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## Your Cheatin' Art

### A Collage

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A TV documentary on cancer. It opens with shots of a funeral—people standing around the side of a grave: a close-up of a widow, and then over to the coffin being lowered. Cut to a sequence of cells under a high-powered microscope—time-lapse so that we see the cells multiplying and going crazy. A voice-over is telling us about how cancer cells behave. Then a man in the doctor's office—getting the verdict. Then Ronald Reagan cracking a joke about his colon cancer. Then a young medical student telling how she wants to go into cancer research—why she finds it exciting and all the progress that's being made. We cut from her, bursting with health and enthusiasm, back to a victim, balding and emaciated from the therapy, but walking in the woods—obviously drinking in the scene as though he can't get enough. Then a sequence of someone earnestly giving us statistics: how many cases of this and that; how much more than in the past, but also how there are more successful treatments and cures. Back now to Reagan going about his work. Then the victim trying to explain things to his child. Finally, a sequence of advice about how to avoid cancer.

It's all a hodgepodge—completely “disorganized”—no connectives. But it works. It's a collage.



I've made a few revisions and additions here to the version that appeared in *Writing On the Edge* in the fall of 1998. I've been writing about the collage for a long time, but I've never made it the center of an essay or chapter till now. (It figured prominently in my chapter on “loop writing” in *Writing With Power* in 1981 and in the first and third workshops in *Community of Writers*. “Silence: A Collage” appears in Part III of this volume.)

[T]wo parts of a piece of writing merely by lying side-by-side, can comment on each other without a word spoken. (John McPhee, quoted in Sims 13).



Directions for writing a collage:

1. Do or gather as much of your writing on your topic as you can. Go fast, don't worry. Freewriting is a good idea. Take thoughts in any order that they come.
2. Go through what you have and choose the best and potentially best bits—freely cutting to find long and short sections.
3. Revise what you have, mostly by cutting, not rewriting. Cut paragraphs and sentences; cut phrases and words. It's amazing what is possible with just cutting.
4. Figure out a pleasing order for the bits: perhaps logical, more likely intuitive and associative—maybe even random.

Another option: add fragments of writing by others—as you'll see I am doing here.



Just as Cubism can take a roomful of furniture and iron it onto nine square feet of canvas, so fiction can take fifty years of human life, chop it to bits, and piece those bits together so that, within the limits of the temporal form, we can consider them all at once. This is narrative collage. The world is a warehouse of forms which the writer raids: this is a stickup. Here are the narrative leaps and fast cuttings to which we have become accustomed, the clenched juxtapositions, interpenetrations, and temporal enjambments. . . . The use of narrative collage is particularly adapted to various twentieth-century treatments of time and space. Time no longer courses in a great and widening stream, a stream upon which the narrative consciousness floats, passing fixed landmarks in orderly progression, and growing in wisdom. Instead time is a flattened landscape, a land of unlinked lakes seen from the air. . . . The point of view shifts; the prose style shifts and its tone; characters turn into things; sequences of events abruptly vanish. Images clash; realms of discourse bang together. Zeus may order a margarita; Zsa Zsa Gabor may raise the siege of Orleans. In a recent *Tri-Quarterly* story, Heathcliff meets Chateaubriand on a golf course. [A writer can create] a world shattered, and perhaps senseless, and certainly strange. (Annie Dillard 20–24)



Dingbats. Blips. Crots. Collage seems to favor the Anglo-Saxon over the Latinate.

Dingbats are the traditional decorative markers that printers use for separations. Placeholders for nothing. Great pleasure from the word and the thing. Asterisks are a sad substitute.

I like to call collage elements *blips*. But Winston Weathers has a more interesting word:

The *Crot*. A crot (crots, plural) is an obsolete word meaning “bit” or “fragment.” The term was given new life by Tom Wolfe in his “Introduction” to a collection of *Esquire* magazine fiction, *The Secret Life of Our Times*, edited by Gordon Lish (New York: Doubleday, 1973). A basic element in the alternate grammar of style, and comparable somewhat to the “stanza” in poetry, the crot may range in length from one sentence to twenty or thirty sentences. It is fundamentally an autonomous unit, characterized by the absence of any transitional devices that might relate it to preceding or subsequent crots and because of this independent and discrete nature of crots, they create a general effect of metastasis—using that term from classical rhetoric to label, as Fritz Senn recently suggested in the *James Joyce Quarterly* (Summer, 1975), any “rapid transition from one point of view to another.” In its most intense form, the crot is characterized by a certain abruptness in its termination: “As each crot breaks off,” Tom Wolfe says, “it tends to make one’s mind search for some point that must have just been made—*presque vu!*—almost seen! In the hands of a writer who really understands the device, it will have you making crazy leaps of logic, leaps you never dreamed of before.”

The provenance of the crot may well be in the writer’s “note” itself—in the research note, in the sentence or two one jots down to record a moment or an idea or to describe a person or place. The crot is essentially the “note” left free of verbal ties with other surrounding notes.

. . . The crots, of whatever kind, may be presented in nearly random sequence or in sequences that finally suggest circularity. Rarely is any stronger sense of order (such as would be characteristic of traditional grammar) imposed on them—though the absence of traditional order is far more pronounced when the grammar is used in fiction and poetry. The general idea of unrelatedness present in crot writing suggests correspondence—for those who seek it—with the fragmentation and even egalitarianism of contemporary experience, wherein the events, personalities, places of life have no particular superior or inferior status to dictate priorities of presentation.

Nearly always crots are separated one from the other by white space, and at times each crot is given a number or, upon rare occasion, a title. That little spectrum—white space only, white space plus a numbering, white space plus a titling—provides a writer with a way of indicating an increase in separation, discreteness, isolation.

Crots are akin, obviously, to a more general kind of “block” writing—the kind of writing found, for instance, in E. M. Forster’s *Two Cheers for Democracy* and in Katherine Anne Porter’s essay “Audubon’s Happy Land.” In such block writing, the authors have strung together short, fairly discrete units of composition to make whole compositions. Likewise, a series of

crots is not unlike a collection of aphorisms—say those of Eric Hoffer who, in a book like *The Passionate State of Mind and Other Aphorisms*, has brought together brief compositional units, some a sentence long, some several paragraphs long, each quite distinct from the other, yet grouped into a whole composition on the basis of a certain attitude and view of life common to them all. These compositions of “blocks” or “aphorisms” are so much in the spirit of croc writing that they may be considered a part of its development out of a traditional grammar of style into the alternate grammar. The writing of Forster, Porter, and Hoffer—in fiction and nonfiction—gives evidence of the usefulness of something other than the ordered linear procedure of traditional grammar even to writers who would not be identified as especially experimental or stylistically daring. (Weathers 4, 12)



I sit here with seven short pieces of writing scattered around me on the floor. Some as long as a page and a half, some only a paragraph or a sentence. Some printed out, some written by hand. A couple of the blips consist of two smaller pieces taped together. The miracle is that I *like* it all. I want to show all these blips to readers.

How could I like all this writing when I didn't feel I was doing anything particularly good this week—just churning stuff out, writing fast, producing assorted blips and pieces?

I didn't *change* a word. Yet now my pile of writing feels strong and right. The secret is cutting—elimination—absence.



In art, the “collage” *seems* modern, but consider the typical medieval stained glass window. Or the *collection* of stained glass windows in a church or cathedral. The walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are a collage.

Symphonies, concertos, and suites don't feel peculiar but they are collages. Why do music critics look for thematic or structural links between movements? Because most movements in most pieces of music are strongly unrelated.

Poetry is the most natural collage form. Poems often don't say what they are saying, and they jam unlike things together.

Why should the collage be old and natural in art, music, and poetry—but not in prose?



A few crots from what is probably the classic collage of our era, “For the Etruscans”:

[T]he woman finds she is irreconcilable things: an outsider by her gender position, by her relation to power; may be an insider by her social position, her class. She can be both. Her ontological, her psychic, her class position

all cause doubleness. Doubled consciousness. Doubled understandings. How then could she neglect to invent a form which produces this incessant, critical, splitting motion. To invent this form. To invent the theory for this form.

Following the “female aesthetic” will produce artworks that incorporate contradiction and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text.

An art object may then be nonhierarchical, showing “an organization of material in fragments,” breaking climactic structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climactic place or moment, since the materials are “organized into many centers.”

. . .

What we here have been calling (the) female aesthetic turns out to be a specialized name for any practices available to those groups—nations, genders, sexualities, races, classes—all social practices which wish to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated. (Rachel Blau DuPlessis 278, 285)



Boxes. The shaded box with prose inside—somewhere on the page of a magazine, newspaper, or even of a book. A separate thread of writing, but glued on where it somehow “goes.” I remember how startled and pleased I was by Dorothy Dinnerstein’s classic early boxes in a serious scholarly work, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. Short bits, sweetmeats, to keep us going in a long sustained argument.



Collages are cheating because they permit weak writers to produce strong finished pieces.

What’s hardest for writers of essays? Figuring out exactly what they are trying to say. And getting everything well unified and well organized.

What is easiest? Getting some good ideas and some good writing. Weak writers can often produce essays with a number of strong points—points that are definitely related and that throw good light on the overall topic. Yet the points don’t quite follow each other coherently and the whole piece doesn’t really hang together. And then there are those clunky transitions.

The collage lets us skip what’s hard. Skip figuring out exactly what we are really trying to say. Skip unity. Settle for a gathering of parts that are all *sort of* related. Skip organization and just put pieces in some intuitive order. And skip transitions altogether.

When we show weak writers how to produce strong collages—and especially when we publish a class magazine with everyone’s collage—we have a better chance of getting students to enjoy and care about writing and to work harder at the harder skills.



Here is Erich Auerbach on the difference between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*.

The tone [in a passage from St. Augustine] has something urgently impulsive, something human and dramatic, and the form exhibits a predominance of parataxes. . . . As we try to trace the impression back, we are reminded of certain Biblical passages, which in the mirror of the Vulgate become: *Dixitque Deus: fiat lux, et facta est lux* (Genesis 1: 3) [And God said: Let there be light, and there was light]; or: *ad te clamaverunt, et salvi facti sunt; in te speraverunt, et non sunt confusi* (Ps. 22: 6) [To thee they cried, and were saved; in thee they trusted, and were not disappointed]; or: *Flavit spiritus tuus, et operuit eos mare* (Exod. 15: 10) [Thou didst blow with thy wind, and the sea covered them]; or: *aperuit Dominus os asinae, et locuta est* (Num. 22: 28) [The Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she spoke]. In all of these instances there is, instead of the causal or at least temporal hypotaxis which we should expect in classical Latin (whether with *cum* or *postquam*, whether with an ablative absolute or a participial construction) a parataxis with *et*; and this procedure, far from weakening the interdependence of the two events, brings it out most emphatically; just as in English it is more dramatically effective to say: He opened his eyes and was struck . . . than: When he opened his eyes, or: Upon opening his eyes, he was struck . . . (61–62)

. . .

In the classical languages paratactic constructions belong to the low style; they are oral rather than written, comic and realistic rather than elevated. But here [in the *Chanson de Roland*] parataxis belongs to the elevated style. This is a new form of the elevated style, not dependent on periodic structure and rhetorical figures but on the power of juxtaposed and independent verbal blocks. An elevated style operating with paratactic elements is not, in itself, something new in Europe. The style of the Bible has this characteristic (cf. our first chapter [above]). Here we may recall the discussion concerning the sublime character of the sentences *dixitque Deus: fiat lux, et facta est lux* [And God said: Let there be light, and there was light] (Genesis 1: 3) which Boileau and Huet carried on in the seventeenth century in connection with the essay *On the Sublime* attributed to Longinus. The sublime in this sentence from Genesis is not contained in a magnificent display of rolling periods nor in the splendor of abundant figures of speech but in the impressive brevity which is in such contrast to the immense content and which for that very reason has a note of obscurity which fills the listener with a shuddering awe. It is precisely the absence of causal connective, the naked statement of what happens—the statement which replaces deduction and comprehension by an amazed beholding that does not even seek to comprehend—which gives this sentence its grandeur. (95–97)



The principle of negativity; absence. Strength from what's left out, not what's put in. Shaker furniture. Sparseness—the flavor of old timers and seasoned professionals. The old tennis pro who scarcely moves—he makes his opponent move. The collage makes the reader move. Silence can be most powerful in music; space in art. Picasso's bare line drawings. If everything there is strong, the observer will put in what's not there. The crashing silences in some of Beethoven's Opus 18 Quartets.



I find it helpful to lay out the spectrum that runs from the tightest essay to the loosest collage. This is a story of gradually loosening ties, slowly diminishing explicitness, unity, focus, connectedness, linearity:

- The school essay. Slam bam thank you ma'am. Say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you said. No surprises allowed.
- The academic essay. Academics permit themselves striking liberties that they don't permit to students. Still, their essays are supposed to be smoothly connected and to *say* what they are saying. (Actually, the truly learned article—because of its long discursive footnotes—functions as a kind of collage. Nowadays publishers ruin the effect by trying to make the text look seamless and removing all the notes from the page and hiding them together at the end.)
- The essay in the larger tradition of Montaigne. It's supposed to *get around* to saying what it's saying—but sometimes does not. From Montaigne on, this more expansive genre has served as an invitation to see where the mind goes as it explores something—and to welcome the fact that the resulting path is not tightly logical but instead has a lot of surprises and wandering. Nevertheless, the implicit principle of the essay is to *connect* that wandering, to *lead* the reader's mind from point to point, to create bridges. The principle of the collage, on the other hand, is to blow up the bridges and make the reader jump or swim.
- The focused collage. It doesn't say what it's saying—but it implies a definite point.
- The open collage on a specific issue or topic. It doesn't even imply a point. Rather it presents conflicting points and multiple points of view. Many newspaper feature stories and radio and TV documentaries take this form because it's so much easier: no need to choose or decide.
- There are open collages with no topic at all but that hover over a general area. "Sports Roundup." "Medical Breakthroughs in our Lifetime."
- The collage on no topic at all. Sheryl Fontaine and Francie Quaas get their students to make collages at the end of a writing course by simply choosing passages they like from everything in their portfolios. This is an invitation to the centrifuge. Still, there will almost certainly be a lurking theme or issue. As Chaucer says, "The tongue returns to the aching tooth." What else is a

“magazine” but a collage on no topic at all. “Magazine” means a storehouse—classically of gunpowder.

In fact, the collage process can provide a quicker and easier way to create a draft for a conventional or logically organized essay, and it usually adds more life and energy to the final product—more raisins in the loaf. Just follow the main steps of quickly writing everything you can think of in any order and choosing the best pieces and cleaning them up a bit. Then arrange in a *logical* order (perhaps with the help of an outline), and then figure out what is missing.



Collages use the simplest but most effective aesthetic principle: put things together if they “sort of go.” They need to go—but not too well. Interest and pleasure increase if there is some friction, resistance, difference. A bouquet is a collage, but a good bouquet needs some clash.

But what makes a collage good? Is there anything besides “Use good quality meat and vegetables for your stew, and have some contrast”? I don’t know, but here are two good suggestions from recent listeners to a draft:

- Anne Herrington: a sense of craft—of an intentional and shaping consciousness.
- Stephen Clingman: resonance across the gaps.



Just do it! Things go better with collage. TV ads are often microcollages—functioning as unrelated dingbat interrupters of unrelated programs. As creators of non sequitur, they are often more vivid and interesting than the programs they interrupt: often better art, better rhetoric—a more concentrated aesthetic experience.

I dial the phone. I must choose from a menu of choices. Then I’m on hold. Then I hear a short ad for the company. Then I’m thrust into the middle of a sequence of disconnected pieces of music. Then someone answers and we talk. Then she puts me on hold again. And so on.

“Call waiting” creates a collage of phone calls that our children and their friends use to create a collage of conversations.

Everybody’s home page. Hypertext. Indeed the internet itself is a vast collage.

They told us life was a connected narrative but it feels more like a collage.



I wonder whether the demand for connected, coherent, logical thinking in the field of philosophy might in itself have prompted Pascal and Wittgenstein to



compose important works in the form of the disconnected collage. Perhaps their crotted works are saying, “Stop pretending that you can say what really needs saying and still use valid chains of connected reasoning.” An allergy to the pretense of coherence?

This makes me think of the allergy that led to Hemingway’s notorious style. He said he was avoiding abstraction and pursuing concreteness—and he was. But he was also avoiding syntactical hierarchy and pursuing syntactical flatness. He went from hypotaxis to parataxis. Short sentences and the proliferation of *ands*.

There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, and the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (Hemingway 191)



In our struggles to teach and to write well-constructed essays, we are constantly reminded of the mind’s tendency to disconnect. But if we spent more time seeking randomness—for example, by constructing collages on no topic at all—we’d notice a much stronger tendency in the human mind—namely, to connect. The human mind is *incapable* of not making sense. It is difficult even to program a computer to produce true randomness.



Drawing together such disparate manifestations as Seurat’s pointillism, Muybridge’s stop-motion photography, the poetry of Whitman, Rimbaud, and Laforgue, the tone rows of Schoenberg, and the novels of Joyce, the author [William R. Everdell, in *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought*] makes an engrossing and persuasive case for his claim that “the heart of Modernism is the postulate of ontological discontinuity” (Holt 65).



*The man stepped on the gas. The car surged forward.*  
*The man stepped on the gas and therefore the car surged forward.*  
*After the man stepped on the gas, the car surged forward.*  
*The man having stepped on the gas, the car surged forward.*

Sentence combining—an enormous if waning industry—is designed to teach students to create longer and more complex syntactic structures—to

combine small sentences (line one) into longer ones (following lines)—to move from parataxis to hypotaxis. The goal is syntactic and semantic hierarchy and subordination: building in transitional words (thus the preoccupation with teaching connectives like “however,” “although,” “moreover”), so as to rope in larger and larger pieces of linguistic terrain as single units. They call it “syntactic maturity” when students spell out connections between sentences and structure clauses hierarchically. I guess this makes sense. Yet I resist.

I feel naughty in that feeling, and indeed with part of my mind and part of my teaching, I *don't* resist. I concur. I try to teach thinking, and thinking *does* mean figuring out hierarchy and subordination: what are your main points and what are the subpoints and how do they relate? Make it all explicit. After all, the whole point of an essay is . . . no, wait, that's not quite right. The whole point of the *school* essay or *academic* essay is to *say* what you are saying, not to leave it implicit. And complex, hierarchical prose is good to learn and can be lovely. I make no argument against it—only against the notion that it's better, more advanced, and that it is the only goal in teaching writing.

It is *not* always syntactically immature to lay out unconnected sentences or units and let them rub up against each other without connective tissue. There is more energy in unconnected sentences, more drama. They tend to be an enactment of something going on rather than a record of a past event that is conceptually finished. Let the reader feel the energy of the jump. The man stepped on the gas. The car surged forward. *And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.* We need help in remembering that there is, in fact, some mystery in the fact that the car surges forward after the man steps on the gas.



“Things are seen,” says Pascal. “Causes are not seen” (*Pensees* #235). Age-old writing wisdom shakes its finger at us and declares, “Don't be vague,” but do we always want to nail down the relationship? Naked fragments suggest blessedly that everything is not so simple.



Etymologies. *Hypotaxis*. From the Greek. “Subjection, submission.” No wonder I fight it. *Parataxis*. “Setting side by side,” indeed, as one dictionary says, “an arranging in order for battle” (*Random House College Dictionary*, revised, 1982).



His first, or nearly first text (1942) consists of fragments, . . . because incoherence is preferable to a distorting order. Since then . . . he has never stopped writing in brief bursts. . . . (Roland Barthes writing about himself in third person. Quoted in Park 394.)



But damn it, first we've got to teach them to be explicit and clear. *Then* we can give them permission to leave things out. If they are going to use the techniques of the collage, they have to do it from a basis of skill with conscious craft—not just because they are lazy or unskilled. Picasso only made those empty and suggestive line drawings *after* he demonstrated that he could draw bulls the way they really look.

Collage and parataxis are important not only because they're easy and lazy—though that's important too. They are also important for the sake of *thinking*. If we ask our beginning students to spell out all their thinking, they often limit themselves to what's dull. If we invite them to use parataxis and collage—however lazy or cheating it may seem—they often capture more *sophisticated* thinking: greater cognitive complexity. And it often comes across too, despite our complaints about “the need for development.” Surely, it's preferable—often anyway—and perhaps especially in the beginning—to have sophisticated and complex thinking that is *tacit* and *sort of* there than pedestrian and dull thinking that is well spelled out.

Richard Haswell made a careful and sophisticated study of many graded student essays and discovered a disconnect between the quality of the writing and the level of the thinking. He discovered that the most successful essays were the most primitive and empty in thinking and logical inference. The *poorer* pieces of student writing had much more complex trains of thinking or inference. Yes, the poorer ones were poor as essays and the better ones were better—genuinely more satisfactory to read. But if the price of good clear writing is increased emptiness of thinking (and that's what his study clearly showed), should we not sometimes—and perhaps especially in the beginning—invite parataxis or collage and the complexity of implied logic that is invited by this “looseness”?



I've been working for a long time on a difficult essay. I'm writing to readers who will disagree with me and I've spent hours and hours trying to strengthen and refine these ideas. I care about them. My early writing was exciting to me. I knew I was going in the right direction. But lots was rough.

As I revised I cut, changed, added, and then cut, changed, added—all this over a week or more. I finally felt I was working it out, figuring it out. Then I had to put it aside for a couple of weeks.

I come back to it now with excitement—it's the fruit of so much caring and work. But when I read it through I discover it's *terrible*: muddy, tangled, frustrating to read, unconvincing. How can it be that my best efforts lead to terrible writing? My first raw writing was better—and yet it was no good either.

It's at times like this that I need to remember collages—and how I can produce clear and lively language and interesting ideas without having to ago-

nize. It's *not* that I can't find good thoughts or words. It's just when I worked on *these* thoughts (which are hard), and for *this* audience (which is hard), everything turned to sludge. But I can fix it. My collages and freewriting are there to prove that I *can* find lively, clear language and good ideas.

If I want a good, organized essay on this topic, an essay that spells out everything explicitly, then I've got to keep going and try to work through to coherent, connected clarity. But if I just want a good piece of writing on the topic, I could take an easier route. I could still go back to my early rough writing and take the good bits and make a collage—and it would be better than what I have now.



That reminds me. But I digress.

Collages are built on the principle of association—the mind's gift for thinking of things that are *different* and yet *linked*. Which leads to surprise.

Something I've already written makes me think of something I hadn't thought of—something I would never have thought to link. Something rolls off my pen that I couldn't have planned. *Surprise* is the most important writing experience for me. Surely, not many people write by choice unless they have tasted the pleasure of surprise and are hungry for more of it.

All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible. (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*)

Grammar B [using crots and other nonlinear devices], with characteristics of variegation, synchronicity, discontinuity, ambiguity and the like . . . is no longer an experiment, but a mature grammar used by competent writers and offering students of writing a well tested "set of options" that, added to the traditional grammar of style, will give them a much more flexible voice, a much greater communication capacity, a much greater opportunity to put into effective language all the things they have to say" (Weathers 2–3).

[I]n writing the essay in Grammar B I felt a freedom to comment on Blake's poem that I would not have felt in Grammar A; in fact, I would never have attempted to say such disparate things about the poem in Grammar A. I also discovered that in "gathering my thoughts" and making my "notes," I felt—between the act of invention and the final act of composition—far less distance than I frequently have felt betwixt invention/composition while using Grammar A. (Indeed, I'm convinced that many of us in the academic world linger over our research and our studies, delaying the writing of articles and essays, because we are inwardly, unconsciously resisting having to transform our material into the forms dictated by Grammar A.) And I also

realized, in writing my Grammar B essay, that while I was losing audiences on one side, I might well be making myself accessible to audiences on another. (Weathers 17)



People use the same form, collage, for conflicting goals:

- The modernist goal of creating deeper meaning—meaning beyond language;
- The dadaist and postmodern goal of destroying meaning—creating no-meaning;
- The naughty and journalistic goal of finding a quick and easy way to create something rhetorically pleasing.



“That’s just the way it is.” The phrase always points to bad news:

- The good die young.
- The wicked prosper.
- No dessert till you eat your salad.

Especially in writing:

- You can’t communicate unless you use words as others do.
- You won’t be taken seriously unless you conform to Standard Written English.
- People just won’t read it if it’s boring or unclear.
- Commas and periods go inside the quotation marks, semicolons and question marks outside—except on the other side of the Atlantic.

So let’s celebrate the subversive: “just the way it is” can also point to *good news*. Using a collage, we can write a good piece—something people will read—without quite figuring out what we are really trying to say and without figuring out a logical or coherent organization. And let’s celebrate all the other ways to cheat in writing and teaching writing:

- Freewrite. Don’t plan, don’t be careful, don’t structure. Invite garbage. It often yields good writing—good ideas and language that’s alive.
- Stop writing. Take a walk. Forget about it for a while. Stop struggling. *Not doing* is essential for doing.
- Put readers out of mind. The piece may have to work for them eventually, but think about them later in revising. Writing is often stronger when we say “screw readers.”
- Share drafts with others and ask for *no response*. Get everyone simply to listen and enjoy. We improve our writing immensely just by feeling our words in our mouths, hearing them in our ears, and experiencing the presence of listeners. No criticism, no instruction, no suggestions. Just the pleasure and mutuality of sharing.

- Share our drafts with others and ask them *not* for feedback or criticism, but rather for some of *their* thoughts and ideas on the topic that they are willing to give away. Our thoughts will usually trigger good thoughts in them that they are happy to let us have.
- Write *with* others. Meet at someone's house or in a cafe or restaurant or an empty classroom. One or three hours of writing with short breaks for chatting and tea. The presence of others somehow makes writing more feasible and satisfying. Body heat. Companionship. When we write alone, we are often pulled down by a feeling that says, "I can't do this."

Yes, struggle is necessary and inevitable. No danger of forgetting that. The danger is in forgetting that we can sometimes finesse the struggle.

Yes, cheating is unfair. Babies are given everything they need—without earning it. Little children get to play all day. Taking the easy way helps us relax and risk. Shortcuts help our minds to jump.

It seems as though smooth logical prose is "regular" and the collage is odd or deviant. But actually the collage—because it is just a bundle of fragments that don't *say* what they are saying—gives us a better picture of how language really works. Words are nothing but empty balloons unless we blow them up. Words themselves don't "carry" meaning. Meaning must always be supplied by readers or listeners—for all writings not just for the collage.

Thus the collage is the universal paradigm for discourse (like the relativity model), while smooth logical prose (the Newtonian model) disguises how discourse actually works.



I read my collage outloud to a friend. He ends up thinking I have the opposite opinion from the opinion I really have. Is it because I wrote so badly? No, it's not badly written. It's because, as a collage, it doesn't say what it's saying—or even try to say *anything*. It just *presents* material. Yes. And I like that about collages. They can settle for throwing live bits at readers and asking them to *experience* them and make up their *own* mind.

But his "misreading" leads to a subversive thought. Perhaps he's right. Perhaps, now that I look at my collage again, I don't think what I thought I thought. Perhaps my collage allowed me to find words for what I didn't know. My collage—and my reading it outloud to my friend—are making me wonder if I disagree with my old self.

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## Can Personal Expressive Writing Do the Work of Academic Writing?

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What is the work of academic discourse? A simple answer is serviceable: academic discourse makes arguments, solves problems, analyzes texts and issues, tries to answer hard questions—and usually refers to and builds on academic discourse. So why can't these jobs be done with personal and expressive writing?

Perhaps you'll say that I've left out the most important job of academic discourse: to be objective or unbiased. But objectivity is passé. Few academics now believe that they can achieve objectivity—or that this view from everywhere-and-nowhere is even a desirable goal. Everyone seems to agree that we can never write anything except from a situated and interested point of view. (What would happen if Alec Guinness stepped out of *The Man in the White Suit* with another new invention: not just a process for making impervious suits but also for making irrefutable truths? I think we'd have to bundle him off again.)

But the death of objectivity has not catapulted academics into publishing personal expressive writing in learned journals. Let me point to four important features in current academic discourse that seem to distinguish it from personal expressive writing. (Perhaps these features are surrogates for objectivity.)

*A larger view.* Even though academic writers seldom profess true objectivity (at least in the humanities), they tend to try nevertheless for a kind of larger perspective that shows how their position relates to the positions other people have taken or might take on the topic. They don't just say, "Here's my position," but rather, "Here's how my position relates to yours. I'm not objective, but I'm not myopic either. I can see the larger terrain."

*Clear thinking.* While still not professing objectivity, academic writers nevertheless tend to try for clear thinking. Above all, this means centering on claims, reasons, evidence—argument. Being winning or sincere or even powerfully seductive is not enough.

*Logical organization* Academics tend to insist on a kind of "bony" structure in their publications; points should follow reasonably from each other, and the skeleton of argument is prominent—heightened by signposts that tell what's ahead and where we've been.

These passages come from the Foreword for a special issue of *Pre/Text* that I edited—an issue devoted to examples of personal and expressive writing doing the work of academic discourse. The issue was Vol. 11 Nos. 1 & 2, dated 1990, but it didn't come out until late in 1991.



*Judicious tone.* When academics write for publication they usually restrain themselves in style and voice—often achieving a certain impersonality. They tend to avoid much talk about themselves or their feelings; they favor control over abandon.

These seem like four pretty solid differences between academic discourse and personal expressive writing. But do these differences really mean that personal expressive writing cannot do the work of academic discourse? Let me look again at these four differences and try to show how they needn't exclude personal writing from academic work.

*Tone?* The contrast with personal expressive writing is obvious and decisive. But is it part of the essential job of academic writing to sound judicious, restrained, and somewhat impersonal?—or is that tone just one way of doing the job? Some people say there can be no wedding without morning coats and other formal attire. My hope is that this issue of PRE/TEXT will help convince readers that good academic work can be done in a more personal tone of voice.

*Logical organization?* Personal expressive writing obviously invites looser, less four-square structures of organization—more intuitive and associative—allowing us to imply more and spell out less. Yet there is nothing in the nature of personal expressive writing that prevents explicitness and a four-square bony organization. Something can be clear and obviously shaped without being stiff—without being any less personal or expressive. In fact, of course, the letters and journal entries we write often make our points more explicitly and clearly than our published articles. The pieces I have gathered here represent a relatively broad range of organizational modes, but none will seem particularly unbuttoned to readers of contemporary critical theory. For the truth is that organizational “standards” have already “broken down” in much academic writing in the humanities. Deconstruction has sanctioned the publication of many pieces that don't even “say” what they are “saying”—on the principle that it is impossible to do so. And if we look concretely back through the annals, we'll see that academics have always managed to depart now and then from conventions of language and organization if their writing was sufficiently interesting—or if they had sufficient prestige.

*Clear thinking?* Similar conclusion. Personal expressive writing may open the door to blurting and venting—no claims, reasons, evidence, or arguments. But again (as I hope many of the pieces here show) despite the open door, there's nothing in the nature of personal and expressive writing that militates against clear claims, reasons, and evidence. A focused argument doesn't make something less personal or expressive.

*Larger view?* Many people assume that personal writing tends by its nature to occupy itself only with its own position; and certainly there is plenty of good personal expressive writing that operates this way. But this assumption is a problem. For there is also plenty of personal expressive writing, as you'll see in this issue of PRE/TEXT, that is deeply attentive to the views and positions of others. There's nothing in the nature of personal expressive writing that is at odds with talking about, summarizing, explaining, or building on the writing of others. In fact, personal expressive writing is often more clearly

attentive to an audience and its views than what we see in much academic writing—where writers often slide into a glassy-eyed stance of talking to everyone but not really connecting to anyone. We see this particularly vividly in personal writing in the form of letters to colleagues. It is one of the worst clichés of dichotomy-bound thinking to assume that feelings always push us toward solitary unconnected discourse, and that thinking pushes us toward social connection. “Personal” usually involves being personal in relation to others.

My premise, then, in putting together this collection, is not that all personal expressive writing does the work of academic writing: simply that some does; and that more could if we let it. Personal expressive writing happens to be one among many registers of discourses we can use for academic duty. Because personal writing invites feeling does not mean that it leaves out thinking; and because it invites attention to the self does not mean that it leaves out other people and the social connection.

. . .

### What’s at Stake?

What I like about personal or expressive writing is how it usually acknowledges what is at stake for the writer. So often, as reader, we only know what is at stake in a larger more impersonal sense (Western civilization or the epistemological premises of various theorists or the reputation of some important author). We often sense that we are not hearing what is actually driving the piece of writing we are reading—why the writer is choosing to take on the burden of Western Civilization at this point and in this way. That is, despite the pious doctrine that meaning is always ideologically situated, people who make that case often fail to situate meanings in terms of the personal stake they have. (They might reply, of course, that the very concept of a ‘person’ is a fiction, but their prose often betrays a palpable personal stake—even while not quite revealing what that stake is.) Up to now it has seemed inappropriate to include one’s own feelings and story in academic discourse. But since the personal dimension has such a big influence on one’s position, perhaps we should turn that convention around and say it is inappropriate to publish an argument or take a position unless you tell your feelings and story.

But that would be wrong. I’ve had it thrown at me: I’m just a privileged person who had trouble with an elite education and my positions are nothing but playings out of my rebellion. No, we deserve to have our arguments taken on their own merits. Even if my ideas are nothing but epiphenomena of my unresolved Oedipal struggle, they deserve to be taken seriously as arguments if they have any possible value. And judgments about my ideas are more secure than those about my inner dynamics. Wayne Booth argues compellingly about the dangers of ad hominem psychologizing argument in his *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*.

Nevertheless, this sincere warning is no argument against my main point in

this essay: that we will benefit from *allowing* and even inviting people to write more personally in academic publications if they *want* to. There is no reason to exclude voluntary acts of personal expressive writing. In short, I am all for purely impersonal discourse—good arguments only for their own sake, pure geometry—as long as we grant equal validity to personal discourse that does the job.

Mara Holt, in this issue, gives a good model for maintaining both sides of the dichotomy about the individual and society. She draws on George Herbert Mead writing more than sixty years ago:

Human Society . . . does not merely stamp the pattern of its organized social behavior upon one of its individual members, so that this pattern becomes likewise the pattern of the individual's self; it also at the same time gives him a mind, as the means or ability of consciously conversing with himself in terms of the social attitudes which constitute the structure of his self and which embody the pattern of human society's organized behavior as reflected in that structure. And his mind enables him in turn to stamp the pattern of his future developing self (further developing through his mental activity) upon the structure or organization of human society, and thus in a degree to reconstruct and modify in terms of his self the general pattern of social or group behavior in terms of which his self was originally constituted.

It's when people give in to hierarchical thinking and assume that one side of any dichotomy must always win or dominate the other that we get assumptions like those I'm fighting here: that either we have "knowledge" that is social, communal, socially justified etc., etc.—or we have non- or pseudoknowledge that is private, subjective, confessional, and so forth.

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