

## 7 Is Assessing Writing Possible?

What does [personal narrative] have to do with the writing in history, chemistry, or biology? What is in this paper that is transferable?

—Howard

The time has finally arrived to decide whether or not to rework our “criteria for good writing.” Given all that we have said (explicitly and implicitly) about discipline-specific ways of knowing, can we assume that our list of primary traits applies to all writing regardless of the discipline? If writing does indeed express the way a discipline “thinks,” and if each discipline’s thinking does vary in important ways, must we not fashion an evaluative instrument that reflects those differences? Diane, whose instincts as we have seen are to remove the “picket fences” separating disciplines, wonders whether these differences are merely “accidents.” The traits that we have recognized (perspective, audience, evidence, logic, correctness) reflect universal principles, she says. I suggest that universal principles may apply even as individual disciplines employ their own methods of inquiry and reporting. Those principles may apply to writing nursing care plans, for example. But care plans may, at the same time, reveal distinctive methods, designs, and expectations. What methods do nurses use, I ask Diane, when treating, and reporting on the treatment of, patients? “The first step,” Diane says, “is assessment”:

That’s where you go in and gather data. . . . The second step is analysis, where you analyze the facts and sift through them. And you come up with the third, which is the diagnosis. What [do] you feel is the problem . . . ? What is the implication? What are you going to do about the problem . . . ? Then the final stage is evaluation, where you look at what you did and whether or not it worked, and then you revise.

Marlene, surprised at what she hears, asks, “So you don’t start off with the hypothesis?” I know why she asks that question. Marlene assumes that an interpretive hypothesis frames an observation. Diane posits an approach that is data-driven. The nurse figures in the equation as an observer only. That role would seem to conflict with the description of the nurse’s job given by Diane earlier: the nurse as patient advocate, as very much a player in the patients’ treatment. Nevertheless, the writing of the patient’s care plan seems to construct a position for nurses that is far more neutral and detached. However, Diane acknowledges, a nurse

might say why he wrote the things he did; he might credential himself in terms of where he's been, and then he might say why he's collected [data] the way he has. When you read a text of history, I'm not so sure it would be so far afield from that same approach.

The reference to history is in response to Marlene's statement, by way of contrast with writing in nursing, that historians "write out of their own experience, beliefs, and value systems, and . . . can't separate those from what they write."

In an effort to zero in on distinctive traits of writing in a discipline, we return to that excerpt from Marlene's history text. In that excerpt, the writer divides up all of human history into schemes or categories: hunter-gatherer, tributary, and capitalistic societies. Marlene notes that the historian sets up these schemes by "modes of production," a fact which reflects his Marxist framework: "There are historians with different ideologies who would group [societies] in different ways." In other words, historians—like scholars in any discipline—write out of their particular framework. But that framework need not reflect disciplinary bias. Instead it may express that particular individual's way of seeing the world—intellectual categories, as Kathy calls them, necessary to the ordering of that person's perspective. Indeed disciplines may contain a vast array of approaches—to the extent, as Marlene sadly reports of her own situation, that we may have "very little in common" with colleagues in our own departments.

If it is true that disciplines themselves cannot find a common language, then any document that attempts to reduce writing to certain universal qualities or "primary traits" may be just wishful thinking. However, this group, because of its commitment to discovering common ground, is determined to give the traits a chance. Are the qualities that we have designated "primary" indeed useful when reading a piece of writing? In order to get at their usefulness, we decide to apply these traits to a problematic piece of student writing. The piece comes from Peter's composition course, a course our college catalog refers to as "Writing from Experience." A required course for all our students—and the only required course in writing—English 11 is commonly perceived by faculty as the one place in the curriculum where students can obtain training in college writing that will prepare them for coursework down the road. No other course carries the weight of such expectations.

Peter sets up our reading by describing the student writer:

He was told by high school teachers that he couldn't write, that he'd better learn a trade. . . . Even when he got an A on an earlier paper he didn't believe it was any good. . . . There was a real credibility problem. He didn't believe.

Peter consciously sets up a portrait of the student writer as underdog hero, knowing full well that we will be charmed by the piece. And yet the portrait that he draws rings true—especially as a description of community college students. For these students, seeing is not believing. They have had so little positive reinforcement in school that they often expect to fail (yet again). Also typical is the advice given to “learn a trade,” in light of such failure. School is seen as “academic” work, for those able to go on to the universities, and to graduate school. It is not seen as applying to the lived experience of most of our students.

Peter describes the student’s assignment:

The purpose or challenge is [to] re-create for the audience, through the use of language, an experience that he has had. And to come as close as he can giving them that experience, making them feel, think, and react as he did.

“What I told this kid,” Peter says, “is you’ve got to tell the truth—no bullshit.” In so saying, he privileges the expression of emotion and sets up the standard of “the truth” as a means by which to evaluate such expression. Finally, in merely asking his students to “re-create” a moment Peter invites narrative, rather than explicit analysis.

I read the paper aloud. It begins in conversational mode, addressing the reader directly, and then quickly sets up the story:

I don’t know how many of you have ever experienced death first-hand, but I am here to tell you that I have. It was two-years ago January, when I worked for a large construction company. Things were slow around the office . . . .

Mixing the rhythms of speech with the intricacies of subordination and parallelism, the narrator entices us to enter the experience while at the same time moving economically to describe a central character in the story:

Lou was about 55 years old, tall, had grey hair, and was a blast to be around. He lived in Little Compton, in a nice little house with his dog. We were never really close, Lou and me, but we did get along.

The narrator knows enough of the man to reveal that “Lou’s whole life was his work; his wife died a few years before and his only daughter lived in Texas.”

After not hearing from Lou for two weeks, the narrator pays a visit to his house. It is at this point that the story takes on the quality of a “re-created” experience:

I got out of my truck, and walked toward the breezeway. I could hear Clyde in the house barking, and figured that Lou would greet me at

the door before I could ring the bell. I opened the screen door and was looking at the wooden door, trying to see what was wrong with it. I pulled on the doorknob to pull the door fully closed. Clyde was still barking, and I reached for the handle again, this time to open the door. I turned the knob and gave the door a nudge with my knee. Just then I felt a brush against my leg as Clyde ran out into the front yard. Before I could even open my mouth, I began to gag. The smell coming from inside the house was one that I couldn't describe. It was horrid, like a mixture of old still air, dogshit, and something ten times worse than limberger cheese.

I yelled for Lou, but there wasn't a sound in the house. I held my breath and covered my mouth with the sleeve of my coat. I walked into the house and saw piles of dogshit and puddles of piss all over the kitchen and parlor floors. I knew then that something was wrong. I started climbing the stairs when I saw an arm hanging off the top step. My heart started pounded, and my breath ceased. I continued up the stairs to find Lou on the floor lying in a puddle that looked like mucus. My body started shaking as my eyes focused on the face of a man I didn't recognize. It was Lou, but his skin was now brownish-green, and it was clinging to his face like a leather glove on a hand.

I stood there staring for what seemed to be an eternity. My head was spinning from the smell and sight. I ran downstairs to call the police and then back outside to throw up.

The coroner's report reveals that Lou had died of a heart attack and had been dead for about a week. It also says that "his fingers and forearms had been chewed on by his dog." The narrator notes that at Lou's funeral, which is attended by only nine people, he doesn't really feel loss at Lou's passing "but I do feel bad that he had to die alone."

I enjoy reading the paper aloud, because I feel myself taken by the rhythms and structure of the piece. It seems to verify what Peter often says, "Good writing is like a dance"—allowing us to luxuriate in the sheer joy of movement. And of course I am moved by its dramatic subject and understated treatment of that subject. Narratives, the psychologist Jerome Bruner tells us, derive much of their power from the linking of the "exceptional and the ordinary" (1990, 47). The writer of this story has rendered death in an altogether unexpected way. Others in the room are genuinely moved by the narrative (one of us has to leave the room because, apparently, it hits too close to home): "This *is* magical," Jerry says, echoing Peter's original comments on the work.

I am troubled by Jerry's reaction and by the respectful silence that the piece elicits from the group. How do we articulate a critical response to a piece that works magic? Is our response to be a matter of "faith," and therefore not translatable or accountable? Put another way, how do we explain to faculty outside this room—say a colleague in chemistry—why this piece is strong? What if she says that, sure, this is good but it has very little in

common with the kind of writing that she's having her students do? What does expressive writing have to do with the kind of writing that I expect my students to do? In other words, can we extract from this piece certain qualities that can be seen operating in disciplinary writing, universal and transferable qualities inherent in good writing?

Jerry, taking up the challenge, seizes upon the trait of "audience": "I was the audience. He addressed me right away." Jerry is alluding to the description of audience as given in our original list of primary traits:

If effective communication is to happen, writing must show some sense of audience and a sense of the "rhetorical situation" (the needs of the audience but also the demands of the form of the writing and the purpose).

Working backward from his own affective response to the piece, Jerry argues that his needs as an audience are addressed because he has been so moved by the writer's words. The more critical response would be to explore the ways by which that effect is achieved: How and where does the writer manipulate language so as to maximize the impact on the audience? Pat talks about the way the writer gradually builds up to the climactic discovery of the body—the barking of the dog, the door slightly ajar.

Marlene observes that the writing "had a ring of truth, it had integrity." Referring in part to the realistic description of bodily decay, Marlene may also be speaking about the narrator's equivocal reaction to Lou's passing ("I don't think about Lou too often . . ."). The narrator's detachment from the scene makes a great deal of sense, as does the lingering vision of Lou's neglected corpse.

Peter singles out the carefully modulated, conversational quality of the writing, and links that explicitly to the writer's voice on the page, "a voice that sounds like a person speaking." For Peter, that is the holy grail: to achieve a level of comfort in writing that approaches the ease and gracefulness of speech. More important, and more disturbingly, Peter ties a writer's voice on the page to the "truth" (" . . . tell the truth. No bullshit.") It's a view that I have some difficulty with, on several grounds. First of all, since Bakhtin (1981), many have looked at language as polyphonic, containing many voices. In the student's narrative itself, we can indeed hear many voices: from the hip colloquial "shoot the shit" to the subtly ironic "I didn't really feel a loss as I saw his casket surrounded by flowers and fake grass." Any view of a unitary voice would, in addition, seem to contradict the postmodern notion that the self is complex and comprises many selves.

Beyond these broad philosophical concerns, I am struck by Peter's insistence that a piece of writing express the "truth." When I ask Peter

what are the qualities in his student's narrative that might transfer to other kinds of writing, his response is quite telling—"voice and personality"—to which I counter: "Are they the same thing?" More than committing the "pathetic fallacy," Peter engages in an ongoing act of faith, a disposition to be charmed by the magic of words. In sharp contrast, I would regard a text as a performance. By that I don't mean to diminish the power of words to move us. Rather I would acknowledge that such power is the outcome of a masterful performance. I am reminded of a question that students seem to ask every semester in my "Writing from Experience" course: How do you know that the writing you read comes from genuine experience and is not just b.s.? I tell them that for me the question is nearly irrelevant: If I am "moved" (emotionally and intellectually) by the writing, I respond favorably to it. From a writer's perspective, the act of reflecting experience on the page is in some sense an act of fiction. From the artful selection of details to the inevitable filtering of memory, writers who write about their lives compose their lives. In short, what I try to do is complicate the (naive) connection between a writer's "experience" and the words on the page.

So far, we have identified the following traits that make the narrative powerful: its manipulation of audience; its carefully crafted use of conversational rhythms; its truthfulness; and the presence of a distinctive voice on the page. Carol and Diane note as well that the narrator is a fine observer, suggesting the writer's ability to conjure up vivid and calculated scenes (all the evidence of the corpse's decay and neglect, for example). We can make the case that this narrative meets the standards set forth by our list of primary traits, as I try to do for the group:

We do have a strong perspective here, and we do have a level of detail that is very striking. . . . how the words have an impact on the audience that's also expressed in the structure [or logic] of the piece. This isn't haphazardly put together. . . . It builds up as Pat says to a really touching conclusion. And the grammar and mechanics seem to be pretty sound.

In saying this, I can't help believing that the qualities that make this piece powerful transcend our primary traits: Kathy calls those qualities "directness" and "engagement." As a result, I also wonder whether I would convince that colleague in the chemistry (or psychology or history) department that this student's narrative shows promise for writing done in other disciplines. Perhaps Peter is right in that respect: reading, like writing, may be an act of faith.