

## Chapter 8. Writing in Non-Literature Courses

As I fulfilled general education requirements and considered majors in my first years of college, I took courses in a variety of disciplines. The writing demands of non-literary courses I experienced varied, from the minimal to major writing challenges. But all required us to submit our reasoning and knowledge in disciplinary written form for evaluation, whether as problem sets, on exams, or in lengthy papers. In the contrast of the kinds of written work I needed to submit in different fields I became aware of how different and particular the thinking, ideas, theories, and practices of the fields were, and I also wondered how the reasoning of one might contribute to another, even far removed on the disciplinary spectrum.

### Reasoning in Science and Mathematics

My basic physics and math courses had little writing beyond required problem sets, exams made mostly of such problems, and cookbook demonstration labs. I do not have any record of these, but I do remember needing to understand the reasoning behind the equations and procedures we were asked to apply to specific problems. As the coursework became more advanced it became less obvious which procedures and equations to apply, what values to place in the equations, what sequence of theories and equations would get us to a complex solution, and what reasoning steps would constitute a valid proof of a proposition. I had few problems in the selection of words, but application of concepts and precision of execution in proceeding down reasoning paths became essential to coming to accurate solutions. Conceptualizing what was essential within the problem facts and determining what variables and processes were at play in relation to each other pushed me to see problems having theoretical shape and coherence. While pieces fell in place readily for me in the earlier courses, in my most advanced courses, I could make crisp sense of only some of the puzzles offered, and I often didn't have confidence in my proposed solutions, nor could I determine what went wrong in those I couldn't solve. This bothered me, as I no longer felt I was understanding how the pieces of theory fit together and applied. The logic of some proofs in number theory (offered as the honors alternative to advanced calculus), in particular, remained obscure to me, because I was not familiar enough with the theory to see the logical entailments. This search to find theoretical coherence in the synthesis of disparate theories drove me later as I tried to understand what writing was, in its many dimensions.

In the social sciences writing, however, reasoning was expressed in more traditional academic essay form. In the large introductory lectures I attended in

sociology, diplomatic history, and economics, however, writing was often limited to brief exam essays which I do not have copies of, nor much specific memory of. I do remember, however, that half of each exam usually required reproducing material from textbooks and lectures, so preparation would have involved mostly reading, note taking, and key information identification. These are useful skills, learned by most college students, but they did not push the bounds of my writing potentials beyond increasing a storehouse of useful academic phrases.

## Reconstructing Intentions and Thoughts of Historical Actors

Other courses, however, posed greater writing challenges. In medieval history in my sophomore year, I wrote one 10-page term paper in the fall and another in the spring. Both were chosen from a list of potential questions circulated by the professor. The fall paper was an examination of Pope Gregory VI's letters to determine his sincerity in his acceptance of Henry IV's penitence. I remember hours puzzling over the grey-bound volume of his letters to find themes in his many actions and attempts to unify control and practices in the church. I connected his more contemplative letters with the transactional ones. In developing my analysis, I was learning to find order and coherence in a substantial corpus of documents, to establish criteria for analysis, and to synthesize my findings in a persuasive narrative. I organized the analysis sequentially, with transitional statements and focusing topic sentences. The first paragraph set up the historical dilemma faced by Pope Gregory and the importance for examining the letters. The second paragraph identified the evidence and the method for the examination of sincerity. The next four paragraphs elaborated the historical dilemma, adding excerpts from the letters presenting his perspective on the challenge he faced. The closing paragraph offered further quotations revealing his dilemma and confession of being humbled by the events. The few comments from the professor suggested I lacked some important contextual historical knowledge, but otherwise met the expectations of the assignment.

The spring paper was also an analysis of a substantial corpus, considering the humanism of the Goliardic poems, and interpreting them in relation to the Renaissance. I began by comparing definitions of humanism, but then rejected the definitional quest. At the conclusion of the initial paragraph, instead, I turned to how the Goliardic lyrics of the 12<sup>th</sup> century represented something new and compared them with quattrocento Italian lyrics. In the second paragraph, I excluded questions of the history of poetic form because I relied on translations and did not know enough about the emergence of rhymed metric poetry to replace Latin quality. Then I discuss who the Goliards were and the spirit they represented (though the professor corrected some of my less-informed assumptions). In the following paragraphs I recounted the themes and attitudes in the poems, supported by long quotations

indicating tropes of sin, sensuality, drink, virility, and nature as lust. I compared them to the earlier Scotus who is more pious and then to the quattrocento, pointing out the Goliards were more conventionalized in poetic form, cruder in sensuality and emotions, and not attuned to spiritual issues. I concluded that the Goliards had a beginning awareness of humanism, but only a beginning. My paper was reasonably structured, but shallow in its readings and analysis.

## Analyzing Governmental Structures, Motives, and Ideas

I have a larger group of papers from several Government courses, as I was considering that as a major. The first term first-year course on American Government asked for three papers. The first three-pager evaluated the seniority rule in Congress, the second four-pager examined the tension between the President's responsibility and authority, and the last of the same length weighed the benefits and weaknesses of the U.S. two-party system. All required me to summarize and synthesize various course readings and supplemental materials we sought on our own, select relevant themes and details, and build a coherent argument, adopting an objective yet evaluative stance while referring to some historical examples. All three submissions met with the general approval of the teaching assistant, so apparently, I was appropriately practicing and expanding skills for this kind of source-based argument, developing a reflective evaluative frame, and maintaining an academic voice, a bit different from the more personal voice and overt personal concerns in my English class. I did, however, remain baffled by the instructor's comment repeated on all the papers that he wished I had gone further and made some stronger conclusions. In retrospect, I think he was asking for some affirmative proposals for reforming the seniority system, the U.S. presidency, and the two-party system, probably based on his experience as a British citizen, though I am not quite sure how I could have done that as an eighteen-year-old who had not yet traveled nor even studied comparative foreign governments (that was for the spring term). It was not explicitly stated, however, that solving institutional problems was part of the assignments, and his comments about going further did not point me in any direction I then understood.

In the spring first year course on European systems, I only have one four-page paper in my files, and I believe the course relied more on exams. My paper was a response to the question of whether national socialism was a temporary aberration in German political history. I extended my high school paper on German nationalism, to discuss the history of governmental weakness prior to the formation of the German state, the progressive impulses behind unification, and then the social and economic disruptions following World War I. I drew on a range of philosophic and historical materials to sketch a large picture. Again, the same teaching assistant liked it but asked for stronger conclusions; again, at that point I didn't seem to have a clue as to what this instructor meant by stronger conclusions and how to get them. Even now with more than a half-century of academic experience, I can only guess.

I took two more political science courses and another on political philosophy. A political science course in the spring of my second year was on Congressional processes. I did two similar papers examining how interests drove legislation that regulated industries, which was a central theme of the course and was the focus of a book the professor was working on, as I later discovered. One, on hearings concerning the regulation of food coloring used for dyeing oranges, I do not have a copy of because the professor kept it for his own project without asking for my permission; he also did not provide any feedback beyond a middling grade. Another, which I do have a copy of, examined the legislative history of a bill affecting the trout industry. The first three pages were an introduction to regulatory legislation and the relation to industrial interests, followed by a history of legislation creating and regulating the FDA. This was then followed by six pages of the legislative history of the bill affecting the trout industry. This history involved the reading of the transcripts of committee and subcommittee hearings to see how members of Congress from affected regions expressed the concerns of their constituent industries. Both parts were factual narratives told in an objective reportorial voice, except for a couple of evaluative phrases and what I thought at the time were clever ironies, such as in my title “Does Trout Regulation belong in the Pork Barrel?” I have only a carbon paper copy of this with no teacher comments.

The instructor’s response to another paper in political philosophy from the fall of my second year also was obscure, providing no useful guidance. The professor, Alan Bloom, assigned us to explain Rousseau’s account of the origins of human self-awareness and acts of will in the *Second Discourse (On the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men)*. I remember spending many days reading, re-reading, and puzzling over the set text and related texts of Rousseau and commentators. I developed what I thought captured Rousseau’s hypothetical story of the formation of consciousness, though I confessed remaining puzzled by two passages. In my essay I discussed my difficulties with those passages at length. Along the way I tried to analyze what seemed to be elements of self-awareness, consciousness, and action—not easy topics to me then, nor even now, as I continue to read the proposals of neuroscientists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and others on the topic. I concluded with a final paragraph suggesting that Rousseau held either one of two views that to me seemed equally unlikely, so I confessed my lack of understanding, particularly of the two passages I discussed at length. Bloom’s comments mostly note that I have gotten Rousseau wrong. No doubt I did, but I still can’t see what the professor was pointing me towards, nor did he engage with the passages I confessed confusions over in order to give me some direction. His response taught me that meeting what I thought were the expectations of the assignment did not always serve me well, no matter how much work I invested in the task, if it did not match the values of the reader. I remember auditing a seminar the following term from this same professor (because he was very highly regarded by my peers and was a faculty guest living at Telluride—a story I will elaborate in chapter 10), but as an auditor I did not write a paper.

From these and related interactions, I learned there were worlds that I could not make myself understood within, nor engage in fruitful dialog with, no matter how much I attempted to meet the formal expectations and practices, because my texts would not be seen as fitting or making sense within the views that circulated within that world.

I had a more affirming response in a third-year course on urban planning, just before I took a term away from the university. I turned the topic of the term paper (though I do not remember the prompt) into a contemplation on values and morality in science and government, far removed from what I remember as a rather technical course on such things as water and sewage infrastructure in relation to city expansion. I pondered such things as fact-value distinctions, technocratic approaches to decision making, cost-benefit analysis, systems analysis, the atomic bomb and the Vietnam war (this was written in January 1966 as the war escalated), ending with the need for moral reasoning in government. I was tying disparate materials into a reflection on my values. In looking now at the profile of the professor who was to become one of the leading theorists of progressive urban planning, I can see why he responded positively to the idealism and search for value in the paper even though I didn't really respond to any of the technical content of the course.

This paper reinforced for me that I could write in ways that seemed to exceed the situation and prompt if I could tap into the deeper values and concerns of the audience. Even from junior high school, I have found transgressive and boundary-bending ways of writing beyond what the situation called for, and often enough I was rewarded (though sometimes not). This transgressive reframing of writing tasks may seem to be in tension with my interest in genre, which was to become one of my theoretical and research obsessions—but I think to the contrary, I was becoming aware of boundaries and expectations as part of experimenting how to move across them to bring my interests and concerns into an acceptable space. Learning to say unconventional things in unconventional ways required a growing rhetorical, technical, and stylistic awareness of the expected as well as an evaluation of the risks and the courage needed to put pressure on those expectations.

At that point I was gathering credits for a government major, hoping I would be able to pursue a principled life in that sphere. This paper marked my final disaffection with the enterprise. Political science at that time seemed to me a cynical enterprise to provide technical means to support power and advantage. Whether or not I was misguided, I was pulling away from engaging in those discourses. It was after this course that I took a term off, to train for the Peace Corps, which I saw as the only way to take time out from the university in a way that conformed with my ideals at the time without also being drafted. The decision to leave was in retrospect complex, driven not only by my search for personal meaning and my disillusionment with the academic disciplines I was experiencing, but also by the recent death of my father and a need to pull further away from the needs and

demands of my mother. All this was compounded by the complexities of living in Telluride House. In Chapter 10 I will attempt to make sense of these crises and how they bore on my orientation to writing.