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On My Progress in English

While I wished that I could avoid writing forever, such prospects looked increasingly unlikely, given that I had just enrolled myself into “Composition and Reading”. Coming into this class, I was increasingly nervous that when asked to produce an essay, I would freeze like a deer in the headlights. Before this class, I had not fully developed a framework with which to write in. I was unable to outline and draft effectively and I never brainstormed. Instead, I focused directly on the quality of each paragraph, sentence, and even word. I micromanaged and obsessively pruned each sentence that wasn’t “perfect”. Naturally, this left me with an empty essay. My writing isn’t perfect.

As it stands, my writing still isn’t perfect and it never will be. But that’s okay! Because of this class, I can at least write imperfectly, which is leagues better than no writing at all. In isolation, I can’t say that any assignment on its own was transformative. Collectively, however, the free writes, discussion forums, and first two essays helped me establish new systems and break free of my longstanding writers block.

Free writes were an unfamiliar concept before this class. Not only was I not exposed to them during my previous schooling, free writes went against every fiber of how I wrote: glacially slow and obsessively picky. They forced me to write under a timer and expected a sloppy and scatterbrained flow. At first, these often felt made me feel like an uncultured writing barbarian, ranting a ghastly and degenerate spew of sentences. After reflecting upon my first timed free write, I was surprised that I was able to write such content in less than days, much less hours. It was certainly no Pulitzer nomination candidate but it did technically qualify as writing.

Discussion forums were a gentle step up from free writes. They were informal, sure, but I wasn’t about to post a free write rant. Seeing how my peers wrote helped me understand that maybe it was okay to be imperfect. After all, this was only a discussion forum and we need not write immaculate essays just to share our thoughts on the prompt. The forums themselves were low pressure and vulnerable enough for me to expose my thoughts in an unorganized way.

Drafting was yet another step up, albeit less gentle. The essay setting made every sentence and word feel heavier and more serious. Within drafts, I still struggled as I used to, but I found that the previous work that I had done with both free writes and discussion forums helped me write more freely and with less self judgement. Essay 1 in particular let me deviate from traditional structure and actually vaguely enjoy. Essay 2 was more challenging for me. Since I wrote about why I thought “The Gangster We Are All Looking For” was frustrating, I had a lot of ideas floating around in my head. I tried in vain to write out a cohesive draft but it wasn’t working. Instead, I turned on a recorder and started ranting about what I didn’t like about the book. After talking to myself, I could identify and solidify points for my essay. The drafting process of Essay 2 was also very effective for me, since I wasn’t absolutely worried about the quality of the output. Once I moved on to the final for both essays, I was able to use more complex sentence structures to eliminate choppy flow. When finalizing, I could use more descriptive or terse words, like substituting “piece by piece” with “incrementally”. Clearly, it’s better to tackle essays incrementally by using brainstorming sessions and drafts rather than a final only.

These improvements haven’t just been in isolation from the rest of my life. When trying to express ideas or arguments to other people, I find myself more confident in my use of complex sentences and sentence structure. Oddly enough, I have found that this effects the way I think; thoughts in my mind’s voice just seem to flow better than they had before. Improvement in writing processes, such as corporealizing abstract ideas, has boosted my performance in the programming that I do as a hobby. A surprisingly large amount of skills that are needed to write English are just as valuable when writing software.

Reflecting upon my growth as a writer during this course, I came to the realization that what I wrote was often less important than how I wrote it. Simply put, the steps that I took to produce quality writing had more of an impact on the end result rather than any specific obsession over sentence quality or structure. To be clear, there is a time for this perfectionism, but it only belongs at the final stages of the essay, not at the beginning. All of this practice writing, including this essay itself, has helped me break free of this needless perfectionism and refocused me on writing as a means to an end, rather than a goal.