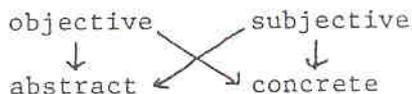


Andrew G. Deveau

The mood in many Freshman English classes today is pragmatic and efficiency-oriented, and those at the University of Delaware are no exception. This attitude is not bad in itself, for it certainly is an improvement over the seemingly lackadaisical attitude of the early Seventies when students spent more time "finding themselves" than learning to write. But something else is missing along with that spirit of irresponsibility. My students could utilize all the rhetorical forms we discussed, were relatively capable with grammar, punctuation, and sentence structures, and all could organize and write a "five-star" essay, but they often failed to produce papers which weren't stuffy, arid, and boring. They lacked humor, spontaneity, and any feeling of commitment or interest; the students were writing nothing but glorified prologues. This problem was subtle, because although I could teach grammar in class, teaching abstract thinking and honest self-evaluation was another matter. Many studies have demonstrated that writing only improves with more writing, so initially I knew I wanted them to write frequently.

At this point two separate concepts shed light on my predicament. A linguistic critic, Roman Jakobson, studied a disease called aphasia, which causes a person's mind to work excessively through either contiguity or similarity, mimesis or metaphor. My students' minds worked too often through mimesis, the representation of reality, and even their efforts here were marked by superficiality. I wanted the students to make connections and abstractions, synthesize and draw conclusions from their observations, and find similarities between disparate objects and ideas.

Another concept brings subject matter into consideration along with point of view. If we consider all writing as stemming from two points of view, subjective and objective, then each one is directed at either an abstract or concrete subject matter:



Our first three essays dealt with three of the four possible relations of subject to object. The diagnostic essay, "what would you want to be if you could be anything?" is a subjective view directed toward a concrete subject. The Hogarth prints were an objective viewpoint of a concrete subject. The next comparison/contrast topic asked them to compare differing views of nature, an objective approach to an abstract subject. But nowhere in the course could they write subjectively about abstractions, even if they could or wanted to.

I decided journals would provide the solution to this problem. They could write each day for a short period at their convenience. But I needed some direction, because I did not want the journals to become simply diaries; I wanted a method that would increase both self-awareness

and writing ability. I could not instantly design problems or topics to make them self-aware, since they would have to do that themselves over a longer period of time. The journal approach also allowed me to continue with my regular teaching schedule, which I did not want to disrupt too much.

But journals offered other benefits which would hopefully further my main goal of increasing students' subjective-abstract writing capability. In some ways I viewed journal writing simply as free writing out of class. By having them write brief entries I wanted to achieve the sharpness of focus which Peter Elbow describes: "free writing helps you pour more attention, focus, and energy into what you write. That is why the exercises must be short."² Free writing is also a psychological analysis of sorts, and I wanted the students to explore within themselves to a depth which many otherwise would never both trying to reach. Clinton Burhans states:

life has left more extensive and profound linguistic riches in you than you probably fully realize: on almost any subject, on almost any object, you can feel, think, and express yourself at deeper levels and in greater variety than you probably believe you can.³

Both Gordon Rohman and Ken Macrorie discuss writers who develop ideas over an extended period through journals.⁴ I hoped my students would review what they had written in the hopes that, once they saw their thoughts reified, they could view them more objectively. At the least it would provide an insight into what they were thinking about one, two, or even four weeks earlier, and possibly even provoke them into revising earlier entries.

Macrorie also states that "a constant charge made by professors is that students do not relate what they read in class to their own lives."⁵ I thought the journals would be an opportunity to record the things they read, or at least provide a sounding board for gripes and observations about the class as a whole.

Though I was not ambitious enough to attempt proving that journals could actually help style, I tried to allow for any stylistic experimentation the students wanted to try. I did stumble across an interesting idea in Writing as Discovery pertaining to style. It defined different ways famous writers made valuable observations through objectifying personal experiences.⁶ The two basic patterns are to recreate past experience, then discuss the significance of its consequences, and to "surround an anecdote with evaluative comments," so that facts would serve as examples of abstract ideas.⁷ I felt both these techniques well within my students' reach if they did begin making evaluative judgements about their lives.

One problem involved in learning rhetorical strategies in E110 is that they are only cumulative to an extent. Each new strategy is begun afresh. In addition, some of the less adept writers lacked self-confidence and felt doomed after their initial failures. I

felt journals would affirm each student's self-worth, and hoped they would learn not to fear writing, after writing so frequently. Lou Kelly states that all students, even the least confident, can learn, respond, and gain confidence in an open system.⁸ Thus I decided not to award grades, make corrections, or even offer evaluative comments; I instead stressed that this writing was for their benefit, so they would just relax and write without pressure.

As Michael Southwell notes, free writing can be good preparation for writing papers, and generating ideas for them. I felt this could benefit my class also, so in order to make the students become even more dependent on themselves, I began making each paper assignment totally open; they could write on whatever they wanted as long as it fit the rhetorical strategy we were studying. I see some connection between journal and free writing and invention, but that is a topic large enough to deserve a paper of its own.

I adopted one other idea of Southwell's because I worried about tying journal writing into my class structure; no easy way to do this presented itself. Regarding free writing, Southwell states that each day his students write for five minutes, and never show him this work, and it thus has no relation to whatever else they are studying at the time.⁹ I chose to view journals the same way; they were complementary and supplementary to what we did in class, and were valuable simply because they were helping the students write better. To discuss them in class would be to violate the students' freedom of expression and their trust.

In my handouts I tried to set the mood for the students' approach to writing: to make them open-minded, perhaps introspective, ready to try out new styles and ideas without trepidation. Creating this effect is very important in helping the students become amenable to and even interested in beginning to explore language and themselves. I provided twenty-five suggestions to propagate that mood. All were simply ideas and could easily be completed within fifteen minutes. Hopefully the ideas encouraged the student to be interested in being innovative and imaginative, and led him into the realm of abstraction, away from a simple chronological retelling of concrete events like what he did on his summer vacation. To illustrate how much they could write in just fifteen minutes, we did a free writing exercise in class. The students were impressed that only one or two people did not fill up an entire page in that short time.

I did not grade the journals. No grades meant less pressure for the students and less attention directed toward pleasing the teacher, which translated into more exploration, experimentation, and fun. I also stressed that they need not stick to my suggestions, so that they would feel more accountable and responsible for their entries. The only verbal instructions that accompanied the handout were warnings about keeping up. I again let them feel the responsibility by pointing out how quickly the writing multiplies if they fall behind. I told them I would announce on one class day that journals would be collected the next, which gave them two days to write perhaps as much as fifteen pages. I didn't let them know when I would collect them, and this warning seemed enough incentive for the students to keep up. My only other verbal instructions occurred each class period, when I inquired how the journals were coming, if anyone had questions or problems. Generally I exhorted them cheerfully

to keep writing. As far as I could tell most people did write every day; a few slipped behind and were honest about it in their writing, and only one obviously fabricated everything at the last minute--judging by the length, similarity in ink (not one change of pen in thirty-three days) and penmanship, and by the repetitious, vague, and bland entries.

I collected the journals twice. The students wrote a total of thirty-four or five days of entries. After I collected them I asked for a paragraph evaluating the journal's worth and effectiveness, and requested suggestions for improvements or changes. I left these instructions vague on purpose because I did not want to influence their answers. Wanting to know exactly what their impressions were, I encouraged anonymity in their evaluations so they could be totally honest, and found that a few of the more courageous students signed them anyway.

The results of this experiment were quite encouraging. Of the twenty post-journal evaluations, only three could be construed as negative in any sense. One of these was signed, and this student was one of the three or four writers who never did catch on to the idea of writing abstractly. The other two "negative" responses were simply non-committal--journals neither helped nor hindered, and were simply part of what had to be done to pass the course. Seventeen students responded favorably for a variety of reasons, and eight of these responses were signed, too high a number to attribute to mere "brownie-pointing." Responses cited the journals as helping aspects of writing as diverse as penmanship and style. These will be explored in more detail below.

I realized that any noticeable improvement in depth of exploration and intensity of focus would take time. Some people were more successful at this than others, but as I previously stated, only three journals at the most showed no sign of intellectual growth or increased insight. I realized that some days their writing would not be good, or would lack developed, sustained ideas; the important thing is that the students knew this too. They wrote that no idea struck them significantly that day, or that they were too tired to write well, and satisfied themselves with less. Often they were apologetic after unsatisfying entries, whether to themselves or me, I don't know. But if they hadn't written every day they would not have produced some excellent passages as well. Forced daily writing is a good idea; though the students were against it at first, in retrospect almost all agreed that it was worthwhile. A typical response was: "I believe practice is the most important element in improving your writing, and the journals were good practice."

Just as they could recognize bad days and entries, they also became adept at judging good ones. Some students indicated in their journals particularly favorite passages, and one student stated in his evaluation that "there is one particular passage that I especially enjoyed," and proceeded to specify it. I had not really expected their widespread spectrum awareness of writing style to increase so this was a pleasant surprise.

Another benefit students continually mentioned was the ability to think in greater depth. Speaking for about half the class, one

student said:

I found myself thinking a little more about my feelings and the things that happen each day which means a little more than I originally thought. Expressing my feelings on paper was a little bit harder than I had expected.

Some students, although never explicitly realizing it, made similar in-depth explorations. I view the journals as successful in this respect because students were examining their ideas more closely, even though I never explicitly stated that as an objective.

Many entries developed experiences over a period of time, usually two or three days. Students reviewed or continued old entries, thus showing they did read over what they had written. Often their viewpoints changed as a result of the perspective gained by the passage of time. For instance, one girl discussed her best friend, who had just run away from home for an entire week. From this experience she began to define her own moral code.

I noticed that students began including things they had read, some from Ell0, but primarily ideas and quotations from other classes and outside reading. One girl responded to a passage on the journal handout, and many others used quotations as a springboard for expressing their own ideas on a particular subject. Quotations seemed a way of both objectifying their experiences and making what they read more personally applicable.

Three students mentioned improved writing skills as a benefit of journal writing. They don't know to what extent this is true. The two patterns discussed in Writing as Discovery were quite common as a structural base of entries. Discussing an incident, then its consequences and implications, was the more straightforward approach, but a subtle blend of fact with evaluation, illustrated with more fact, followed by more abstract conclusions, was equally common and handled with comparable skill and success. This talent seems totally unconscious and emerges naturally as they write. Other students tried for stylistic effects, wrote poetry, or created various moods and impressions, such as:

here i sit, soft strains of piano and guitar
in the distance, a soft brightness as the cover-
let of snow eases the harsh lines of the world
with a heavy coolness . . . yes, you're still
beautiful, and i'm still the autumnal judge of
this closeness, you're not here but you're with
me again--you're back. And when the crisp pine
cuts the Christmas nights, we'll be together--
again--and i don't know if it will be the same,
but it will be.

Improved confidence was another advantage which they indicated on the evaluations. They appreciated moving away from such a standard, structured, grade-oriented system, so that they could relax. I think grade-conscious students, with both high and low grades, equally profitted

from the freedom journals permitted.

A few students utilized the journals as a testing ground for ideas they later developed into paper topics. It seemed this practice was limited to the better students in the class, simply because they were thinking about assignments before the night before they were due. Other things students mentioned as valuable about journal writing include better penmanship, the ability to release their emotions, freedom of expression in general. Some singled out free associations as both fun and intriguing, others cited writing as helpful in preparing them to write at any time, especially in-class essays, and most liked not being graded. They frequently mentioned their writing as grammatically incorrect, plagued by poor spelling, etc., but I found their writing to be as consistently good as what I received on papers, even from the poorer students.

Together my students and I have devised several changes which might improve this experiment. First, start the journals at the beginning of the semester. They feel this would alleviate some of the jitters new students experience. A teacher might also change some of the quotations or suggested entries to suit his or her requirements and expectations. A teacher could also make the students more aware of the theories and practices involved in their writing, such as the different rhetorical techniques they employ all the time. This would have to be done gradually, once they are used to making relevant observations with some frequency. This should take at least three or four weeks, so they would not feel pressured into conforming to anyone's expectations. One might also inform the students about the goals and objectives of the project as a whole; invention, self-exploration, and abstract thought could all be emphasized. But I wonder if this also would put undue pressure on the students. The key to success seems to be no expectations, no pressures. Again, discussing these topics would best be accomplished over a period of time, not immediately or all at once. One could try reading sample journal entries, either from their own or from past journals, to illustrate possible entry styles, techniques, and topics. My students expressed opposition to this in their evaluations, however, and felt it would be a violation of the journal's confidentiality. Finally, one could stress the concepts of voice and audience more. Each student seemed to have a strong, if unconscious, sense of audience. On a continuum, some wrote with their own ego as a sole audience, and others with the teacher in mind, and many shades of difference lie between the two. The only generalization I can make here is that a rough correlation existed between the depth of insight and the ability to view the self as the sole or primary audience. Those students who wrote to me often were more guarded in their comments, or simply viewed this as another assignment. Any statement is tenuous though, because of the vast number of variable factors, such as day of the week, weather, tests, family and dorm situation, money problems, etc. Finally, I advise returning their journals instead of keeping them for a semester. All my students seemed quite possessive and attached to their journals after the experiment ended, moreso than to any other piece of writing they did in the course.

Journal writing is a valuable addition to an E110 course for many reasons. It might help students in any number of important areas, including focus, depth of insight, style, increased confidence, and prewriting and invention. If for no other reason, journals are a record of an important transitional time in the students' lives, which they might like to look back on in years to come. As one student put it: "When you look back on the journals you see some stupid things you wrote and you can really laugh at them, and other things you see as magnificent and can't believe you wrote them." This sensation is one I believe worth trying to instill in every student, remedial to genius.

University of Delaware

NOTES

¹Roman Jakobson, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), pp. 1113-4.

²Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), P. 8.

³Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., The Would-be Writer, 2nd ed. (Waltham: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 21.

⁴Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing, revised 2nd ed. (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1976), p. 137.

⁵Macrorie, p. 140.

⁶Elizabeth Morgan, David Herrstrom, and Ronald Morgan, Writing as Discovery (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1976), p. 36.

⁷Morgan. p. 36.

⁸Lou Kelly, "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class," in Ideas for English 101, eds. Richard Ohmann and W.B. Coley (Urbana: NCTE, 1975), p. 17.

⁹Michael G. Southwell, "Free Writing in Composition Classes," CE, 38 (March 1977), p. 676.

The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak. Is this the starting point of the road towards the union of your two dreams--to be allowed in clarity of mind to mirror life, and in purity of heart to mold it?...It makes one's heart ache when one sees that a man has staked his soul upon some end, the hopeless imperfection of which is immediately obvious to everyone but himself. But isn't this, after all, merely a matter of degree? Isn't the pathetic grandeur of human existence in some way bound up with the eternal disproportion in this world, where self-delusion is necessary to life, between the honesty of the striving and the nullity of the result? That we all--every one of us--take ourselves seriously is not merely ridiculous?

--Dag Hammarskjold

The wind sighed over his shelled ears. The world slipped bright over the glassy round of his eyeballs like images sparked in a crystal sphere. Flowers were sun and fiery spots of sky strewn through the woodland. Birds flickered like skipped stones across the vast inverted pond of heaven. His breath raked over his teeth, going on ice, coming out fire. Insects shocked the air with electric clearness. Ten thousand individual hairs grew a millionth of an inch on his head. He heard the twin hearts in each ear, the third heart beating in his throat, the two hearts throbbing his wrists, the real heart pounding his chest. The million pores on his body opened.

I'm really alive! he thought. I never knew it before, or if I did I don't remember!

--Ray Bradbury

And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is a vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

--Ecclesiastes 1: 17-18

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said; "One can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.

"When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day.

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast...."

--Lewis Carroll

But let there be no scales to weigh your unknown treasures; And seek not the depths of your knowledge with staff or sounding line. For self is a sea boundless and measureless. Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."

--Kahlil Gibran

Never measure the height of a mountain until you have reached the top. Then you will see how low it was.

--Dag Hammarskjold

I celebrate myself and sing myself,
and what I assume you shall assume,
for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

--Walt Whitman

...they had been there all the time; but my eyes had never been opened to them. I did not know what my own house was like, because I had never been outside it.

--Bernard Shaw

Journal Writing for Fun and Profit

I will not grade your journals, but to pass the course you must hand in a journal which fulfills the few requirements outlined below. If you have questions please ask me at any time. Journals can be rewarding if you let them be; experiment, explore, and have fun. The content and form are entirely up to you. I will be the only one reading what you've written. Please date your entries, and spend at least ten to fifteen minutes each day writing. I can't emphasize how important writing daily is, so don't let yourself get behind.

Some suggestions if you're stuck:

1. Record any "fabulous realities" (see Thoreau, p. 54 in PW) you encounter. If you don't encounter any, begin looking. (See also #17.)
2. Look at common objects in new ways (i.e., a penny or match.) Try what Ann Dillard does, and see "the tree with lights in it." Try describing it as minutely as possible. Try perceiving the world as a child does.
3. Try writing nonstop for ten or fifteen minutes on whatever pops into your head. Don't think, just write!
4. Simulate the loss of a sense (sight by blindfolding, sound by turning off the volume on the TV.) Describe what happens to your other senses.
5. Sketch in words a person who doesn't know you're watching: a student eating alone in the dining hall, a girl looking at herself in a store window, etc.
6. Take a dramatic personal experience and write two accounts of it, one objective, one subjective. How do they differ?
7. What is the most interesting event in your life? The most meaningful? Why?
8. Write an unusual fantasy or a radically altered version of reality. Some interesting literature has been produced like this. See Samuel Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," written about an opium-inspired dream.
9. What's the earliest thing you can remember? Try to capture a sharp picture, image, or mood. Is this memory significant for some reason?
10. When you first awaken, jot down everything you remember of your dreams. Relax and let it flow: accept fragments, and random images and words. Try to capture the "atmosphere" as well as specific incidents. Keep a daily record, and try to discover emerging patterns and interpretations.
11. Write a brief parable.
12. Destroy an enemy. Have the satisfaction of setting down the last word, which you never thought of in time during the argument itself.
13. Write a letter to yourself from your parents giving you advice on how to get along in an uncertain, dangerous, and cruel world. Write a letter from them telling you how fresh, exciting, and beautiful the world is.
14. Make a list of the events in an average day of your life. Decide whether it will illustrate the meaningfulness, meaninglessness, tragedy, comedy, fulfillment, or quiet desperation of your life.
15. Read the obituary page of a newspaper. Then write an imaginary obituary for yourself.
16. Write a parody of the TV commercial you hate the most. What elements are you making fun of, and how?

17. Your attention is suddenly caught by the way sunlight reflects in a pool of rainwater, or the way a tire hisses as the car turns a corner, or the way a half-torn letter is blown by the wind down a dirty street. Distill this moment into a haiku poem. Or write a longer, freer poem about this subject, or anything else. Avoid rhyme, concentrate expressing meaning as succinctly as possible.
18. Use this as a scrapbook. Transcribe passages of prose and/or poetry which you especially like. Follow these with commentary of your own.
19. Write an opening paragraph for an essay on the most boring topic you can think of -- "Engineering Problems in Paraguay," "The Potato-Friend to Man," "Valuable Skills Obtainable through E110." Don't, however, resort to parody or satire. Make the paragraph focus down, limit the subject, indicate the thesis. Make it interesting. Now try this for an essay you're working on now.
20. Write two accounts of the same event; in the first use all active verbs, in the second, all passive. Now rewrite one, eliminating all adjectives and forms of the verb "to be."
21. Write a short scene (perhaps something which happened to you) in the form of pure dialog, with no explanatory material at all. Avoid stereotyping your characters, and yet make them understandable to another reader. Try to produce conversation which reveals unspoken tensions.
22. Revise yesterday's entry; try to improve it by addition or subtraction. Try a new word or figure of speech here and there, and cross out all unnecessary words.
23. Keep a record of a writing project. Observe closely the processes you go through, first to last, with particular attention to the formation of your initial idea, gradual development of order, and appearance of detailed ideas that occur along the way. Note false starts and major shifts in emphasis and direction.
24. Devise your own class for E110. What things would you stress, what would you ignore or downplay? If you could teach anything you wished for one semester, what would it be, and why?
25. If you were responsible for leaving in a three foot square box all the things which most accurately represent our culture, what would you include? Assume this box will be sent to an Earth-like planet revolving around Alpha Centauri. What would you include if you had to most accurately represent yourself?