

Jasper

“King Arthur came a lot, didn’t he?”

Pfft. No, King Arthur’s *Camelot* refers to his associated court. Silly. But I let out a hysterical laugh when I recalled this gag from the British mockumentary *Cunk on Earth*. It seemed like my lecturer also enjoyed the show as she played a clip regarding A.I. There was a certain charm to her: throwing her hands up, monologuing her thoughts, and lightly bouncing on her feet. As though this lesson briefly offered her the perfect excuse to share what she genuinely liked; to segue into a throwaway joke she enjoyed.

My classroom reacted unevenly. Some had blank faces. Some eyes darted around. Some gave a courtesy laugh. Perhaps they didn’t get her ad-hoc comedic relief. It made sense: there really wasn’t any link between *Cunk on Earth* and “*finding reliable sources*”; it might even be the complete opposite. But this got me wondering how the joke felt momentarily justified because it fit the setting; it felt warranted because we were discussing A.I.’s use for op-eds. I brimmed enthusiastically knowing that I got her reference.

But what I didn’t get were ideas for my own op-ed. I stared at my open Word document. It was still blank. The same blank I promised myself to fill in yesterday. The same blank that I kept drawing in my mind. Lackadaisically, I skimmed through NTU Learn. I scrolled to find a collection of essays written by previous students in the *Pioneer Road*. Oh? I thirst for inspiration as I scoured with spelunking eyes — the pages seemed to archive deep insight and quirky topics; I took my notes and my time.

I started feeling strangely frustrated. It was like each article was robed in Greek and demonstrated great philoxenia and welcomed you into their home for a cup of tea. It was warm, not like a hearth is warm, but like a microwave is warm. And the home was inviting, not like a fluffy blanket is inviting, but like a job application is inviting. Each essay seemed to begin with vivid lived experiences, before quickly pivoting into a formal “research voice”, as though the upcoming rhetorical questions act as a required hinge rather than genuine uncertainty. The pivot feels suspect — rehearsed — as if the flamboyance of observation was carefully calibrated to land on a predetermined question. I wondered if these details existed solely to justify a conclusion that waited quietly in the background.

Perhaps we manufacture meaning as a byproduct of trying to meet academic expectations.

I scrolled back to my own field notes, alt-tabbing to crosscheck whether the essays in *Pioneer Road* validated my writing. How detail saturated should my essay be? Have I written descriptively enough to qualify myself a reason to talk about something that *I* enjoy? Have I considered the rubric? If observation must eventually transform into a thesis, then I suspect that I do not merely record what I see; I also search for what can be argued. Op-eds — it seems — are meant to be deeply personal; idiosyncratic. How, then, does the demand for academic rigor shape the way we transform observation into discourse?

1. What did you enjoy most in observing and writing about your chosen topic?

I liked doing the “meta-analysis” on the writing practices of the op-eds I’ve seen. I don’t know — I thought it was quite funny and interesting and insightful to pick apart these things. I picked up on how flowery the language was, then noticed the tonal shift when we started going into the knitty gritty if-I’m-not-interested-I-won’t-really-read-read-this-section parts. Where did all the emotional expression go! Then I just contemplated how manipulated our writing can get. If I pay attention not for the sake of curiosity but for the sake of conjuring a thesis statement, have I really done a thing? Do we now measure the quality of an opinion or personal feeling toward something in terms of citability? These are some of the themes I want to write about.

Actually, I think it will be quite obvious from this reflection portion that I like writing in a reflective 4th-wall conversing-with-the-reader manner..?

2. What did you find most challenging, as you analyzed your topic?

The most challenging part is naming the “problem”. How can I meaningfully word the feeling of doing this analysis work and then coming up with something to write about? The... for lack of a better word, performativity of analysis? It’s not necessarily a bad thing — the rubric probably demands it — but to me I thought it could be interesting; How far can you extract meaning until you’re doing too much; How credible can you be to yourself if you cannot think of anything. How saturated should the details be to motivate what I want to say? The issue then is that I have to:

- Describe the process accurately
- Figure out how to connect it to my own observations
- Describe the consequences

Frankly, I still cannot really fully and accurately explain to myself what I want to get across. Not laconically at least. Which is why I feel that I could have written much more descriptively than what I have done; I just need to picture the details better.

3. What aspect of your assignment would you like the most feedback on? Write a question that you can guide your teacher in giving feedback that could be most meaningful to you as you move forward in class?

Does my exploration of how academic rigor shapes observation feel thoughtful and nuanced, or does it risk sounding overly cynical? Does it feel organic? Do you think there are any branching paths / room for further analysis? Have my observations been relevant-ish? The cunk part is a bit awkward to me but I can’t think of alternatives. I also thought it was funny.

Basically, if I write my current research question, I want to try writing light satire. Or not! I don’t know. But I can try to demonstrate the effect while naming it. Is this thematically possible? How... rigorous must the op-ed be (how ironic)? What if I want to “cite” non-academic stuff in my op-ed? i.e., the way a certain book I own is written — and the implications of its story? Submit first think later.