Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Student

by E. Shelley Reid

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

Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Students

E. Shelley Reid

1. A Thousand Rules and Three Principles

Writing is hard.*

I'm a writer and a writing professor, the daughter and granddaughter of writers and writing professors, and I still sit down at my keyboard every week and think, *writing is hard.*

I also think, though, that writing is made harder than it has to be when we try to follow too many rules for writing. Which rules have you heard? Here are some I was taught:

> Always have a thesis. *I* before *E* except after *C.* No one-sentence paragraphs. Use concrete nouns. A semi-colon joins two complete sentences. A conclusion restates the thesis and the topic sentences. Don't use "I," check your spelling, make three main points, and don't repeat yourself. Don't use contractions. Cite at least three sources, capitalize proper nouns, and don't use "you." Don't start a sentence with "And" or "But," don't end a sentence with a preposition, give two examples in

> every paragraph, and use transition words. Don't use transition words too much.

When we write to the rules, writing seems more like a chore than a living process that connects people and moves the world forward. I find it particularly hard to cope with all those "Don'ts." It's no wonder we get writer's block, hands poised above the keyboard, worried about all the ways we could go wrong, suddenly wondering if we have new messages or whether there's another soda in the fridge.

We can start to unblock the live, negotiated process of writing for real people by cutting the thousand rules down to three broader principles:

1. Write about what you know about, are curious about, are passionate about (or what you can *find a way* to be curious about or interested in).
2. Show, don't just tell.
3. Adapt to the audience and purpose you're writing for.

When we write this way, we write *rhetorically:* that is, we pay attention to the needs of the *author* and the needs of the *reader* rather than the needs of the *teacher*—or the rules in the textbook.

Everything that matters from the preceding list of rules can be connected to one of those three rhetorical principles, and the principles address lots of aspects of writing that aren't on the list but that are central to why humans struggle to express themselves through written language. Write about what you know about *so that you can* show not just tell *in order to* adapt to your audience's needs and accomplish your goals. (Unless you do a good job showing what you mean, your audience will not understand your message. You will not meet their expectations or accomplish your goals.) Make clear points early *so that* your audience can spot your expertise or passion right from the start. Write multi-sentence paragraphs in which you show key ideas in enough detail that your audience doesn't have to guess what you mean. Use a semi-colon correctly *in order to* show how your carefully thought out ideas relate to one another—and to win your reader's confidence.

Writing will still be hard because these are some of the hardest principles in college; they may be some of the hardest principles in the galaxy. But if you write from those three principles, and use some of the strategies listed below, your writing will finally have a fighting

chance of being *real,* not just *rules.* And that's when writing gets interesting and rewarding enough that we do it even though it's hard.

2. Show & Telepaths

What does that "show, don't just tell" idea really mean? Let's try some time travel to get a better idea. Can you remember being in kindergarten on show-and-tell day? Imagine that a student gets up in front of you and your fellow five-year-olds, empty-handed, and says, "I have a baseball signed by Hank Aaron that's in perfect condition, but I can't bring it to school." You're only five years old, but you know that she's got two problems, right? Not only can you not *see* the ball to know exactly what "perfect condition" looks like, to eyeball the signature and smell the leather and count the stitches, but you have no reason to *believe* this kid even if she describes it perfectly. If you tell without showing, your reader might not only be confused but might entirely disbelieve you. So you're two strikes down.

Another way to explain show vs. tell is with a story. There is a very, very short science fiction story in a collection of very short science fiction stories entitled "Science Fiction for Telepaths."

This is the entire story, just six words: "Aw, you know what I mean" (Blake 235).

"Wah-ha-ha!" go the telepaths, "what a great story! I really liked the part about the Martian with three heads trying to use the gamma blaster to get the chartreuse kitchen sink to fly out the window and land on the six-armed Venusian thief! Good one!" Since the telepaths can read the storyteller's mind, they don't need any other written details: they know the whole story instantly.

This story is a little like when you say to your best friend from just about forever, *you know what I mean,* and sometimes she even does, because she can *almost* read your mind. Sometimes, though, even your best buddy from way back gives you *that look.* You know *that look:* the one that says he thinks you've finally cracked. He can't read your mind, and you've lost him.

If you can confuse your best friend in the whole world, even when he's standing right there in front of you, think how easy it could be to confuse some stranger who's reading your writing days or months or years from now. If we could read each other's minds, writing wouldn't be hard at all, because we would always know what everyone meant,

and we'd never doubt each other. If you figure out how to read minds this semester, I hope you'll tell us how it works! In the meantime, though, you have to *show* what you mean.

3. The Little Green Ball and Some People: Doing Details Right

Now we know: I can read my own mind, and you can read your own mind, and this self-mind-reading is even easier to do than breathing in and out on a lovely April morning. When I write something like "I have a little green ball" on the whiteboard, I read my mind as I read the board, so I understand it—and I'm positive, therefore, that you understand it. Meanwhile, you read my sentence and your own mind together and the meaning is so perfectly clear to you that it's nearly impossible to imagine that you're not understanding exactly what I intended.

I have a little green ball. Even a five-year-old could read this sentence and know what I mean, right?

Try something. Bring both hands up in front of your face, and use each one to show *one* possible size of this "little" ball. (You can try this with friends: have everyone close their eyes and show the size of a "little" ball with their hands, then open their eyes, and look around.) Hmm. Already there's some possible disagreement, even though it seemed so clear what "little" meant.

Maybe "green" is easier: you know what "green" is, right? Of course. But now, can you think of two different versions of "green"? three versions? five? In the twenty-five minds in a classroom, say, we might have at least twenty kinds of little, and maybe a hundred kinds of green, and we haven't even discussed what kind of "ball" we might be talking about. Those of you who are math whizzes can see the permutations that come from all those variables. If I sent you to Mega Toyland with the basic instructions, "Buy me a little green ball," the chances are slim that you would come home with the ball I had in mind.

If I don't care about the exact ball—I just need something ball-like and not too huge and somewhat greenish—then it doesn't matter. I can leave it up to you to decide. (Occasionally, it's effective to avoid details: if I were writing a pop song about my broken heart, I'd be deliberately vague so that you'd think the song was about *your* heart, and then you'd decide to download or even buy my song.) But the more

I care that you know exactly what I'm thinking, the more the details matter to me, then the more information I need to give you.

What information would you need to write down so that someone would buy the exact little green ball that you're thinking of while he or she is shopping at Mega Toyland?

If you're going to *show* me, or each other, what you're thinking, using only language, it will take several sentences, perhaps a whole paragraph—filled with facts and statistics, comparisons, sensory description, expert testimony, examples, personal experiences—to be sure that what's in your mind is what's in my mind. After my students and I finish examining my ball and choosing rich language to show it, the whiteboard often reads something like this: "I have a little green ball about an inch in diameter, small enough to hide in your hand. It's light neon green like highlighter ink and made of smooth shiny rubber with a slightly rough line running around its equator as if two halves were joined together. When I drop it on the tile floor, it bounces back nearly as high as my hand; when I throw it down the hallway, it careens unpredictably off the walls and floor." Now the ball in your mind matches the ball in my hand much more closely.

Showing is harder than just telling, and takes longer, and is dependent on your remembering that nobody reads your mind like you do. Can you think of other "little green ball" words or phrases that you might need to *show* more clearly? How do you describe a good movie or a bad meal? How would you describe your mother, your hometown, your car? Try it on a blank page or in an open document: write one "you know what I mean" sentence, then write every detail and example you can think of to make sure that a reader *does* know what you mean. Then you can choose the most vivid three or four, the ones that best show your readers what you want them to understand.

There's another kind of description that requires mind reading. If I write on the board that "some people need to learn to mind their own business sometimes," would you agree with me? (By now, you should be gaining some skepticism about being able to read my mind.) In my head, I'm filling in "some people" and "their business" and "sometimes" with very specific, one-time-only examples. It's like I have a YouTube clip playing in my head, or a whole season's worth of a reality TV show, and you don't have access to it yet. (I might as well be saying "I have cookies!" but not offering to share any of them with you.)

If I give you a snapshot from that film, if I use language to provide a one-time-only example, I *show* you: "My ninety-year-old grandmother needs to stop calling up my younger cousin Celia like she did last night and telling her to persuade me to move back home to Laramie so my mom won't get lonely and take up extreme snowboarding just to go meet some nice people." Does that help you see how the one-time-only example *you* were thinking of, when you read my boring sentence along with your own mind, is different from what I wanted you to think? As writers, we need to watch out for the some-people example and the plural example: "Sometimes things bother me" or "Frederick Douglass had lots of tricks for learning things he needed to know." If an idea is important, give an exact one-time snapshot with as much detail as possible.

In a writing class, you also have to learn to be greedy as a reader, to ask for the good stuff from someone else's head if they don't give it to you, to demand that they share their cookies: you have to be brave and say, "I can't see what you mean." This is one of the roles teachers take up as we read your writing. (One time during my first year teaching, one of my students snorted in exasperation upon receiving his essay back from me. "So, like, what do you do," he asked, "just go through the essay and write 'Why? How so? Why? How so? Why? How so?' randomly all over the margins and then slap that 'B–' on there?" I grinned and said, "Yep, that's about it.")

It's also *your* job as a peer reader to read skeptically and let your fellow writer know when he or she is assuming the presence of a mind reader—because none of us knows for sure if we're doing that when we write, not until we encounter a reader's "Hunh?" or "Wha-a-a-?" You can learn a lot about writing from books and essays like this one, but in order to learn how *not* to depend on reading your own mind, you need feedback from a real, live reader to help you gauge how your audience will respond.

4. Lost Money and Thank-you Notes: What's in an Audience?

Writing teachers are always going on and on about *audience,* as if you didn't already know all about this concept. You can do a simple thought-experiment to prove to them, and to yourself, that you already

fully understand that when the audience changes, your message has to change, sometimes drastically.

Imagine that you've done something embarrassingly stupid or impulsive that means you no longer have any money to spend this semester. (I won't ask you what it is, or which credit card or 888 phone number or website it involves, or who was egging you on.) You really need the money, but you can't get it back now. If I just said, "Write a message to try to get some money from someone," you might struggle a bit, and then come up with some vague points about your situation.

But if I say, "Ask your best friend for the money," you should suddenly have a very clear idea of what you can say. Take a minute and consider: what do you tell this friend? Some of my students have suggested, "Remember how you owe me from that time I helped you last February?" or "I'll pay you back, with interest" or "I'll do your laundry for a month." Most of my students say they'll tell their friends the truth about what happened: would you? What else might you say to your own friend, particularly if he were giving you that skeptical look?

Suppose then that your friend is nearly as broke as you are, and you have to ask one of your parents or another family adult. Now what do you say to help loosen the parental purse strings? Do you tell the truth about what happens? (Does it matter which parent it is?) Do you say, "Hey, you *owe* me"? Some of my students have suggested choosing messages that foreground their impending starvation, their intense drive for a quality education, or their ability to learn a good lesson. Would your parent want you to offer to pay back the money? What else might you say?

Notice how easy it is for you to switch gears: nothing has changed but the audience, and yet you've quickly created a whole new message, changing both the content and the language you were using.

One more try: when your parent says there's just no extra cash to give you, you may end up at the local bank trying to take out a loan. What will you tell the bank? Should the loan officer hear how you lost your money, or how you promise you'll be more responsible in the future? Should you try looking hungry and wan? Probably not: by discussing collateral (your five-year-old Toyota) and repayment terms (supported by your fry-jockey job at McSkippy's), you're adjusting your message once again.

Sometimes writing teachers talk about a "primary" and "secondary" audience, as if *that* were really a complicated topic, but you know

all about this idea, too. Take just a minute and think about writing a thank-you note. If it's a thank-you note to your grandmother, then your primary audience is your grandmother, so you write to her. But if your grandmother is like mine, she may show your note to someone else, and all those people become *secondary* audiences. Who might see, or hear about, your note to your grandmother? Neighbors, other relatives, her yoga group or church friends? If you know your note will be stuck up on the fridge, then you can't use it as a place to add snarky remarks about your younger brother: you write for a primary audience, but you also need to think for a minute to be sure your message is adjusted for the needs of your secondary audiences. (If you haven't written a thank-you note recently, try to remember the last time someone forwarded your email or text message to someone else, without asking you first.)

In a writing classroom, everyone knows that, in reality, your primary audience is the teacher—just as during rehearsal or team practice the primary audience is the director or coach who decides whether you'll be first clarinet or take your place in the starting line-up. Your classmates (or teammates) may be part of a secondary audience who also need considering. It can be tempting to take the middle-of-the-road route and forget about any other audiences. But in all these cases, you won't be practicing forever. It helps to imagine another primary audience—sometimes called a "target audience"—outside the classroom, in order to gain experience tailoring your performance to a "real" audience. It also helps to imagine a *very specific* primary audience (a person or small group or publication), so that instead of staring at the screen thinking vague "some people" thoughts, you can quickly come up with just the right words and information to match that audience's needs, and it helps to consider some exact secondary audiences so that you can include ideas that will appeal to those readers as well. (Who do you suppose are the specific primary and secondary audiences for this essay? How does the writing adapt to those audiences?)

5. Pink Houses & Choruses: Keeping Your Reader With You

Once you've identified a target audience, and put down all the detail you can think of to help show your ideas to those readers, you need to focus on not losing them somewhere along the way. Earlier in your

writing career as you worked on writing cohesive essays, you may have watched writing teachers go totally ballistic over *thesis statements* and *topic sentences*—even though some teachers insisted that they weren't requiring any kind of set formula. How can this be? What's up with all this up-front information?

The concept is actually pretty simple, if we step out of the writing arena for a minute. Say you're driving down the interstate at sixty-five miles an hour with three friends from out of town, and you suddenly say to them, "Hey, there's that amazing Pink House!" What happens? Probably there's a lot of whiplash-inducing head swiveling, and someone's elbow ends up in someone else's ribs, and maybe one of your friends gets a glimpse, but probably nobody really gets a chance to see it (and somebody might not believe you if she didn't see it for herself!). What if you had said instead, "Hey, coming up on the right here in about two miles, there's an amazing huge neon Pink House: watch for it"? They'd be ready, they'd know where to look and what to look for, and they'd see what you wanted them to see.

Writers need to advise their readers in a similar way. That advice doesn't always need to be in a *thesis statement* or a *topic sentence,* but it does need to happen regularly so that readers don't miss something crucial.

"But," you say, "I'm not supposed to repeat things in my essay; it gets boring!" That's true, up to a point, but there are exceptions. Have you ever noticed how the very same company will run the exact same advertisement for light beer five or six times during one football game? It's not as if the message they are trying to get across is that complex: *Drink this beer and you will be noticed by this beautiful woman, or get to own this awesome sports car, or meet these wonderful friends who will never ever let you down.* The ad costs the company hundreds of thousands of dollars each time, but there it is again. Beer: sports car. Beer: sports car. Contemporary Americans have a very high tolerance for repeated messages; we even come to depend on them, like football fans relishing the instant replay. Beer: sports car.

If you'd rather think like an artist than an advertising executive, consider popular music. Pick a pop song, any song—"Jingle Bells," for instance, or whatever song everybody's listening to this month—and the next time you listen, count the number of times the chorus, or even the title phrase, comes up. Do we get bored by the repetition? Not usually. In fact, the chorus is crucial for audience awareness because

it's often the first (or even the only) part of the song the listener learns and can sing along with. Repeating the chorus helps bring the audience along with you from verse to verse: the audience thinks, "Aha, I *know* this!"

Now, what you're trying to say in your essay is much more complex than *beer: sports car* or *I will always love you.* If you only say it once or twice—there, in the last paragraph, where you finally figured out the most important point, or maybe once at the start and once at the end—we might miss it, or only get a piece of it. Here you've spent hundreds of minutes working on this idea, and we zoom past it at sixty-five m.p.h. and miss it entirely! You have to bring it back to our attention throughout the essay. Of course, you don't want to repeat just anything. You certainly don't want to repeat the same examples or vague "some people" theories, stuffing baloney into the middle of the paper to fill it out. But the core idea—beer: sports car—needs to appear early and often, using the same key words, even, as an anchor for all the complex ideas and examples you're connecting to it, as a place for the audience to recognize the main idea and find a way to "sing along."

So as you're revising, add your chorus back into some key middle parts of your essay—the beginnings and endings of paragraphs, like commercial breaks, can be places that readers expect repetition—until you start to really feel uncomfortable about your repetition . . . and then add it one more time, and it might be enough, but it shouldn't be too much. (Since you read the essay dozens of times *and* you read your own mind, you'll get antsy about repetition long before your readers will in their one trip through your essay.) If you get a good balance, your reader—the same person who keeps laughing at the beer ad or mumbling the chorus to the pop song without knowing the rest of the lyrics—won't even notice that you're repeating. When I work with my students, I say: "I promise to tell you—no harm, no penalty—if you're ever *too clear* about your main point." I find that very few people make it that far, but they like having the encouragement to try. You and your peer readers can make the same agreement.

6. Fruit Jell-O: Balancing Arguments & Examples

"Great," you say, "so I'm supposed to have all these examples and to have all these Pink House reminders, but it's hard to keep it all straight."

That's a very smart observation—because one of the main challenges writers face, when we can't read someone's mind or get them to read ours, is learning how to balance the writing that states our *theories and arguments* with the writing that provides our *evidence and examples.* It turns out that it's easier to do just one of these things at a time when writing, but having theories and arguments without evidence and examples is a recipe for confusion and misunderstanding.

I find that it helps sometimes to think about fruit Jell-O™, the kind my mom used to take to family get-togethers: lime Jell-O with mandarin orange slices in it, or berry Jell-O with cherries in it. Fruit Jell-O is a pretty good *balance* of foods to take to an informal family gathering: it meets the needs of the audience.

You wouldn't want to take plain gelatin to show off to your family, after all. Think of the last time you ate plain old Jell-O, with no additional food (or beverage) added to it. Weren't you in a hospital, or a school cafeteria, or some other unhappy place? Hospitals serve plain gelatin because it *looks* and *behaves* like food, but it has so few ingredients that it won't irritate your mouth or upset your digestion. That same blandness means that not a lot of family members will choose it over the tortilla chips or the macaroons.

Writing just your opinions, theories, and arguments is a lot like serving plain Jell-O: it seems like you're doing something productive, but there's not much substance to it. Politicians often write plain Jell-O speeches with no details or examples, because that kind of talk motivates people but won't irritate voters with tiny details about time or money. Talent-show contestants sometimes choose to sing plain Jell-O songs for the same reason.

On the other hand, if you took a bowl of cherries with you, your family might perk up a bit, but cherries are kind of hard to serve. They roll out of the bowl and off of those flimsy paper plates and end up sliding into the cheese dip or being squished into the new carpet by your two-year-old cousin. People finger all the cherries but take just a few (using tongs on cherries just seems too formal!), and it's hard to know how to handle the pits, or to eat gooey already-pitted cherries with your hands.

Writing just your examples, reasons, and details is a lot like bringing cherries to the party: it's interesting and lively, but readers don't know what to make of it all. Some of your reasons or stories will roll out of readers' heads if they aren't firmly attached to an argument;

some readers will meander through all your details and just randomly remember one or two of them rather than building a whole picture.

Good writers blend argument and evidence as they write, so that readers get both elements together all the way through. Good revisers go back and adjust the recipe, seeking a workable combination. Sometimes as you're revising it can feel odd to be just adding cherries: it can seem like you're packing in too many extra details when there's already a perfectly good piece of fruit there. Other times it seems weird to be just adding Jell-O, because all those "chorus" sentences sound the same and have the same flavor, and you don't want to repeat yourself unnecessarily. It's hard to get the balance right, and you'll want to have your readers help you see where to adjust the ingredients. But if you remember that the fruit/evidence is the tastiest part (so you want the most vibrant examples), and the point of Jell-O/argumentation is to provide consistency to hold everything together (you want statements that sound alike), you may start to gain additional confidence in balancing your writing.

7. Wash-and-wear Paragraphs

If you're going to have Jell-O and cherries, a chorus and one-time-only examples, in every paragraph, that's going to take some managing—and you'll want to manage *rhetorically* rather than going by some rules you once heard about exactly how long a paragraph should be. What paragraph-length rules have you been taught? Should a paragraph be five to eight sentences? always more than two sentences? never longer than a page? Some of my students have learned rules that specify that all paragraphs have twelve sentences and each sentence has a specific job. That sounds complicated—and you know that a rule like that can't be universally true. What if you're writing for a newspaper? for a psychology journal? for a website? Paragraph length doesn't follow clear rules, but once again depends upon a rhetorical negotiation between the writer's needs and the reader's needs.

Switch gears for a minute and try out another metaphor: what do you know about how big a load of laundry should be? Right: it depends. What's wrong with a very small or a very large load? Paragraphs face the same kinds of boundaries: too small, and they can waste a reader's energy, always starting and stopping; too large, and they overload a reader and nothing gets clean. But there are no definite rules

in laundry or in paragraphs. Is there ever reason to do one tiny laundry load, even if it might waste money or energy? Sure: maybe you've got an important event to attend Friday night and you just need to wash your best black shirt quickly, or maybe you have a small washing machine. Is there ever reason to do one slightly oversized load? Absolutely: perhaps you're low on quarters or there's only one machine open in the dormitory laundry room, and you need to get all those t-shirts clean. The same is true for paragraphs: sometimes, you have just one important thing to say, or your readers have a short attention span, so you want a short paragraph—even a one-sentence paragraph. On the other hand, sometimes you have a complex explanation that you want your reader to work through all at once, so you stretch your paragraph a little longer than usual, and hope your reader stays with you.

You want to write paragraphs that your target audience can handle without straining their brains or leaving suds all over the floor. I bet you're pretty good at sorting laundry into the basic loads: darks, colors, whites, like the three body paragraphs of a five-paragraph essay. But what if you're writing an eight-page paper using three basic points? What if you have an enormous pile of whites?

You sometimes have to split up even the loads that look alike. Would you split an all-whites pile into all the long-drying socks vs. all the quick-drying shirts? the dirty stuff vs. the really gross, stinky stuff? the underwear you need tomorrow vs. the towels you could wash later? You can find lots of ways to split a too-long paragraph based on how you want your reader to think about the issue: pros and cons, first steps and next steps, familiar information and more surprising information.

Writers need to remember that paragraphs help readers focus and manage their analytical energies. It's good to have some variance in size and shape but not to overtax your readers with too much variation; it's useful to write each paragraph with a clear beginning and ending to direct readers' attention; and it's helpful if paragraphs come with a blend of information and analysis to help readers "see what you mean" about your subpoints and see how they relate to the overall point of your essay. It's not true that paragraphs are "one size fits all," and it's not true that "anything goes": you need to adjust your paragraphs to connect your ideas to your readers' brains.

8. Hey Hey Hey and the Textbook Conspiracy: Annotating Your Reading

I know, you thought this was an essay about writing. But part of being a writer, and being a helpful companion to other writers, is being a careful reader, a reader who writes.

Besides, I want to be sure you get what you pay for: that kind of critical thinking helps all of us be better writers. Did you know that you pay for most textbooks in two ways, and most students never do the simplest thing to recoup their investment?

How do you pay? First, except for texts like the one you're reading right now, you've paid some exorbitant price for your books, even if you bought them used. Why would you do that, instead of checking them out of the library or sneaking a look from a friend? Right: you can read them whenever and wherever you get around to it. (No, I don't want to know where you read your class book!) But you may be overlooking one more benefit, which I'll get to in a minute.

Second, you pay for the book—even a free one like this one—with your time. You pore over page after page, the minutes ticking by, instead of building houses for orphans in Botswana or coming up with a cure for insomnia or even giving that double-crossing elf what he deserves in *World of Warcraft.* Did you ever finish all that poring (with a "p," not a "b," really) and realize you had tuned out and didn't remember a thing? Now you've paid dearly, and you may have to pay yet another time when you re-read it.

The simplest thing you can do to get your money's worth and your time's worth from your books and other reading material is this: you can *write* on them.

Whatever you pay for the book (minus whatever you might sell it back for), the only two benefits you get are convenient reading access, and the chance to *write in the book.* If you don't write in your book, or type notes into the document, you're being cheated, as if you'd paid for a Combo Meal but ate only the fries. (Do you think maybe you won't be able to re-sell your book if you write in it? Check with your friends: I bet someone's bought a used book that's been scribbled all over. So clearly someone will buy your book back even if you write in it. Don't let the textbook industry scare you out of getting what you pay for.)

Some of you may think you *are* writing on your text, but I wonder if that's true. Smearing it with hot pink highlighter pen doesn't count

as *writing*. Why not? That takes another story and another metaphor. There's a classic *Far Side* cartoon from back in the twentieth century that reveals what dogs are *really* saying when they bark all day long. According to cartoonist Gary Larson, when we finally translate their secret language, we find that they say, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" (144). You can just see a dog thinking that way, everything new and surprising, but not much complexity of analysis. Hey!

When you read something and gloss it with your highlighter pen, that's what you're saying: Hey! Hey! Hey! You can come back six weeks later to write an essay or study for an exam, and you have an entire book filled with Hey! It's a good start, but as a smart writing student, you're ready to go further to get your money's worth.

Without having to expend much more energy, you can begin to add a wholly intelligent commentary, putting your own advanced brain down on the page, using an actual writing utensil such as a pen or pencil (or a comment function for an electronic document). For starters, let's just vary Hey:

Ha.
Heh.
Hee.
Hooboy!
Hmm.
Hmph.
Huh?
Whoa!

Each of those responses records some higher-brain *judgment:* if you go back later, you'll know whether you were saying "Hey, this is cool!" or "Hey, this is fishy." You can also use other abbreviations you know: LOL, OMG, WTH(eck), or ☺. You can underline short phrases with a solid or a squiggly underline, depending on your reaction. And of course, you can always go back to "Why? How so? *Show* me!" If you get really bold, you can ask questions ("will this take too much time?"), write quick summaries ("annotate so there's no hey") or note connections ("sounds like the mind-reading thing"). It doesn't take very long, and it keeps your brain involved as you read. What other short *annotations* could you write or type on this page right now?

Every time you write on the page and talk back to the text, you get your money's worth, because you make the text truly your own, and you get your time's worth, because you're staying awake and you're more likely to remember and learn what you read. If you don't remember, you still have an intelligent record of what you should've remembered, not just a pile of Hey! Bonus: being a writer when you're a reader helps you become a better reader *and* a better writer.

9. Short-Time Writing: Use Your Higher Brain

So far, we've been thinking about writing when you have plenty of time to consider your audience, play with your paragraphs, and recalibrate your Jell-O/cherry balance. But you won't always have that much time: sometimes you'll get a late start or have an early deadline. In college, you might encounter essay questions on an exam. Learning how to be a good timed-exam writer can help you in lots of short-time writing situations.

What's hard about writing an essay exam? The stress, the pressure, the clock ticking, the things you don't know. It's like trying to think with a jet airplane taking off overhead, or a pride of hungry lions racing your way. But wait: the coolest thing about the essay exam is that, in contrast to a multiple choice exam that shows what you *don't* know, the essay exam allows you to focus on what you *do* know. The problem is that only your higher brain can show off that knowledge, and for most people in a stressful situation like an essay exam, the higher brain starts to lose out to the lower brain, the *fight-or-flight* brain, the brain that sees breathing in and breathing out as one of its most complicated tasks, and so the writing goes awry.

Essay exams—or those last-minute, started-at-1:22-a.m. essays that you may be tempted or forced to write this semester (but not for your writing teacher, of course!)—generally go wrong by failing to meet one of the three principles described at the beginning of this essay. Sometimes students fail to study well so that they can write from knowledge. (Unfortunately, I don't know if I can help you with your midnight cram sessions.) More often, though, some very smart, well-prepared students fail to adapt to their audience's needs, or fail to provide specific support. All that late-night study-session agony goes for nothing if your lower brain takes over while you're writing. Your lower brain can barely remember "I before E," and it knows nothing about

complicated rhetorical strategies like ours: you have to make sure your higher brain sets the pace and marks the trail.

So the teacher hands out the questions, and the first thing you do is . . . panic? No. Start writing? Heavens, no. *Never* start an essay exam—or a truly last-minute essay—by starting to write the essay, even if (like me) you generally prefer to "just start writing" rather than doing a lot of restrictive planning. Freewriting is an excellent writing exercise, but only when you know you have plenty of time to revise. Instead, ignore all those keyboards clacking, all those pens scribbling: they are the signs of lower brains at work, racing off screeching wildly about lions without remembering the way writing happens. You're smarter than that. You're going to use your higher brain right at the start, before it gets distracted. Speed, right now, is your enemy, a trick of the lower brain.

The first thing you want to do is . . . *read the gosh darn question.* Really, really read it. Annotate the assignment sheet or exam prompt, or write the key question out on a separate piece of paper, so you know you're actually reading it, and not just pretending to. (If you're in a workplace setting, write down a list of the top things you know your audience—or your boss—wants to see.) In every essay exam I've ever given, *some*body has not answered the question. When I say this in a class, everyone frowns or laughs at me just the way you are now, thinking, "What kind of idiot wouldn't read the question? Certainly not me!" But someone always *thinks* she's read the whole question, and understood it, when she hasn't. Don't be that writer. Circle the verbs: *analyze, argue, describe, contrast.* Underline the key terms: *two causes, most important theme, main steps, post–Civil War.* Read it again, and read it a third time: this is your only official clue about what your audience—the teacher—wants. On a piece of scratch paper, write out an answer to the question, *in so many words:* if it asks, "What are two competing explanations for language acquisition?" write down, "Two competing explanations for language acquisition are ___ and ___ ." In an examination setting, this may even become your opening line, since readers of essay exams rarely reward frilly introductions or cute metaphors.

But don't start to write the whole answer yet, even though your lower brain is begging you, even though the sweat is breaking out on your brow and your muscles are tensing up with adrenaline because you know the lions and probably some rampaging T-Rexes are just

around the corner. In real time, it has only taken you two minutes to read and annotate the question. Some students are still pulling out their pens, while across campus at least one student is just waking up in a panic because his alarm didn't go off. Meanwhile, far from being hopelessly behind, you're ahead of everyone who's writing already, because you're still working with your higher brain.

You have one more task, though. You know that *showing* takes longer, and is more complicated, than *telling*. Given the choice, your lower brain will tell, tell, and tell again, blathering on about Jell-O generalities that don't let readers see all the best thinking going on in your mind. Before your higher brain starts to abandon you, make it give you the cherries: write yourself a list of very specific examples that you can use in this essay, as many as you can think of. Do not just "think them over." That's a lower brain shortcut, a flight move, and it's a trick, because your lower brain will forget them as soon as the lions get a bit closer. Write them down. If you don't know all the possible transmission vectors for tuberculosis that were discussed, write down excellent examples of the ones you *do* know. If you can, number them in an order that makes sense, so that you leave a good breadcrumb trail for your lower brain to follow. Don't call it an "outline" if you don't want to; that can feel intimidating. Just call it a "trail guide."

Now you can start writing: take a deep, calming breath and begin with your *in so many words* sentence, then follow the trail your higher brain has planned. About every two or three sentences, you should start out with "For example, . . ." or "Another example of this is . . . ," to be sure that you're not forgetting your higher brain's advice or sliding into a vague "some people" sentence. About every three or four sentences, you should start out with "Therefore, . . ." or "In other words, . . ." and come back to a version of that very first, question-answering sentence you wrote on your paper. Bring the chorus back in; stay in tune and on the trail. Don't try for too much variation or beauty. Knowing that your higher brain has already solved the problem, all you have to do is set it down on paper, to *show what you know.* Writing is hard, especially under time pressure, but when you use higher brain strategies and don't get trapped in the rules or caught up in random flight, when you take control and anticipate your reader's needs, you can make writing work for you in very powerful ways even without a lot of time.

10. Rules vs. Rhetoric, or, The Five Paragraph Essay vs. "Try Something!"

We started out by thinking of all the rules—all those "Don'ts"—that writers can face. Each of the metaphors here replaces a *rule* with an *idea* that helps you consider how real people communicate with each other through writing, and how writers make judgments and choices in order to have the most powerful effect on their readers. That is, we've been thinking *rhetorically,* about the audience and purpose and context of a writing situation.

Interestingly, many of those rules are just short-cut versions of really good rhetorical principles. If you were a middle-school teacher faced with a room full of thirty squirrelly teenagers who all wanted to know *What's Due On Friday?* and who didn't have patience for one more part of their chaotic lives to be in the "it just depends" category, you might be tempted to make some rules, too. You might even come up with The Five Paragraph Essay.

That is, instead of saying, "Most readers in the U.S. prefer to know exactly what they're getting before they invest too much time," which is a thoughtful rhetorical analysis that can help writers make good choices, you might say, "Your thesis must come in the first paragraph." Instead of saying, "In Western cultures, many readers are comfortable with threes: three bears, three strikes, three wishes, even the Christian Trinity," you might make a rule and say, "You must write an essay with a beginning, an end, and three middle paragraphs." Instead of saying, "Your readers need to know how your examples connect to one another, and how each set of examples is related to your overall point," you might say, "Every paragraph needs to start with a transition and a topic sentence and finish with a concluding sentence." And instead of saying, "Writers in the U.S. face one of the most heterogeneous groups of readers in the world, so we need to be as careful as possible to make our meaning clear rather than assuming that all readers know what we're talking about," you might just say, "Each paragraph needs to include two concrete-detail sentences and two commentary sentences."

You would intend to be helping your students by saying these things, and for many young writers, having clear *rules* is more useful than being told, "It depends." But eventually the rules start to be more limiting than helpful, like a great pair of shoes that are now a size too small. Good writers need some space to grow.

As a writer in college now, and as a writer in the larger world full of real readers—whether they're reading your Facebook page, your letter to the editor, or your business plan—you need to free yourself from the rules and learn to make rhetorical decisions. From now on, when you hear someone tell you a rule for writing, try to figure out the rhetorical challenge that lies behind it, and consider the balancing acts you may need to undertake. What do you want to say, and what will help the readers in your primary audience "see what you mean" and follow your main points?

There aren't any easy answers: writing is still hard. But the good news is that you can use a few helpful "rules" as starting points when they seem appropriate, and set aside the rest. You can draw on some key principles or metaphors to help you imagine the needs of your readers, and when you come to an open space where there doesn't seem to be a perfect rule or strategy to use, you can *try something.* In the end, that's what writers are always doing as we write: trying this, trying that, trying something else, hoping that we'll make a breakthrough so that our readers will say "Aha, I see what you mean!"—and they really, truly will see it. You know James Bond 007 would *try something;* Jane Eyre would *try something;* those Olympic medalists and rock stars and pioneering cardiac surgeons and Silicon Valley whiz kids are always *trying something.* In the same way, being a good writer is always more about *trying something* than about following the rules, about adapting to a new situation rather than replicating last year's essay. So take a deep breath, push all those nay-saying rule-makers into the far corners of your brain, focus on your current audience and purpose, and write!

Discussion

1. Which section of this essay do you remember most clearly? Write down what you remember about it, and explain how you might use an idea in that section to help with a writing task that you're doing this week. Why do you think this section stuck with you?
2. Without looking back at the essay, what would you say is the *chorus* of the essay, the "beer: sports car" message that keeps getting restated? Write it down: it may be a sentence, a phrase, and/or a few key words. Now go back to a section of the essay and underline or highlight sentences or phrases where Reid re-

peats this chorus or key words. Does she repeat them as much as you thought she did?

3. What other rules for writing have you been told to follow, either at school or outside of school in your workplace, community group, or online setting? List a couple of rules that weren't described in this essay, and note down whether you think they're most connected to the principle of writing from knowledge, showing enough detail, or adapting to readers' needs. Also, if there's another principle for writing that helps you a lot, something you always try to do, add a note about it so you can share it with your classroom peers.
4. Where in this essay does Reid practice what she preaches? Go back through the essay and label a few places where she seems to be doing what she says writers should do ("here she gives a Pink House heads-up sentence at the start of a section"), and note a few places where she doesn't. Even though Reid admits that writing is hard and depends on a specific context, her essay may make some of the strategies sound easier or more universal than they are. Which one of her suggestions seems like it would be the hardest for you to do, or seems like it would be the least effective in the kind of writing you do most often? Explain why this suggestion is trickier than it looks, and how you might cope with that challenge as a writer.

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