The Sixth Paragraph: A Re-Vision of the Essay

by Paul Lynch

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* Volume 2, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)
1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.
PE1417.W735 2010
808'.0427--dc22
2010019487

The Sixth Paragraph: A Re-Vision of the Essay

Paul Lynch

Part the First

Recently, I taught a class called "Introduction to the Essay."* It was not a first year writing class, which most students are required to take, but a sophomore elective. For a long time, nobody signed up for the course. I didn't understand why. I was prepared to teach some great stuff: essays about love, sex, mashed potatoes, turtles, getting lost, getting drunk, getting migraine headaches, noise, things people hate, things people love, and deer antlers. (I'll explain this last one later.) When students finally did sign up, it was at the last minute, when all the other required English classes had already filled. Eventually, after I got to know my students and they got to know me, I felt comfortable enough to ask them why they had been reluctant to take the class. "To be honest," one student said, "it was the title. It just didn't sound that interesting." I asked them what they thought they'd be writing in the course. "School essays," they said. "The kind we've been writing all our lives."

Looking back, I'm surprised that I hadn't seen it coming. When I was a middle school teacher, I decided to cover the bare walls of my

classroom with some posters. I went down to the supply closet, and I found one that immediately grabbed my attention: it was called "The Cheeseburger Essay." Maybe I grabbed it because I was hungry. Anyway, the poster pictured a triple-cheeseburger—I must have been really hungry—and each part of the sandwich was stamped with part of an essay. I'll bet that most of my "Intro to the Essay" students could have diagrammed the poster even without seeing it. The top bun was the introduction. The cheese was the thesis. Each of the three patties represented a reason that supported the thesis. And the bottom bun was the conclusion. So let's say I were asking my middle school students to write a "cheeseburger essay" about whether they should get homework every night:

> Students have always gotten a lot of homework. Teachers think it is important because it helps students, but the students do not like it because it is more work. Students should not get homework every night for three reasons. First, they have many extracurricular activities. Second, they should spend time with their families at night. Third, they should rest so they can be ready for school the next day.
>
> Students have many extracurricular activities. They do sports, music lessons, and art classes . . .

I'm sure you could write the rest of this essay in your sleep. (Perhaps you already have.) You know the rules, just like my students did. When I asked them what an essay was, they said the following. First, it has five paragraphs. Why five? I asked. Because you need one for your introduction, one for each of your three reasons, and one for your conclusion. What goes in the introduction? The thesis and the reasons. What else? Don't use the pronoun "I." Why not? Because you're supposed to be making arguments based on the support, and the support should prove the point. If you use "I," then it sounds like *you're* saying these things. Don't include your personal opinion because your opinion doesn't matter. Essays should speak for themselves. Don't use "you" either, they told me. It's too informal. And don't—I mean, *do not*—use contractions.

Whenever I teach college writing classes, I always ask how many students have been taught the five paragraph form. Almost every hand goes up every time. Why does everyone learn it? One, it's easy to remember. Two, it's easy to perform. If you're writing an SAT or AP

exam, the five paragraph essay gives you a blueprint that you can reproduce quickly. To be honest, it's also easy to grade. A teacher can recognize the parts very quickly. Is there an intro? Check. A thesis? Check. Reason #1? Check, and so on. For a high school teacher with 125 students, being able to read and grade quickly is crucial. So there are some good reasons to teach the five paragraph essay. Many of your college writing classes, by the way, will be capped at twenty students; the idea is to make grading papers a little easier and giving feedback a little more worthwhile. Unfortunately, you might also have an adjunct professor who's teaching four or five sections, which means they might have as many students as your high school teachers. They may be inclined to ask for these kinds of formal structures if only so they can keep their heads above water.

In any case, you may have noticed that I've just listed exactly three reasons why the five paragraph essay gets taught: "Students have always been taught the five paragraph essay. Teachers teach it for three reasons. First, it is easy to remember. Second, it's easy to perform. Third, it's easy to grade. . . ." Once again, you can probably see how this very essay on the essay going to shape up. And the bad habit of slipping into the five paragraph structure also reminds me of my bad conscience. I hung that cheeseburger poster in my classroom and taught my students to follow its advice so that they would do well on our state-mandated standardized tests. ("Who is your hero? Give three reasons why.") Such advice isn't terrible, and I don't mean to pick on middle and secondary school teachers, not only because I was a middle and secondary school teacher, but also because the vast majority of my college students have been very well prepared by the time they get to my class. (Notice that I just offered *two* reasons for my opinion, and I used an "I." I even used the passive voice. *What will he do next?!?*) Third of all—damn . . . I *still* cannot get out of the habit of offering three reasons—the good old five paragrapher does feature the basics. Academic writing should make an argument; arguments should have reasons; reasons should be based on evidence. But as you can see, the form tends to straitjacket writing: it fits everyone, but once you're in it, you can't really move.

English teachers often complain that people think of us as the grammar police. (Introduce yourself as an English teacher, and you're sure to hear something like, "Oops, I better watch my grammar.") This gets old, but I suppose we have no one but ourselves to blame.

We spend a lot of our time marking grammatical errors and writing things like *AWK* (as in awkward), *CLARIFY, SPECIFY,* etc. Again, I feel guilty about this—I've written these kinds of comments more times than I can remember. But they're not very helpful, are they? I might as well scribble *Write better!* in the margins. Kind of like yelling *Kick it!* at a soccer game. A student might ask, "If I knew how to *CLARIFY, SPECIFY,* and avoid *AWK-ing,* then don't you think I would have done it already?" It seems as if we want student writing to be like clean glass: we should see right through it to what you're telling us. The writing should be as clear as crystal, easily understood, with no effort on the reader's part required. The writing should also be brief and concise. No unnecessary words. Sentences should be like assembly lines, with not a move wasted. No hemming or hawing. Our previous five paragraph example exemplifies this plain style: "Students have always gotten a lot of homework. Teachers think it is important because it gives students practice, but students do not like it because it is more work. . . ." Sure, it's clear, brief, and sincere, but it's also really dreary and boring. Would you write or talk like this in any other part of your life? Imagine a five paragraph love letter. It would start like this:

> Since the dawn of time, men have written love-notes to women. I find you attractive and would like to accompany you to the local Cineplex for three reasons. First, we share many of the same interests and hobbies. Second, we like the same kinds of movies. Third, your beauty causes me to perspire excessively.

This is clear and brief, and it's even got three reasons, but it's probably not going to win anyone's heart.

(By the way, that was the sixth paragraph of the present essay. I'm just saying.)

What if you wrote an introduction like this?

> Others form Man; I give an account of Man and sketch a picture of a particular one of them who is very badly formed and whom I would truly make very different from what he is if I had to fashion him afresh. But it is done now. The brush-strokes of my portrait do not go awry even though they change and vary. The world is but a perennial see-saw. Everything in it—the land, the mountains of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—all waver with a common motion

> and their own. Constancy itself is nothing but a more languid rocking to and fro. I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not the passage from one age to another (or, as the folk put it, from one seven-year period to the next) but from day to day, from minute to minute. (Montaigne 907–08)

This introduction goes on for a while longer, but let's pause there for a moment. It's easy enough to say already what's wrong. Lots of "I." In fact, a lot of focus on the author himself. Thus, these sorts of pieces are often called "personal essays." But even though this is a personal essay, one focusing on the author, the author is still not sure exactly what he's writing about. He is "unable to stabilize his subject." He is painting his very own portrait, but he's not even sure how to do that: his brushstrokes "change and vary," and his picture "staggers confusedly . . . with a natural drunkenness." This is hardly an efficient way to write. Indeed, the author is promising to wander haphazardly, even drunkenly. Not only is the author writing entirely about himself, he is also suggesting that his self changes constantly. He doesn't worry about contradicting himself, another no-no for the school essay. There is no thesis statement of any kind. How could he offer a thesis if his subject is himself and he's not even sure what that means? He's simply going to record "varied and changing occurrences." If he could find something more solid in himself, he would. He can't give the final word, only the word of the moment.

Ironically enough, the paragraph I've just quoted was written by the author who is traditionally considered the inventor of the essay—Michel de Montaigne.

Montaigne was a sixteenth-century Frenchman who, upon his retirement, began writing short prose pieces in which he explored his thoughts and feelings on whatever subject occurred to him. He called them his *essais,* which comes from the French word for "try" or "attempt." It is, of course, the root of our word "essay." Originally, then, essay meant something like an experiment or an exploration. Montaigne's titles include "On Idleness," "On Liars," "On a Monstrous Child," "On Sadness," "On Sleep," "On Drunkenness," and so on. Often his main focus was himself. "Reader," he writes in his introduction to the *Essays,* "I myself am the subject of my book" (1). He

called them *essais* because he knew that he was simply testing out ideas. Later essayists would think of essays like going for walks, walks where the destination doesn't really matter. Virginia Woolf, a great novelist and essayist, wrote, "We should start without any fixed idea where we are going to spend the night, or when we propose to come back; the journey is everything" (65). In school essays, the destination is usually what matters. Personal essays, however, begin without a destination in mind. Basically, essayists like Montaigne and Woolf tried to understand the subjects that caught their interest by understanding their own thoughts and feelings about them. Today, we call this "writing to learn." It's the kind of writing in which the writer tries to figure out what she thinks *while* she's writing rather than doing so *before* she writes.

I hope the irony is becoming clear. I've just given examples from the inventor of the essay and one of its greatest twentieth-century practitioners. Yet, I'm not sure that most of their writing would have received passing grades in a standard first year writing class. Had they been graded in the usual first year writing class, the margins would have been filled with comments like *Focus!* and *Stick to the point!* Their written thought experiments didn't have traditional thesis statements that are supported with evidence. And in Montaigne's case, he was never finished with them. He revised and republished his essays twice, and his wife published a final version after his death. These new versions of his essays not only added new entries, but they also included revisions of his old entries. For Montaigne, it was perfectly natural to go back and change pieces that had already been published. Five centuries before computers and word processing, Montaigne was always rewriting.

Why did Montaigne write in this way? He had an unusual education, learning to read and write in Latin before he did so in his native French. He had read a lifetime's worth of classical literature when he was still very young. But this learning did not always console him. "I would like to suggest," he wrote, "that our minds are swamped by too much study and by too much matter" (151). With minds stuffed with knowledge, Montaigne argued, students did not learn to think for themselves. "We know how to say, 'This is what Cicero said'; 'This is morality for Plato'; 'These are the *ipissima verba* of Aristotle.' But what have *we* got to say? What judgments do *we* make? What are *we* doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do" (154). Montaigne also

complained that the teachers of his day "keep us for four or five years learning to understand words and stitch them into sentences; as many more, to mold them into a great body, extending into four or five parts" (189). Sound familiar? As a student, Montaigne had learned the formal structures of classical rhetoricians, who also had their version of the five paragraph essay, and Montaigne came to hate it. Tired of having his head crammed with other people's words, and tired of the strict formalism he had been taught, Montaigne sought a way to write that was informal, skeptical, and unsure.

Montaigne wasn't the only person who wrote what we might call "essays." He may have coined the term in the sixteenth century, but even centuries before, people were writing short nonfiction pieces about their experiences and thoughts. In thirteenth-century Japan, for example, Kenko wrote *Essays in Idleness*. The original Japanese title reads, "With Nothing Better to Do" (29). "What a strange, demented feeling it gives me," he wrote, "when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head" (30). Kenko wrote about a wide range of topics, including sexual desire, longing for the past, board games, and parades. One of his shorter pieces makes the strange claim that one "should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain" (36). I don't know whether this is true, but it shows that even before the term "essay" existed, some writers chose to "essay" about whatever floated into their minds.

In fact, essayists often write about small and minor things like mashed potatoes and ketchup, sidewalk chalk, going for walks, turtles, and even chasing after a hat that's blowing away in the wind. Other essayists take on more serious problems like alcoholism, migraine headaches, hunger, and other forms of suffering. Perhaps the only similarity that these essays share is that they recount the authors' own attempts to understand their experiences. In these essays, the writers don't start with their conclusion; they think through what's happening on the page. And while these essays have an organization, they are not organized in the usual thesis-plus-support system. The difference, according to Rutgers English professor Kurt Spellmeyer, is between writing that is "a means of achieving understanding" and writing that is a "demonstration of understanding" (270). The first is the kind of writing that Montaigne did: writing to achieve understanding, to try to

figure out what he thought about what he read and saw and lived. The second is the kind of writing we've usually favored in school: writing to demonstrate understanding, to prove that you've learned the material or found the right answer to whatever question we asked you. William Covino, a professor of English at Fresno State in California, puts it this way: one kind of writing asks for "knowledge-as-information" and another asks for "knowledge-as-exploration" (54). School has usually sought the former; Montaigne and other essayists write the latter. Covino calls it "the art of wondering." And as Virginia Tech professor Paul Heilker points out, the word *essay* itself is "less a noun than a verb" (180). Again, the original word in French *was* a verb; Montaigne was naming more of an action than a thing.

At this point, you may be wondering how the school essay strayed so far from Montaigne's version. There are many reasons, but the simplest may be that "essay" is such a loose, baggy term that it eventually was used to describe almost any short nonfiction work (as opposed to novels or short stories, usually classified as fiction). Teachers just got in the habit of calling their assignments "essays," whether they were asking for research papers, book reports, critical reviews, or arguments. Now, perhaps unfortunately, "essays" refers to forms that Montaigne would not recognize (and conversely, Montaigne's works might not be recognizable as essays). We schoolmasters have tended to favor "demonstration of understanding" and "knowledge-as-information," so our notion of the essay has tended to ask students to show knowledge that they already have rather than asking them to discover knowledge that they don't have. We want students to prove, not wonder.

I can't help it, either. Look what I'm doing in this essay so far. It may not be five paragraphs long, but it's basically demonstrating information and proving what I know. Perhaps I needed to do that just to show that the word "essay" usually has referred to a much looser, wider, even wilder form of writing. But now enough of my point-making. We've walked the straight and narrow path of demonstration. Perhaps it's time to explore a little bit. Perhaps it's time to essay.

Part the Second

If you've been teaching long enough, the schoolmaster habits can be hard to break. My initial intention for my "Intro to the Essay" class was to do the usual thing: analyze Montaigne-like essays and ask stu-

dents to write pieces showing that they had understood the methods of analysis that I was trying to teach them. In other words, I was about to ask my students to write five paragraph essays about Montaigne essays. Sort of like teaching someone how to play the guitar out of a book (and without a guitar). You learn something, I guess, but you won't be able to make much music.

I could see very quickly that my students were not enthralled with my plans. So I asked them what they wanted to write, and they jumped at the chance to do something different, to imitate the personal essay rather than analyze it. "We already know how to write school essays," they said. I asked them whether they'd feel gypped. "This course," I said, "is supposed to teach you something useful. You know, how to analyze a text, how to use evidence. I'm afraid that what you're proposing won't be much help to you in your other classes." They assured me that they didn't care. "We've been writing theses for all of our other classes," they said. "It would be fun to do something different." So to relieve my boredom and theirs, we junked my plans to write more formal academic pieces. We decided to write the kind of essays we were reading: about love, sex, food, animals, getting lost, getting drunk, getting headaches, things people hate, things people love, or—if my students chose—deer antlers. (No one did finally choose to write about deer antlers or any other sort of antler, but they could have if they'd wanted to.)

It was a little strange at first, asking my students to write . . . well, whatever the hell they wanted. But that's what I had to do, at least if I were going to follow Montaigne's instincts. In fact, giving my students absolute free range was more than strange; it was downright frightening. For me, at least. If you're a teacher and you're not . . . you know . . . *teaching,* then just what do you think you are doing? What happens when you have no idea what to expect?

It turns out that you can expect some really good, original writing, writing that made me forget to pick up my red pen. Take this opening, from my student Owen:

> I often have a strange feeling that there is some other place that I ought to be, and I do not know quite where it is. I am plagued with a vague suspicion that there is somewhere full of fascinating situations and events that were always meant to collide with my life and are waiting for me to stumble upon them but are slipping away into a void of hypotheticals while

> I am miles or feet away doing nothing of any importance or relevance to myself or anyone else. Thus my life slides away in the most ordinary and horrible way possible.

Now *that's* an opening paragraph. Soon after I began reading Owen's essay, I forgot that I was supposed to be "correcting" it. I was reading it as though it were written by a peer rather than a student. I was reading it because I wanted to read it. Rereading it now, I'm struck by its perfect Montaignian (that's a made-up adjective, but a good made-up adjective can be impressive) quality. It makes the same "mistakes" that Montaigne's essays make: it's all about the author—notice how often that he uses "I"—and it focuses on the author's thoughts and experiences. It invites an identification between the reader and the writer. I have felt this feeling, and perhaps you have, too. The writer speaks as a companion, rather than as an expert.

The piece got better. Like Montaigne, Owen is a bit skeptical about the benefits of formal education. School, he writes, "must convince the student that boredom is an unavoidable and essential component of life. If this were not accepted the 'real world' would fall apart." These sentences made me glad that I had abandoned my original plan for the course. Meanwhile, Owen's essay winds up to one of the best lines I read all semester: "When I tell people I am an English major I am usually asked if I want to be a teacher. The idea is absolutely absurd to me. How many inmates do you think apply for jobs as prison guards after being released?" I say this is one of the best lines I read, but reading it also made me uncomfortable since I had both been an English major and become an English teacher. But it made me think, and it made me wonder how often I have bored my students because I am guarding in the same way I was guarded. I like to think that my teaching "frees" students—from prejudice and ignorance. After Owen's essay, though, I wondered whether I was freeing students or imprisoning them. That's what the best essays do: they make you wonder.

Now, let's say he were writing this for a first year class that asked for a research paper. Though our notion of the research paper is pretty different from what Montaigne wrote, you will be asked to write formal research papers, and you may be wondering what the personal essay has to do with the research paper. Fair enough question. The answer begins with observing that Owen isn't just navel-gazing. He's asking a serious question about whether education teaches us to tolerate boredom. In *Dumbing Us Down* (2005), for example, John Taylor

Gatto, former New York City Teacher of the Year and proponent of alternative schooling, has made a career about asking the very same question. Owen's wondering has led him to a question that also interests nationally-recognized educators, a question that one could do some research on and write about, a question that might be more interesting than whether you're for or against abortion, or gun control, or capital punishment.

Like Owen, Kathy begins with an experience to which her readers, including me, could easily relate: insomnia. (In fact, I'm drafting this essay at 1:14 a.m., so I can really relate to insomnia.)

> It is really a shame when one is not able to sleep. At least for me, it leaves me with nothing else to do but wrestle with my thoughts. I try to count sheep, hypnotize myself, concentrate on my breathing, and clear my head. All of these are techniques people have told me to try. None of them have worked for me so far. The problem lies in the fact that when I cannot sleep, I focus so much on trying to sleep, that it is nearly impossible.

The essayist here sounds like a peer or a friend rather than an expert or a professional. What's more, she takes a mundane experience and tries to turn it into something more serious, and thus she finds a subject that might interest her more than the standard research topics that demand us to be "for" something or "against" something. How many college students experience insomnia? Does it get worse as the semester goes on? How does it affect their grades? If you've ever found yourself wide awake in your dorm room all night, perhaps you've wondered about the answers to these questions. Writing about them in this essayistic, wondering/wandering way, you might be more likely to stumble across questions that really interest you.

Looking out her dorm window, Kathy sees our university's church, which leads her to recall attending services there. Though she planned on sleeping in most Sundays, now that she is away from home, a friend persuades her to go. And though she wakes up early only reluctantly, she does not regret going:

> The stained glass windows and architecture were amazing. I would continuously look up, for no other reason than to admire the way the golden arches on the off-white ceiling came together. The lights, pillars, candles, tabernacle, statues, es-

> sentially everything in the cathedral, demanded my attention. I was captivated by the beauty that surrounded me, and nothing could break my trance of sheer fascination.

Isn't that a lovely passage? Lovelier still is the way she begins the next paragraph: "Back to reality, I am not in that gorgeous church anymore. Instead, I am stuck in this utterly boring dorm room." The contrast is wonderful. If the strength of the first image weren't enough, Kathy sharpens our perspective by bringing us into her dorm room, which she doesn't need to describe. You can picture it: cinderblock walls painted flat white. It pales in comparison. But she tries to reconcile herself to her room. "After all," she writes, "this is the only space in this city I have." I don't know if I would have gotten such strong writing if I had given Kathy a formal assignment.

Jon decided to imitate Sei Shonagon, one of the great Japanese essayists, who wrote in the tenth century, long before Montaigne came up with the word *essai.* Sei Shonagon liked to keep lists of her likes and dislikes, and my class read one of those essays, titled "Hateful Things." Though she wrote one thousand years ago, her dislikes can seem very familiar: "A man who has nothing in particular to recommend him but who speaks in an affected tone and poses as being elegant" (27). Or, "Sometimes a person who is utterly devoid of charm will try to create a good impression by using very elegant language; yet he only succeeds in being ridiculous" (26). (In college, you may run into people who use very elegant language but succeed only in being ridiculous.)

Jon kept his own list. "Since I am not in the greatest mood right now," he writes, "I thought it appropriate to base this essay on Sei Shonagon's 'Hateful Things.' I would just like to apologize in advance for anyone I may inadvertently offend with the subsequent items." Already, I was primed simply to read this essay. How are you going to "correct" what someone hates? Besides, I wanted to see how much, if anything, Jon and I had in common. "The squirrels outside my window in the parking lot playing a friendly game of cat and mouse. The freedom they have upsets me. While I sit in my room studying in order to make something of my life, they run around without a care in the world. Sometimes I wish I were as free as these squirrels, being able to do whatever the hell I want whenever the hell I want." This is a very common move in a personal essay: to take a mundane moment—for example, watching squirrels play—and then to ask larger questions about one's purpose in life. Something else Jon hates: "Having a ri-

diculous amount of work to do on Mardi Gras weekend. Where is the celebration in that? I believe there is a conspiracy among teachers to make as much work as possible due the week after what is known to be a busy weekend among college students." (Again, a question that might be worth exploring. Does homework increase near holiday and party weekends? How would you find out?) He continues, "I mean, I had big plans for this weekend, especially Saturday, I was going to get up early, go 'eat breakfast' at a friend's apartment, then go 'watch' the parade, come back and 'sleep' for a couple of hours, and go back to my friend's apartment to 'play some board games.'" This passage is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, it sounds like the author is writing his thoughts as they come to him. That gives the essay a lively tone. Second, the passage requires so much interpretation. As you can probably guess, Mardi Gras is not exactly the most wholesome event in the world, so the author's scare quotes make me wonder what he means exactly. I have a hard time believing that they're just going to be playing board games. I don't know for sure, but that's what makes it interesting.

Like Jon, Samantha followed a time-honored essay tradition, writing about the art of walking. We read Henry David Thoreau's essay on walking, and though Samantha didn't like it very much, she used as it inspiration for her own work:

> The reason I dislike Thoreau so much is because he consistently drifts far, very far, away from his intended idea. Then, when you try to figure out how he got to a certain point, it just confuses you more. He begins the piece by talking about the art of walking and by the end, he has wandered miles from the beginning idea and never returns to tie up loose ends. Is the reason I feel the need for the author to return because I simply have been trained that way? Throughout my life, I have been saddled with expectations that are supposed to teach me responsibility, obedience, control, and fluidity of thoughts. Eventually, I became accustomed to thinking everyone expected those of me and in turn I expect it from them.

What I like about this passage is the level of criticism. Sam isn't just saying she hates Thoreau's essay; she is also questioning why she has come to the conclusions that she has. She's wondering about her own interpretive principle. That makes this moment very Montaingian: it's

not just the critique of another author but the critique and the personal reflection about that critique. Sam comes to wonder whether she reads because of how she's been trained, and that's a short step from wondering whether there are different ways of reading (and writing). These are questions that have troubled English professors for a long time. Is there a "right" way to read? Or do we just think that the way we happen to read is the "right" way? This is a serious question. Perhaps you've had the experience of being told that the books you like aren't literature, or that your interpretation of a poem isn't correct. Well, that all depends on what you mean by "literature" and "correct." There's a huge argument about this between scholars, but the truth is we usually don't share it in the classroom. It's sort of like the way parents try not to fight in front of the children. This condescension is obviously foolish: Samantha, who's not an English major, has found her way to a fundamental question simply by following her thoughts. Again, essays are more about exploring what's possible rather than demonstrating what's already known. (If it's already known, why demonstrate it?)

Speaking of exploring, I actually asked students to go for a walk one day, so they could practice wandering around aimlessly. This experience was strange for them, as it was for me. (I stayed behind to watch their stuff, and I can just imagine what someone who happened to look in might have thought. Were they all abducted by aliens?) Samantha wasn't quite sure what to do either. "When the class was told we were going for a walk," she writes, "I was expecting a kind of group walk around campus or, at least, some kind of structure. Never did I expect to just leave class and walk on my own. I was lost, and I believe, by the puzzled looks on the faces around me, the class was, too. The first thing that came to mind was *whom should I walk with so I don't look like a loser walking alone?*" This question suggests the same thing about school that Montaigne noticed and Sam has already noticed. School can so train you to think in certain ways that even taking a walk by yourself seems strange.

At this point, you may be wondering how to write such an essay. The truth is, I don't know. We just read some examples and went for it. Jon imitated a structure we'd read. Samantha took a theme and played with it. Owen captured the tone of Montaigne perfectly, and Kathy sat at her desk and imagined her entire world. Of course, we worked on these pieces throughout the semester, revising them to make them stronger, and proofing them at the end for any little errors. But the

creativity came from the students, and its source was mysterious. In some ways, I did the least teaching that I have ever done in a semester. I just asked my students to read some essays and write essays like them.

I'm not trying to suggest that Montaigne's version of the essay is better than the formal school version. I'm simply arguing that there are other available ways of writing, ways that are as old and as important and valuable as the usual ways we're usually taught. You're still going to need to know how to write an argument with a thesis and with support. That's a good and useful thing to know. Moreover, it's not as if the personal essay and the school essay are diametrically opposed: the former can lead to the latter in interesting and compelling ways. The personal essay does not demand that you answer questions; it demands that you ask really interesting questions. Yes, these questions can lead to answers, but the better the question, the better the answer. At the very least, you now know that there is another way to write, one that allows you to wander far and wonder out loud.

Discussion

1. If you could write about anything, what would you write about? If your writing teacher simply said, "Write what you want," where would you start?
2. What food would you write about? What animal? What girlfriend or boyfriend? What book? What strange event? What question?
3. If you weren't taught the five paragraph form, what kind of form(s) have you been taught? How have you been taught to structure essays? What reasons have you been given for structuring your essays in these ways?
4. Have you ever taken a walk to nowhere in particular? A drive to nowhere in particular? If not, why not?
5. Is there a piece of your own writing that you love but that has nothing to do with school?

For More on the Essay

If you want a really good and thorough introduction to the essay, I recommend Philip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present.* This book features a large collec-

tion of essays, starting with very early versions from the ancient world, continuing through Montaigne, and reaching all the way to the present day. Lopate also has a great list of books of essays and books on the essay, so you can probably find whatever you want by starting with Lopate. You can also check out John D'Agata's *The Lost Origins of the Essay,* which goes back in time even further than Lopate's collection. If you want to read Montaigne, you can read the M.A. Screech translation, which I've used here, or you can read the Donald Frame translation, which sometimes reads a little easier. You can also find a lot of essays online, especially of older essayists. If you google "Montaigne" and "Project Gutenberg" for example, you'll find a lot, though the translation is from seventeenth century. You can also find twentieth-century essayists online, including Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and James Baldwin, among others. Many living essayists, however, still have their work copyrighted. Nevertheless, you may be able to find a lot of contemporary work on your library shelves and in your library electronic databases.

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