

Abigail Mirot

Prof. Dana Nowlin-Russell

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Passion or Practicality

For me, writing evolved naturally from reading. I was a voracious reader as a kid, constantly getting yelled at for reading a book under my desk during lessons. It was natural for me that one day I wanted to see if I could emulate the narratives I had been consuming for years.

Writing didn't start out as an academic process for me. I wrote my first essay a year after I wrote my first short story. For me, in the beginning, writing was about fun and self-expression, not grades. There was no five-paragraph format to use, and feedback from others was meant to help me, not demoralize me. When I got older, I forgot that writing was originally a way for me to express myself and not just a vehicle for me to express what I thought a teacher or a college admissions officer would want me to feel. Only in college was I able to remember that writing is meant to please me and not just others.

My writing journey started with Google Docs and a teacher who absolutely did not want to be teaching the fifth grade. When I was ten, I had this teacher, Mrs. Jarry, who reviled teaching elementary school. She constantly told us how she wanted to teach middle school but had been brutally cast aside. She talked about middle school the same way that most people talk about New York City. The glitz, the glamor, and the lack of AC at Glenbrook Middle School seemed to

call to her. Her distaste for teaching the fifth grade meant that beyond the basic requirements of the curriculum, we were given a lot of free time and *highly* unmonitored access to Chromebooks. What came from that was my first short story – a disturbing tale about a girl whose parents are found dead on a bathroom floor. One might ask, why a bathroom floor? For that matter, *which* bathroom floor? I never worked that one out. Ten-year-olds have limited awareness of the importance of exposition. In retrospect, one-thousand percent I should have been reported for that story. But instead of questioning the material handed to her, Mrs. Jarry gave me the thumbs up and told me to keep going. And with unlimited free time and a Chromebook, I did. Who knew the encouragement of a disgruntled teacher could have changed my life so thoroughly?

From then until my sophomore year of high school, I continued to write. I spent most of middle school trying to write a book and I went to creative writing camps in the summer. Those summers exist in my memory in such sharp contrast to the school year. At camp, I wrote whatever funny little story came to mind and I was praised for them by counselors and teachers. I felt like I was talented, like I was smart. But fall always came. I slipped back into my routine of skipping homework assignments and falling asleep in class. I wasn't even getting A's in English, which is the one thing I thought I was good at. According to my English teachers, I couldn't follow the format, I went off on tangents and expressed too many personal opinions in my essays. In essence, my creative writing skills had taught me to put too much of myself into my writing.

During my sophomore year of high school, I changed everything about myself as a student almost overnight. My parents had told me that I was never going to get into college if I kept

things up the way they were. I realized that if I didn't submit to the way that my school wanted me to write and act as a student, I was going to have to give up my future. Over time, I perfected the five-paragraph structure, my thesis statements were pristine, and I met every grading criteria my AP classes could throw at me. I stopped creative writing because I didn't have the brain space for anything but my studies anymore. (It's kind of hard to come up with a story when you have to memorize all of the British kings in one night.) Even though it was difficult and energy-sucking, I don't regret that time in my life. I gained study skills I still use to this day. I learned how to write in an organized and professional manner which has served me well in college classes and I know will serve me well during my career. And if I hadn't "buckled down" I never would have gotten into Pitt, which has been integral in helping me refind the fun in writing. However, I do acknowledge that my writing style had become robotic and completely lacked its old creativity and freedom. I still sometimes struggle to break out of this style today.

Throughout my entire time at college, I've wrestled between my passions and my practicality. I entered college undecided, still flip-flopping between choosing job security or personal happiness, fully believing that I couldn't have both. My first semester I took an English class, Austen & Brontë, and I fell in love with the department. I could write more freely than I ever had in high school. I could express my opinions and use the pronoun "I" without being burned at the stake. My assignments were more than just five-paragraph essays, they had nuance and allowed for creativity. I felt at home in the department, supported yet challenged. I should have given in to that feeling but instead, I ran away from it, sure that feeling comfortable meant I was taking the easy route. While running away from English, I managed to run straight into Computational Social Science. For my first semester of sophomore year, I went cold turkey with English

classes. No Thriftbooks haul at the start of the semester, no writing in any of my classes, just math and coding all day every day. Going to my classes I felt like a walking ghost, an automaton with no purpose. I quickly understood that I couldn't completely cut myself off from the subjects I love or it was going to bleed me dry. I still wanted to be practical so I decided that extracurriculars could fill the void if I wouldn't change my classes. Specifically, I became a member of the literary magazine Cherry Bomb, a club in which I am now the business manager.

I walked into my first Cherry Bomb meeting with a purely selfish aim. I had written a poem and I wanted to know if my piece got picked for the magazine. I was working, doing reconnaissance, trying to determine whose writing was in and whose was left out in the cold. I confided my aims in a friend sitting next to me. She told me my piece got in! "Well, now what?", I asked myself. "Why stay here now that I've achieved my goal?". Then they started talking about fonts and joking around and spreading all the lovely English glitter that I'd been missing so badly since I dumped myself into the deep end of the STEM field. I missed the light-heartedness, the emotionality, and the desire to see things more deeply. I missed being in a community I knew I could contribute to. A big part of why I loved creative writing was because I knew I was good at it. Being able to produce creative writing that people responded positively to made me feel confident and accomplished, while in STEM classes I spent most of my time silent and confused. I didn't want to be on the outside of this community, a STEM commuter that travels in and out. I wanted to be a permanent resident. Being a member of Cherry Bomb gave me a safe space in which I could be creative, working on pieces to submit to the magazine gave me a reason to write again, and I met people who assured me that my course load shouldn't be a punishment. I deleted my five-year plan and started from scratch with the goal of being happy, whatever the

cost. If I had continued with Computational Social Science I would have had to revert back to the writer I was in high school. Entirely regimented. As an English Literature major at Pitt, I've been able to continue my English courses and now I write essays regularly for my classes. In these essays, I try to balance the confident and free voice I have in my creative writing with the organized and rigid voice I learned in high school. I plan to spend the rest of college and beyond searching for a balance between creativity and structure in my writing. The balance will never be perfect but I am content with the fact that I have given myself the opportunity to grow as a writer once more.