remember once having a great idea about an article on Rita Dove, but library research showed me that, although my specific idea wasn't out there, there was at least one author who came close enough to it to make it a no-go for further work. My fellow grad student called it "pissing on the furniture," because this author didn't want to sit there, but he wanted to make sure that no one else did, either. So you need to see if anyone has pissed on your furniture. Of course, the bigger the author, the bigger the text, the more likely it is that your issues will have received coverage.

So let's begin with structure, at two separate levels. The first is the structure of your argument, and the second is the structure of the physical manifestation of your argument, your paper. I think there are three ways to structure an argument in literary studies. There may be more, but these are the three I can think of:

1. You can discover something new.
2. You can pile on an argument.
3. You can pick a fight.

Types of Articles

When I think of the Platonic form of academic writing, I think of the first method here, discovering something new. This method takes many forms, but they all do the same thing, they all stand like a conquistador with a flag, claiming some land. Perhaps the easiest of these forms is the discovery of someone new, kind of like first-generation feminist criticism. The notion of discovery, or recovery, of obscure or forgotten writers is important. The early articles about these writers usually attempt to present the particular author as worthy of further study, by comparing him or her to established canonical figures and either trumpeting common virtues or acknowledging unique attributes. Another form is the "discovery" of a neglected work by an already-recognized author. In this case the presentation is the same as in the first instance, a justification of further study, or a connection with already-established works. The third form is the most difficult, which is the uncovering of something completely new in an already-established work by an already-established author. The move here from new author to new work to new textual site is a particularization, and each level requires greater critical skills, a better sense of reading, and a greater familiarity with the existing criticism. This third point is especially apt; you don't get to speak unless you know what has already been spoken.

Piling on is the *via media* of academic writing. Here you nuance, extend, or recalibrate what someone else has said. Think of it as the scientific method of academic writing. You begin with a solid base of well-proven infor-

mation, and you add your accretion to it. It's piling up bits of sand, each dependent upon the others underneath it. If I had to sum it up in a sentence, your paper in the mode would look like this: "Professor X's insightful work on Text Y is only made more relevant, and serves a greater purpose, if we do Z to it." And Z can be a number of things: apply it to another text, tweak just one small thing, or push its logical consequences to a further application and understanding. In my experience, other academics love this model. It shows that you've done enough work to enter the conversation, demonstrates a proper respect for authority (as long as they agree with the original critic), and isn't too presumptuous. In short, you're humble and loveable. You may not be holding forth in the middle of the conversation, but you're standing to the side, kibitzing every once in a while.

The third, and, to my mind, the easiest way to produce an article is to pick a fight. Look for a loophole, a contradiction, a disagreement you have with something already published. Then bring your intellect to bear. It's a difficult process to talk about in the abstract, so let me tell you about my first article (written in grad school). It's also the first piece of writing I can actually remember constructing, because it's the first piece where I really had a plan. Robert Frost's official biographer, Lawrance Thompson, quoted a letter from Frost talking about his first published poem. In it, Frost said that he "grafted Schopenhauer onto Christianity." Thompson commented that Frost "grafted Schopenhauer right out of sight." When I read that, I saw the contradiction, and thought that this might be a place where I could work. The poet himself said Schopenhauer was there, but his biographer said no. My initial guess was that Thompson didn't know much about Schopenhauer, and therefore he really wasn't in a position to assess Frost's use of the philosopher. So I boned up on my Schopenhauer (just a short reading of an article on him in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) and dug up the poem in question. My initial research, including the trip to the library, making the copies, and reading the texts, took about three hours. Had the idea not panned out, I would have lost those three hours, but not what I learned in them. In terms of an article, I could have ended up saying that Thompson was right, but that was about it. However, I found that my initial spark, my hunch that Thompson had a very superficial understanding of Schopenhauer, was correct. The rest was just a matter of writing it up.

I'm not showing you the process above to demonstrate my research skills or critical acumen. What your take-away should be is that I was willing to lose three hours, or three days, or even three weeks, to research that didn't produce something publishable. Not every treasure hunt you engage in will get you gold nuggets. But, unlike a treasure hunt, you never come home empty-handed from the library.

Your Primary Task

Aye, there's the rub, you say. You've got great ideas, but people like me always hammer at your presentation of them. That may be because you don't understand what you're trying to do in your paper. Your number one task in a paper is to make your reader read the text in question exactly the way you do. That is, you need to teach your reader how to read, how to see the text through your eyes. There are many metaphors that we use for this. Some have spoken in legal terms, where you marshal evidence in support of your case. Some have talked about logic, with major and minor premises and an irrefutable conclusion. But I like to talk about inevitability. You need to make your conclusion inevitable. Readers, if they buy your first premise, must, inexorably, be led to your conclusion. You do this by offering evidence: from the text itself, from other texts (other critics, historical documents, cultural artifacts, etc.), from analogies, from examples, from critical thinking. But it's not enough to just present your evidence. That's just the stuff with which you prove your point. You need to unpack your evidence, show your readers how to read it, by explaining why it must be read in the way you're reading it. In short, you need to leave your reader with no unanswered questions, no gaps where your reading can be pried apart.

Assertions and Arguments

Let's take a tangential step here to address one of the most distressing aspects of student writing, the confusion of assertions and arguments. Assertions are statements. "James Joyce was a naughty boy" is an assertion. It's a good assertion, perhaps even a true assertion. But it has no place in your writing. Your writing is about turning assertions into arguments, because arguments have support. "James Joyce was a naughty boy, and we can see this in the letters he writes to Nora, his fascination with excreta, and his elliptical handling of masturbation in *Ulysses*." If we ignore the dangerous problem of associating an author's biography with a particular text, we can see that

your assertion now is set up to become an argument. There are places where you can hang some support, where you can flesh out a reading, and where you can address other critics.

That's why it's crucial that you're clear and you're linear in your presentation. Take another look at that assertion / beginning of an argument above. You'll see that it ends with a comma series attached to it. I could be clear and linear if I just wrote a paragraph supporting each point in the comma series. Yes, you've seen this before, in grade school, in high school, and in your undergrad career. It's the five-paragraph theme. It's not cool, it's not sexy, but it is effective. And, in terms of structure, its principles should sit behind everything you write, be it a two-page response or a 300-page dissertation. The five-paragraph theme usually gets summed up this way: "Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them that you told them." Introduction - Body - Conclusion. We can make it more sophisticated, we can bend it, insert things in the middle of it, stretch it out or truncate it, but the principles are the same: we open with our *bonafides*, we offer our reading, and we go home.

Structure of a Paper

Opening with your *bonafides* works in two ways. First, you need to show that your topic is worth talking about. "Ulysses is a great novel" doesn't cut it. Nor does "Ulysses sucks." But something like "Bloom's characterization in *Ulysses* reflects Joyce's insecurity concerning his relationships in his professional and personal worlds" will do the trick. Here's a topic that well-intentioned people can agree or disagree with. It's not too vague or too specific. It's not too obvious or too obscure. This is where your professors can help you the most, because we are more familiar with these fields, and know the state of scholarship, so we're able to give you some assistance about the state of your topic. The middle ground of obscurity / obviousness and vagueness / specificity is different with every author and every text (and is also culturally and historically determined, so what is too specific now might be just right ten years from now), so you're going to have to trust us on this one. Of course, that means that you have to spend some time with us, to hash out ideas, to go over sources, to create the framework for a paper that will hang together.

Once you've established your topic, you've got to prove your worthiness to enter the conversation. And there's only one way to do that, by placing yourself within that conversation. You need to demonstrate that you're familiar with what has already been said about your topic, and how what you have to say fits into that conversation. If we were in the sciences we would call this a "literature review" or a "survey of scholarship," and our forms for doing it would be much more prescriptive. But we're not, so this area can take a multitude of shapes. By the time I was in grad school, 20 years ago, the notion of the "extended footnote" was already a chestnut. But it did its job, so we used it all the time. You can still see a number of contemporary articles that employ this technique as a way of claiming legitimacy for the author. Here's how it works: somewhere near the beginning of an article, there's a passing phrase, or perhaps even a sentence or two, which alludes to the body of criticism surrounding the topic of the article. This phrase or these sentences are footnoted, and the note is a pithy bibliographical presentation of other works which address this topic. Rhetorically, it's saying, "See, I did my homework. I know what other people have said, and I'm not just repeating them. I have something new to say." Or you could do this inside the text itself, presenting the articles around your topic and addressing them in turn. This latter method is almost necessary if you're going to pick a fight. Sometimes there's a mixture of both, where you'll address directly some of the corpus of criticism, and merely note that you've been through the rest. Either way, though, you've got to prove your legitimacy.

Next we offer our reading. Here's where you set the bear trap, where you make the conclusions inevitable, where you grease the slide so that all readers end up where you want them to be. You present your textual sites, the spaces you're going to explore, you offer support or a sounding board through existing criticism, and you offer your own thoughts. Although an interplay between original thought and previous scholarship is essential for success in this area, I have seen far too many grad students treat this as an all-or-nothing venture. Either the paper is a collection of what other people have thought about the text, or the other critics get ushered offstage so that you can begin your reading. The first process is nothing more than slavish reproduction, unworthy of a professional, while the second asserts the height of hubris: "There, now that those pesky critics are out of the way, let me tell you the REAL meaning . . ."

The connection between what you have to say and what others have said varies from text to text and author to author, but it must be apparent in this section. Too often grad students neglect this point, but this is really the crux of the matter when you approach this professionally. You should never pass up an opportunity to have the last word. That is, you should never leave your readers wondering how to read a particular quotation, be it from the primary text or from a critic. You should always tell your readers how to read it. Be explicit about each quotation, and you'll create inevitability. But this doesn't mean that you get to say anything you like. You don't get to make assertions here, just arguments.

Before you really get this section down on paper, you need to think about this structure. Do you want to walk through the text from front to back in order to prove your point, or do you want to structure your argument so that it has the most effect, and then present the texts and their sites in the order that best supports that? Do you manipulate your argument, or do you manipulate your texts? I believe in the second way, because it does more work for your readers. Again, the more you leave your readers to their own devices, the more likely it is you'll have a breakdown, a miscommunication between you and them. So spell it out for them. The more work you do for your readers, the less space there is for slippage, and the greater your inevitability.

Finally, you go home. You've proven your point, and you can hear readers getting ready to offer objections. If you're really doing the work for your readers, you'll anticipate their objections and address them here. Yes, it's the old counterargument technique from composition class, and yes, it really works. You can bring up some critics that you don't see eye-to-eye with, or you can bring up some oppositional readings, but with both of these you have to acknowledge then refute them. Ideally, you've handled both of these points of attack already, so the only objections that can be raised concern your first principles. And let me tell you, attacks on your first principles are a badge of honor. Well, maybe not always. If your first principle is that Stephanie Meyers is the new Jane Austen, you deserve the beatdown you'll surely get. But if you're reasonable in your principles, attacks on them mean that your argument is inevitable, that there's nowhere to place the thin edge of the wedge to pry it apart. Consider these attacks, then, as a testament to your success.

Getting Better

So how do you get good at this? You already know the most obvious answer, and that is to practice. Just as athletes develop muscle memory to perform at a high level, so too you must develop, well, let's call it intellectual rigor memory, so that you'll grow into performance at a high level. But the second, and usually neglected way, is to look at models. In a sense, every article you read, if you read it closely enough, is a model. But some are better than others. One friend says that she learned how to write papers from reading René Girard's "The Politics of Desire in *Troilus and Cressida*." That just proves that I have very smart friends.

Unfortunately, I think when you read articles, you're way too focused on what you can get out of them, how you can pull a quotation from them to stick in your paper and get another entry for your Works Cited page. So the next time you read one, pay attention to the structure of it. Chances are, there's some form of the structure I outlined above. Watch how the author gathers and presents evidence. Look for inevitability. Of course, this way of reading and thinking about criticism requires more time, but I believe it's a necessary investment if you ever want to get better at writing in an academic setting.

The Most Obvious Points

Now I've saved the most obvious points for last, and, conveniently, they'll tie right back to my opening paragraph. As you should know by now, the process of writing cannot be filled with shortcuts. Writing well takes time, and there's no way around this. There is no substitute for multiple drafts and close proofreading. Your first drafts are not good enough for submission. Nor are your second drafts. If you'd like some proof of this, turn one in. But be forewarned: if you have any ego invested in what you submit, you will be crushed. Although you won't like it, and may feel it is undeserved, every criticism of your paper, every mark that points you to Fowler or Wilson Follett, every deletion, question, correction, or terminal comment, is a favor your professors are doing for you.

You can't catch all your mistakes as you're writing. It's just not possible. You know what you have written, and it may be deathless prose. But somewhere between your brain and your fingers there is slippage, so what

you wrote, in all likelihood, is not perfectly captured on the paper. And even less of what you thought is captured thus. You can't pull something off the printer five minutes before class without proofing it before you submit it. There are, again, many ways of doing this, but all of them require a commitment of time. You can read your work out loud. You can read your paper sentence-by-sentence, backwards. You can swap papers with another student and proof one another's work. But no matter which way you slice it, you need to spend time proofing. As I stated before, you're no longer a dabbler or a dilettante; you're a professional. You need to present your work as such. If you're embarrassed, or confused, or angered by comments that professors write on your papers, that's actually a good thing, because it means that you have real motivation to improve your work.

But I offer this final thought in defense of my colleagues. We are not your copy-editors. We will not do the hard work of proofing your papers for you. That is your responsibility, and some inchoate form of professional pride should stay your hand from presenting to us anything but your best work. If you turn in a paper with the comment, "It's not my best work, but here it is . . ." or "I was up against another deadline, so this suffered . . ." or any other phrase designed to excuse your lack of commitment or skill, what you are really saying is, "I'm unprepared to be a professional." When we get papers like that, we all know it; many of us are just too kind to tell you that you don't have the skills necessary to make it in this field.

Why It's Harder for You

Since I can't even remember how I learned to string together subjects and verbs, but know that it had something to do with the repetition and handholding I got from Sister Mary Susan in middle school, I can only begin talking about my own writing in grad school. To be honest, until then I didn't give it much thought, because I was one of those guys I mentioned above, who tossed something off that was perceptive enough or slavish enough to get decent grades. So as long as I got good grades, I didn't care, and really didn't need to. When I started grad school, I realized that it was time to buckle down, time to do multiple drafts and really work on editing my work. I tried that for half a semester, but I didn't know what I was doing, so instead of getting As I was getting Bs. Faced with lower grades, I went back to what I had been doing, turning in a first draft (and, back in those days, this was a true first draft, composed at the typewriter, without the benefit of the built-in editing that a word processor offers). I started getting As, and thought that it was silly to deny the fact that pearls dripped from my pen. Doing multiple drafts just edited away all those fresh thoughts, all the things that made my writing special. But I now realize that it wasn't my writing that got better, it was my grasp of the concept of what I was supposed to do with my writing; that's what got me better grades. Fortunately for me, I have all those papers in a drawer, and I glance at them every once in a while and wince. They're truly bad. Oh, the sentences made sense and the paragraphs hung together, but I really didn't have anything to say. Those papers are filled with unsupported diaphanous platitudes and generalizations.

But wait, you're saying, this worked for you, so it should work for me. Unfortunately for you, it won't, and here's why: the academic world has changed greatly from the early 1980s. The stakes have been raised. Just as my daughter did things in first grade that I didn't do until third grade, so you are doing things at the graduate level that I didn't think about until later in my career. In short, you don't have the luxury of learning slowly. This field we're in, now more than ever, is competitive. Each year we churn out more and more graduates for fewer and fewer jobs (by that I mean jobs where you get paid to read texts then talk and write about them). So the ante is continually raised. Admission standards continually go up; expectations continually go up. Grad students are now expected to publish at the rate Assistant Professors were expected to publish at three decades ago. I had the luxury of time to learn my craft slowly, but alas, our field no longer affords you that opportunity. So you have to condense your grasp of this skill set into a very short time.

But this is the world you're preparing for. You can do your research in half the time. You can edit on the fly. You can format and reformat papers with a couple of clicks instead of hiring some nice old lady with a ruler to look over your footnote spacing. And all that comes at a cost. Because you can do all these things, you are expected to do all these things. In short, we're all wise to tricks like the "Courier New" font switch (or even the oh-so-trendy periods and commas in 14 points maneuver), so your use of them is an indictment of your skill and an insult to our intelligence. You have access to tools that we could not have imagined when we began our professional careers.

Now the academy will expect you to use them to their fullest. Their cost to you is not measured in time saved or time lost, but in raised expectations. If you're capable of grasping this, you'll succeed, because you'll be willing to devote time to other areas of your writing. If you're not, or if you don't believe it applies to you, you should seriously think of finding peace in another vocation.