

Allaying Fear:
An essay on the value of not finishing a piece of writing

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This essay discusses the practice of writing and staying motivated. Drawing on observations about three types of fear that students in writing classes experience, the author reminds us that with consistent teacher support, combined with a change in perspective on how students and teachers perceive drafts, students can learn to manage fears and focus their energy on writing. Learning to see drafts as examples of their Current Best Work (CBW) can help students strive for and develop a sense of high standards without fearing that they are submitting work that is not perfect.

“This is one of the few courses in your entire life in which you can, if you choose to, follow your interests with joy, and expand your curiosity. Writing is a journey, and the essay that you write is a record of your observations, thoughts, analysis, and discoveries.”

- Paul Wadden (from the Theme Writing syllabus, Fall of 2008)

One of the more significant issues for teachers of college-level writing is establishing ways to help students develop and maintain levels of motivation. Learning how to stay focused and motivated on a writing project entails recognizing internal and external limitations as well as learning to work with personal fears. I don't know many people who feel that writing is easy. In fact, it is difficult because it is often discouraging to realize that our first efforts are so inadequate. William Zinsser describes writing as “hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard” (Zinsser, 2001, p. 12).

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Yes, writing is hard. This is the first observation I share with my students about the similarities that exist between writing and learning any kind of art or sport, for example; it requires a combination of patience, thinking, much practice and the kind of commitment that erases deadlines from the mind. Many students sign-up for writing courses hoping to master a skill over a short period of time, and find themselves becoming disillusioned as soon as they find out that one of the course requirements is to work on a major project for the entire semester. Fears switch on, and de-motivation kicks in. The present essay is concerned with providing an account of several ideas that I have found helpful to both my students and myself as we learn to recognize three types of fears that prevent people from staying focused: (a) fear of making mistakes (b) fear of not being able to meet deadlines; and (c) fear of being evaluated by peers and teachers.

Three Kinds of Fear

Fear of writing is real. It can happen for many reasons that will require a very long list. For the purpose of this short essay, it would help to establish what I mean by fear. I see fear as the feeling of not being able to cope with a situation or a task that appears beyond our immediate possibilities. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains that, “When a person is bombarded with demands which he or she feels unable to meet, a state of anxiety ensues. When the demands for action are fewer, but still more than what the person feels capable of handling, the state of experience is one of worry” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 50). In writing classes, inability to cope with the demands of school often shows as people’s fear of making mistakes. This is the first type of fear discussed here, and most common among students. Tragically, fear of making mistakes is planted in our minds very early in life and never seems to go away. Theodore Zeldin tells us that fear of making mistakes has a long-lasting effect on people’s ability to do simple tasks such as thinking and writing at the same time (Zeldin, 1994).

A second fear connected to writing is the fear of not meeting deadlines. This is an interesting type of fear that many people learn to live with during their college years. Some of us can remember the days back in college when we would look with envy at those students who managed to write a paper the night before the due date, after going to a movie and drinking the equivalent of two gallons of coffee. What I did not realize then is that for most of those students, writing was a task, “a job to be done” before a deadline. In other words, meeting the deadline was more important

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than crafting a piece. I looked at those students with envy because as a non-native speaker of English, I struggled (still do) with my writing. At that time, writing was about 60 percent struggle and 40 percent fear. The combination of fear of making mistakes and meeting a deadline meant that – on average – I had to draft a piece somewhere between twelve and twenty times before my anxiety meter would begin to subside. While the number of drafts I write has decreased a tiny bit over the past two decades, the fear of not meeting deadlines continues to appear from time to time just as it did twenty some years ago. Unfortunately, for both students and teachers who write, there is rarely time for this much drafting and this fear never goes away.

A third reason behind fear of writing is evaluation. Fear of evaluation happens when we are asked to share our writing with our peers or submit a draft to a teacher upon which we expect some kind of judgment. This kind of fear is most evident when teachers refer to the end of term assignment as a “final product” that is graded. The idea of seeing a draft as a final document suggests that the final grade is the ultimate goal and thus dismisses the possibility of seeing writing as an ongoing process, even when there is a product at the end of the term. I think that students would focus less on the fear of being graded on a final product and pour more energy into their efforts to write if they believed that their grades might be based on regular engagement over time, and on the journey of working with interesting ideas. In the next section, I explore these three ideas in a bit more detail.

Looking at Fear in the Face

When I was much younger, each time I had to perform in public I would become sick. Fear was the cause and as the concert date loomed, I would look at the date on the calendar with enormous fear. To me, it was more like a day of execution. My piano teacher would say, “Tell me, what *IS* the color of fear?” Since I was unable to answer, he would add, “See? Go, get on stage and play.... And if you play badly, I’ll kill you.” All that fear changed the day I saw my own piano teacher making attempts to survive a panic attack in the green room, fifteen minutes before a performance. I did not ask him the question he had asked me many times, but the look on his face taught me that fear never goes away. (By the way, the color of fear on his face was French gray.)

In writing classes we see fear of making mistakes on our students’ faces when they hand in their drafts, thinking that we are going to return the

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paper with more red color than we can see on a Virgin Atlantic airplane. I usually read my students' first drafts, make some comments in pink, highlight the typos in blue or red, confusing grammar in blue and mark the interesting sentences or clever statements in green. Even though I explain my colorful feedback system, students still come to my office to ask for "guidance" about "what to do," particularly how to improve their grammar. I tell them that the content, the quality of their ideas is far more important than grammatical accuracy, especially in the early stages, and that grammar is something we can take care of as we continue to produce drafts. I often show them how what some time ago seemed like a good sentence had to be changed in order to make a point and in the process, the grammar and maybe vocabulary had to change as well. I tell them to look at the comments they received from their peer readers, to look at my comments and then focus on producing another draft that makes their ideas come to the fore and that helps us hear their voices. Grammar is something we can take care of later. That is the easy part. Over the years, I have seen that this kind of guidance helps allay students' fear of making mistakes.

Lack of time is another area in which some of us can sympathize with our students. Fear of not meeting deadlines intensifies when we realize there is not enough time for ideas to grow and develop before we actually have to put them down on paper. This type of fear is most destructive because it is not easy to see. I tell my students that when I was much younger, each time I had to perform in public and looked at a calendar I would become sick. That fear would manifest itself in all kinds of health problems, and as the concert date loomed, I would actually begin to believe that I would never be ready for the performance. Then, one day while I was on tour with a Romanian violinist who spoke almost zero English (he would say, "I no time") and would prefer to practice other pieces by himself rather than working together. His attitude about performing made me realize that the idea of "perfecting" a program as I was trying to do, seeing that night's performance as the final product was creating all sorts of unnecessary pressure. The truth is, no matter how hard one works at preparing a concert, the performance is not the final product, but rather an example of where we are at the moment in our association with that topic. In other words, a performance is an example of our Current Best Work.

We have a parallel problem in schools. We can recall language teachers who, back in high school, convinced us that writing is a task and that as such, our priority is to focus on getting a piece of writing done on time because it is a "final" product (a "concert performance," using the music analogy). We have all had teachers like this; we have all been teachers

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like this. We have had to meet deadlines and to give deadlines. This is a reality of “performing.”

Here, I am not saying that we should do away with deadlines. We need some “*date limite*” as we say in French, to make sure that there is some structure, especially when we have to submit grades by the end of the term. What I am saying is that students can be told that they are not expected to submit perfect drafts because such things do not exist. Their current draft is all they have. Dates for submissions are there to remind them that they need to plan in advance so that their drafts are a reflection of their best work in progress.

In order to help students prepare themselves to work with the reality of deadlines, I help them design a plan based on their own timetables. One feature of that plan is that students themselves must devise ways of achieving small-scale accomplishments. By encouraging students to work towards small victories, they can make more realistic plans as to the dates when certain parts of the paper need to be drafted. Having a manageable plan for working regularly helps them develop the habit of writing a paragraph a day (for example), and can keep them focused on the topic as they craft small pieces of the writing. In this way, students do not need to focus on a deadline. Conceptualizing something as finished means it is dead—it has stopped growing, hence the idea of a Dead-line. That goes against the concept of a draft as an example of one’s Current Best Work. Having many short-term deadlines that ask students to turn in their best current drafts rather than a finished product helps allay their fear of deadlines.

In writing classes, teachers can help students see their drafts as examples of their current best effort as a way to help them develop a sense of respect for each other’s work. When a draft is seen as something “in progress,” even at the end of a term, students can lower their anxiety by focusing on the content of their own and their peers writing, and diverting their thoughts away from perfecting their grammar, for example. We learn a great deal from discussing our papers with people who are going through the same experience. Students’ comments show a sense of mutual respect, and criticism gradually becomes constructive because it acknowledges that the piece of writing is “organic,” a work in progress. This too, allays fear of deadlines.

The third kind of fear that I wish to discuss is fear of being evaluated. Fear of evaluation is a monster with two faces: fear of being evaluated by peers and fear of being evaluated by teachers. In conversation with students one can learn that fear of evaluation by peers usually means fear of being

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laughed at because of linguistic inaccuracies or not having achieved a required number of words.

On the other hand, fear of evaluation by teachers is more complex. Like a monster that inhabits the space under a bed, fear of evaluation by teachers has many tentacles. Some of these include (a) Fear of getting a bad grade for not having mastered a particular writing style or technique (b) Fear of being evaluated unfairly because of personality: shy or quiet people are sometimes seen as incompetent (c) Fear of not living up to expectations created by the teacher, the image of the school, the family, society, and more importantly, fear of not living up to self-expectations that have been passed on to them by teachers (d) Fear of being evaluated on incomplete knowledge: Many students report feeling anxiety of this kind because they feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that is available to them and realize they will never be able to absorb it all, or make good decisions that will help them select the sources that will support their papers.

Thus, fear of being evaluated is a complex matter that justifies the need to provide students with opportunities to see themselves from a different perspective. In the final section of this essay, I tell a story of how students and teachers can work together to shift paradigms and learn the value of seeing their writing as an example of their Current Best Work.

The Tutorial: An Example of What the Teacher and Students Learned About their Current Best Work

Until I began teaching at ICU, the only experience I had had with tutorials was from my piano lessons at the conservatoire. In those days, our teacher would give us an imposed piece that each one of the seven students in the class would study for a week. We would then get together and perform the same piece in front of each other. Usually, the pieces our teacher selected would last somewhere between five to seven minutes. At the end of each interpretation, we would answer questions from the teacher as well as ask questions to other students about their performance, discussing decisions we had made about the interpretation. This kind of reflective exercise was extremely useful because we learned the value of seeing our interpretations as unfinished work, and began to see a performance as an opportunity to show our current level of understanding of the music we played.

On the occasion of my first tutorial with students in my Academic Reading and Writing classes (ARW), I remembered my experience and decided to try a variation of it. We set up group appointments of five to

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seven students at a time, got together, exchanged drafts, read and commented on what we had learned from reading those drafts. At first, it seemed like a difficult exercise. My students were shy and did not want to share their writing with one another for fear of being laughed at. I told them to imagine me writing about those topics in Japanese. I admitted to my students that my level of Japanese is quite good when I need to get through customs and immigration, but extremely limited when I have to write a few lines explaining cold symptoms at a doctor's office, for example. Basically, when I write in Japanese, I write like a five year old.

As I learned during the first tutorial sessions, being able to admit one's limitations has its own rewards. Since I try to participate in each tutorial as moderator and storyteller, one day I decided to share with my students, drafts of a paper that my writing partner and I were working on at that time. I made sure to tell them that the inscription "draft 11" meant that we had revised whatever we had done ten times and that we were now on the eleventh draft. Questions about drafting and how to stay focused began to flow. Now, as I reflect on those April through June sessions, I realize that the students and I were not talking just about selecting verbs and nouns, or, as the case sometimes turned out to be, commas; we were talking about the process of pondering, negotiating ideas, searching for words that sound true to ourselves. And as we talked about it, it became clear that there was no way for us to take the essays to the point where we would have liked them to be. We realized it was necessary to re-define the word, "deadline."

I explained to my students that one way to look at a deadline is to see it as a stop on a road. We stop to take a break and think about what we have written so far, and we then submit it to the teacher or editor, fully understanding that it can continue to grow. Some day we can come back and continue to read and write more about it if we choose to do so. In this spirit, I told them to conceptualize each draft as an example of our Current Best Work. As a joke, I mentioned to my students that, since we are studying in the ELP and learned about a hundred acronyms between April and May, I figured that adding one more would not hurt us, so we began to talk about our drafts as examples of our Current Best Work (CBW), not as finished essays.

During the weeks that followed those sessions, I observed that students began to feel more comfortable and less fearful about reading and offering commentary on each others' drafts. Students' levels of expertise always vary, even in the same class, so they were almost always able to provide each other assistance, and I was there as well, working along with them. The tutorials thus became examples of "shared problem solving"

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sessions as described by Barbara Rogoff: “Shared problem solving – with an active learner participating in culturally organized activity with a more skilled partner – is central to the process of learning apprenticeship” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 39).

The tutorials gave us opportunities to shift paradigms and learn to see our drafts as “interesting problems” that are in the process of being studied. Sharing drafts, considering various ways of presenting information, making contributions by developing maps for the pieces, considering possible “red flags” or issues that may work against our ideas, these are all ways of turning the tutorial into a session of apprenticeship. But perhaps, the most important value that students can learn from the tutorials is to appreciate the value of seeing their own and others' drafts as unfinished work that is at its current best. When students learn to see their drafts as examples of their current best effort rather than a finished product, they can learn two things: first, they begin to accept the fact that whenever we write something for others to read, we should expect some kind of criticism about it. Second, they learn from practice that a good draft shows the reader where the writer is at the moment, and that there is still room for improvement.

At the end of the spring term when students handed in their first-ever essays, we talked about the effect of changing the “lens” with which we looked at a piece of writing. Seeing our writing as examples of our Current Best Work made it so much easier to generate the kind of motivation we needed in order to stay focused. In the end, students did not see their papers as “final,” because they knew there is always room for new information to find its way into the project.

Conclusion

Helping students develop mechanisms to stay focused and motivated throughout a writing course entails guiding them to recognize and work with fears of the kind I have discussed in this essay. When we begin to see that fear of writing is often the result of unexamined attitudes and behaviors, we can develop a more pro-active attitude towards writing. This attitude includes learning to see our drafts as examples of our Current Best Work rather than as finished essays. With such a view, students' fears of making mistakes, of deadlines, and of being evaluated tend to dissipate. The work we do in a writing class comes to be seen as a long and interesting journey rather than a fearful one.

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