

First Day of Class: Lies, Fibs, Prevarication, and Refuge from the Commonplace

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A few years ago, I had a Dominican student, Luis, who was both stunned and thrilled when I told him that in a personal essay prevarication is like predication, that a white lie or two are permissible. I did not expatiate on the topic—the thrill or *schadenfreude*—but I could have mentioned John Knowles’s reflection on English classes at Phillips Exeter Academy, where he falsified quotations, a transgression to which numerous famous authors have fessed up—a peccadillo compared to plagiarism in that it involves imagination rather than theft; nor did I mention my own *fibacious* high school attributions to Pliny the Elder who, I’m sure, would have been proud of the authorship. And what I am getting at here is that in the long run imagination trumps scholarship. Any automaton can learn to research via the Internet, and fools can plagiarize, but creativity is at the soul of all good writing, and we, teachers, need to find ways to foster it.

Returning to Luis—later in the semester he submitted a personal essay that had a strong impact on me as well as on the classmates who listened to it—the metagoal of my classes—an essay with none of the boring canonical blather of traditional English Language Learner (ELL) essays that nobody besides Little Jack Horner profits from listening to. After class I asked Luis if all the events were true. His broad smile was intended to be read as a horizontal head shake—yet more imagination. I must admit that learning that not everything in the essay was true slightly diminished its impact on me, but what good would it have done for his audience to have learned what I did? How does fiction derive its impact if not from simulation of truth? We all know that Sophie never made that choice, but that never lessened the buckets of tears shed over it.

My contentions so far make sense only in the context of the personal essay, the mode of writing that is by far, if not exclusively, appropriate for ELLs beginning their foray into the domain of essaydom; the personal essay is, with few exceptions, the vehicle of composition teaching during the first two years at Phillips Exeter Academy, where the compositional competence of entering freshmen exceeds that of any community college ELL student I have ever taught. But the virtue of compositional prevarication consists in freeing up the imagination that, arguably, is more important to GOOD writing than learning to cite correctly or to write a perfectly formatted and developed five-paragraph essay.

What is more, excessive detail in the pedagogy of essay construction—comparative essays, persuasive essays, argumentative essays, etc.—is largely a waste of time. I would argue (though not at any length here) that most writing is basically the same. The idea of an introduction, body, and conclusion is to some extent inherent in most genres of writing, even poetry: for instance, Mark Doty’s verse structure—introduction, asking a question, and answering it—is a variant on this pattern (see Vendler, 1996).

Similarly, kids learn early on that telling a story involves structure similar to that of the standard essay. The most devastating two words a kid hears about her story are “So what?” Thus, the crucial factor of making a point is learned early on. Personal essays are very much like storytelling, and their structure is not nearly as important as having something imaginative and cogent to say. They free the writer as well as the teacher from the long, dreary, banal yawn of the standard student essay. One might even go so far as to suggest that paragraph/essay/story are an innate, logical extension of sentence formation; i.e., introduction/body/conclusion logically derives from subject/verb/object.

Inasmuch as essays need to prove a point and mine is, in part, that for beginning and intermediate writers imagination trumps exposition, clarity, correctness, and all of the other orthodoxies that you will find in writing texts, I offer you the following paragraph to compare with paragraphs you get when following the prescripts of at least 99% of writing texts:

A friend of my ask me can you be my girlfriend of course, i answer yes, but after that I say to myself what he want to do everything was ok until the guy decided to give a first kiss oh father, he was kiss me with the tongue and move and my lips to fast the I bite his tongue and so surprise that I'm a life.

With the syntactical flair of James Joyce, this memorable and powerful and student-composed paragraph displays a prelapsarian innocence to what Bartholomae (2005) called the commonplace—“a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration . . . a set of ‘prearticulated’ explanations that are made readily available to organize and interpret experience” (p. 7–8). For Bartholomae, the primary culprit in deficient student composition is misappropriation of the commonplace. By freeing the imagination in deviating from the commonplace, students may achieve a more seamless entry to it later on in their academic careers.¹

The passage is ironically a testament to the raw power of honesty while not undermining my arguments advocating the lie: confessional honesty is the other side of the same coin, accomplishing the same thing. Once the lie has been established, it opens the door to extreme honesty. The class—readers—will not know which is which, facilitating self-revelation that in most cases would remain cached.

How, then, does one go about using such compelling passages? Bartholomae (2005), among others, seemed to be advocating the creation of a personal, alternative canon, exposure to which would allow students “to feel both the power and limits of written language . . . to work inside the styles of others through close reading and through imitation and homage” (p. 14). Bartholomae (2005) showed how Jim Slevin ingeniously took a student essay that was incoherent and unreadable until he recast it in the line format Whitman used in *Song of Myself*, creating a vital and arresting piece. Similarly, a few years ago while teaching a course on the Beats, I noticed that Ginsberg’s poem “America” sounds like a dialogue where each line after the first was a response to the unwritten response of an interlocutor.² My assignment was to write the interstices, with 20 or so lines from “America” on the left and the student’s lines on the right. One thus-composed student poem was, on my view, as good as Ginsberg’s, occasioning lines like “look frontways sideways upways downways everyways or sardine angels will swallow you whole.”³

What I am preaching is, from the get-go, taking students out of the straitjacket of expectations: sounding as knowledgeable (not to mention as boring) as an encyclopedia, as

serious and judgmental as St. Peter; being armored with facts; espousing the socio-political views that the perfect citizen should have; being a pillar of virtue; ignoring that all work and no play makes Jacques a bore. While Jacques may well be faithful to his wife, wouldn't lies about his adulteries make better reading than a dissertation on how and why he is faithful? In short, abandon those writing texts and work via personal essays.

If we return for a moment to poetry, specifically the "confessional school" of poets, Sylvia Plath will likely come to mind ("Daddy") and perhaps Robert Lowell ("Skunk Hour"). Lowell's poems tend to have an almost visceral effect on readers, but does it matter if his confessions are not entirely truthful? Poet Stephen Dunn (2018) maintained that details in poetry, whether factual or fictive, contribute to the poem's *emotional veracity*. Dunn concluded that a writer's worst sin is to be uninteresting. It seems only fitting that we are left with the irony that truth can be sin.

Consider the performance of a play where the protagonist forgets a line and improvises a few that leave the audience stunned. Should the playwright complain? Samuel Beckett would; in fact, his estate will sue theatres for any deviation from his texts. But aren't we the worse for this? Matthew and Luke cannot both be telling the gospel truth, but are we not better off for alternative facts, for once? Yet even the facts are muddied waters, as Noah's story would imply; incredible though it may appear, it has been literal truth for millions. Perhaps another story, one you may be more convinced by, will make the point: it's called *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction*.

The lie is liberating in that it disrupts navigation into "the commonplace." It allows students to compose with their own discourse as opposed to making bad imitations of that which they have had very limited exposure to. Licensing students to lie de-authorizes the commonplace, freeing students from prearticulated explanations, expected syntactic structures, vocabulary, collocations, and phrasing that, as Bartholomae (2005) demonstrated in numerous examples, compose the somewhat convoluted notion of commonplace.⁴ Students come closer to proclaiming, verisimilarly, "*I am a cosmos/writer.*"

Via Aristotle, Bartholomae (2005) was concerned with where the writer situates herself in the act of composition. The lie, the fib, allows the writer to situate herself outside the realm of the commonplace (which Latin rhetoricians might describe as *sic situ laetantur lares*: the household gods delight in the place; teachers are the gods, the essay the well-appointed room). There is a telling juxtaposition in Bartholomae's observation that student writers are carrying off a bluff (p. 61), in effect lying about their membership in the university's (or a particular subject matter's) discourse, and my suggestion of deliberate but masked lying in composition. The attempts at membership that Bartholomae exposed are rather pathetic. The author of my assignment, on the other hand, invites the professor and other students to join her community, on her terms. It is an expression of authenticity that Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre—and perhaps even Foucault—would ostensibly approve of.⁵

Bartholomae (2005) was not saying that reproducing the commonplace is errant per se but rather that students imperfectly grasp it; aspects of the commonplace crop up in fits and starts as if students were, in an art class, reproducing the Mona Lisa after a momentary glimpse of it through a peephole. Mastery of the commonplace consists in writing "from a position of privilege" (p. 79). Successful student writers learn to usurp the realm of professional discourse, thus transforming the political and social relationships between students and teachers.⁶

Students acquire dominion over the commonplace as they pass through what Bartholomae (2005) figuratively called “versions of pastoral”: let’s call these stages v1, v2, v3, and v4, which are roughly equivalent to the four years of undergraduate education. In what appears to be a reference to Empson’s *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Bartholomae compared the successful writer to a person of low status (shepherd) speaking in disguise to a member of court (p. 9). This is a close approximation of what lies do—they permit the writer to assume a more powerful and knowledgeable position vis-à-vis the teacher-reader, that “position of privilege,” knowing what is true and what is not, whereas failed student composition, in Bartholomae’s examples, present the writer as Harlequin attending Lady Astor’s ball.⁷

More specifically, a v4 essay by an English literature major is likely to include vocabulary such as *tease out*, *liminal*, and *descant*, which one would be surprised to find in an essay written by an economics major.⁸ Intradisciplinary mastery of the commonplaces of philosophy will be evidenced by the appearance of some of the following: the use of the verb phrase *consist in*, as distinguished from *consist of*. Strong arguments will be described as *robust*. Students will write *on my view* in lieu of *in my view*. Arguments will be described as valid for exhibiting the features *modus tollens* or *modus ponens*. The philosophy commonplace has a strong Latinate component or flavor: students will write *ceteris paribus* in lieu of *all other things being equal*. *Scilicet* will be used instead of *that is to say*, *qua* instead of *as* when appropriate. Via Robert Nozick, students will find the verb *entail* and the noun *entailment* valuable in expressing propositions. At v4, students may use obscure adjectives such as *carceral* to refer to incarceration. While the commonplace will be largely intradisciplinary, seepage across disciplines is a constant. For example, the verb *deconstruct* became widely used in English literature essays decades ago, but it now appears in the discourse of many disciplines.

The commonplace provides structure to an essay, helping to determine the way one thinks about an issue. However, Bartholomae (2005) offered no solution to the trek through the “versions” (v1, v2, v3, v4) of pastoral/commonplace to acquire mastery. V1 and v2 essays will grate on teachers correcting and commenting on those essays. What he provided is the diagnosis; I humbly offer some therapy. My therapeutic workaround, not precisely a solution, is to let students use their authentic voices via the personal essay—and more specifically the lie essay, avoiding tawdry imitations of the commonplace, which students have had very limited exposure to and access to which is gained largely by reading—a longitudinal process. While not directly mentioning the personal essay, Bartholomae hinted at its value, noting that being an “insider” grants a special right to speak. It allows students to assume the same privilege that their teachers possess with regard to the commonplace. He touted student essays where the writers locate themselves within a discourse “aggressively” and “self-consciously” (p. 74). This is precisely what the personal essay does. In composition classes and in other classes, many v1 and some v2 essays, for which there is no *commonplace-cure*, will simply not be written.

One objection to this line of thinking might be: If academic writing is a way of sounding truthful, then wouldn’t students write their (lie) essays in this manner, thereby reproducing unimaginative compositions? The first response to this objection would be that the only alternative—writing a lie that sounds like a lie would be counterproductive, to say the least. Consider, for example, a novel that is very popular in ESOL reading classes—*Big Fish*. The structure is a mesh of truth and “whoppers” that resolves into moving fictive truth.

Manipulating truth is necessarily imaginative. One goal of the lie is to make truth sound more interesting.

The second response is that the lie generally produces Stephen Dunn's (2018) previously-alluded-to emotional truth. He elaborated this notion via an exceptional poem where, arriving at puberty, he confesses to asking his mother to reveal her breasts. The poem contains one or more lies that result in impactful, emotional truth. Memoirists do the same. Their products are filigreed with lies. To wit, Mark Doty's fabulous, sad and serious memoir *Heaven's Coast*, dealing mainly with the death of a loved one from AIDS, is peppered with prosed-out poems from *Atlantis*. They are not cited as such and, as we know from Dunn, poems treat truth if not cavalierly then at least as an emotional entity. The essay that elaborates a lie or lies does not have the same goal, nor does it produce the same result, as the standard academic truth-telling essay.

So now if you find yourself a convert, what do you do on the first day of writing class?

Assignment

1. Think of something surprising that happened to you or that you did last summer/last week/during semester break. Write a paragraph not to exceed 100 words describing it. Do not worry about grammar or spelling; this will not be collected.
2. Write a paragraph describing an incident that did not happen—that is a lie.
3. Write a second paragraph describing an incident that did not happen—that is a lie.

You will have 20 minutes to write all three paragraphs. Now you will meet in groups of three or four. You will read your paragraphs in any order you want. If you have only finished two paragraphs, just read those. Next, the others in your group will guess which paragraph was true. Then the teacher will ask if anyone told a very convincing lie. The student will read that lie to the class.

This in-class assignment is a lot of fun. It frees students from the burden of having to write something that appears laden with intelligence while actually demanding intelligence—just not the bookish kind students think they are expected to produce.

This assignment is a preamble to the first personal essay topic:

Lies

A little lie is called “a white lie.” A big one is a “whopper.” Begin with an introduction about how important it is to tell the truth and if it is ever necessary or good to tell a lie. Is it possible to avoid telling lies, even white ones? Because introductions do not need to consist of just one paragraph, you will write a second introductory paragraph answering the question of who lies more—men or women. Do they tend to lie about different things? If any of your friends are big liars, tell why they lie and what they lie about.

End your introduction by saying that you are going to tell three stories, two of them will be lies and your reader has to guess which one is true. Since you have already written a first draft of this, you know which of your stories was not convincing. Work on making it more convincing. In your conclusion, think about answering one or more of these questions: How often do you lie? More or less than most people? Are you happy or sad about having lied or having told the truth instead? Finally, are you more satisfied with the lies you wrote or the truth?

It is likely, then, that in future personal essays, students will strive for truth but not nothing-but-the-truth, and imagination will provide refuge from the commonplace. Having written the fib essay and having experimented with the notion of emotional truth in a semester's worth of personal essays, students should write a significantly longer piece that demands metacognition. The assignment is to reread all of their essays and to find a theme common to a number of them, finding what most motivates their introspection, what perhaps they may be obsessed with, what personal, emotional, social, or political issues they are deeply concerned with.⁹ Examples supporting their theses can be culled from previous essays and edited to fit the new theme.¹⁰

One last issue arising from the discussion of teachers creating a personal, alternative canon for student imitation with pieces such as the previous "Joycean passage": *What are the consequences of the syntactic anomalies that such a canon would encourage?* It is an article of faith, and I am the holiest of rollers, that the power of a piece thus created along with the demands put on the imagination by that creation carry over to any essayistic or narrative writing, just as the organization of a poem is often an extension of the form of an essay.

My latest canon includes a set of poems from James Tate's (2015) *Dome of the Hidden Pavilion*, all of which are basically surrealistic. ("The Grandmother" is especially effective since most students, having grandparents, can identify with the poetic events.) Since I have only recently created the imitative assignment, with one class, I have no student exemplar to prove my point. But see as a distant correlative the effect Tate's poems had on poet Ovidio Reyes (personal communication, January 20, 2019) in his creation:

At the Existentialist Café after James Tate

Being and nothingness, those two abstraction . . . I want to reach for my chessboard. Let them play each other, and I'll sit and watch until the first streak of light slips under the door and crawls to my feet without waking the dust.

—Charles Simic

I stopped at a McDonald's in Lawrence where everyone spoke Spanish. "What is existence?" I asked the bald guy eating a cookie and he gave me a look that said, 'Fuck off.' He reached into a shopping bag holding all the shit he had ordered and pulled out another barely comestible. The Dominican teen in front of me with wild, curly black hair turned and smiled through a gap wide enough to suck in a *papa frita* with her teeth clenched. I was blown away but jolted back to the philosophical present though shoved a bit closer to *la Nada*

than *el Ser* when her *plátano* boyfriend turned and said “Whadaya want, *nuthin*?” She reflected. I asked, “Can I watch you eat fries?” “That will cost you a dollar,” she said. “You should consider brackets,” I said, proud of my knowledge of the Spanish for ‘braces.’ “She ain’t much for punctuation,” said the *plátano*. It was my turn. The menu did not list fries unaccompanied by burgers or beverages, but I took a chance on large fries and ketchup. “Large or small,” said the manager. “You speak English,” I said. “No,” he said. “You hear what you want to hear.” “I already said ‘large,’” I said. “The ketchup,” he said, “large or small.” “They’re all the same,” I said. “You see what you want to see,” he said. He dumped ten large ketchups onto my tray. “You’re in luck,” he said. “This place is as clean as a whistle,” I said. He put the whistle hanging from a gold necklace into his mouth and blew. The fat, bald guy disappeared. So did half of my sweatshirt and most of the hair on my head. “That’s a neat trick,” I said. He gestured at the white rabbit. “There’s a cat too, for the rats.” He touched my belly. “You shouldn’t eat large fries. They make you obese,” he said. He held out his hand. “Shake,” he said. “My name’s Franny. My father was Franklin and my mother was Annie. It’s a Dominican thing.” “It shows,” I said. “How curious, extraordinary, and bizarre. I’m Ted. My father was Tom and my mother was Ed.” I looked around at the absence of dirt and clients. I shook my head. “Clean as a whistle,” I said. “You should take it with you,” he said with a clean arm sweep of the whole place. “I would,” I said, tapping my belly, “but I can’t get out the door.” “The place closes at ten,” he said. “Just my luck,” I said.

This, on my view, is evidence of the potent impact bizarre and/or disruptive syntax can have on the writer. A lot goes on in the mind of a writer of such an imitative poem. Decisions of what to put in and what to leave out, the order of events, the degree of *bizarrierie*, to mention a few. I would argue that the decisions made in such a piece far outnumber those made by a writer of ordinary syntax, which is governed by the commonplace, and that the mental machination called upon makes a better writer. Learning the art of dialogic non-sequitur, I would maintain, reinforces the use of sequitur in a standard academic essay.

If there is a metagoal in all of this, it may be what John Ashbery said of Tate’s (2019) last volume, that by dint of astonishment, delight, dismay and confusion the poems “generally improve the quality of our lives” (cover). The metacognitive outcome is in some respects clearer: students learn to formulate their own distinctions between lies, truth, emotional truth, and fudged truth—just what is it they are creating and why.

Notes

¹Bartholomae’s (2005) choice of epigraph from Michael Foucault’s “Discourse on Language” is in the very least intriguing.

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a

political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and powers it carries with it. (p. 60)

Foucault (1972) saw educational systems as essentially oppressive, appropriating discourse. Bartholomae would seem to agree that the discourse communities within the university maintain and modify the parameters of discourse, but his focus would seem orthogonal to Foucault's cynosure of social conflict. For Foucault, education maintains the divisions within society. One would hope that Bartholomae's classroom (and ours) would be dedicated to enlarging the discourse community and the kinds of discourse permitted in it.

²In line 50, Ginsberg (1992) wrote, "I am talking to myself again" (p. 76).

³I first noticed this structure with lines 19–20.

⁴The "Lie Essay" indeed deauthorizes the commonplace but only in the instance of its composition. What remains interesting but well beyond the parameters of this article is whether the persistence of the commonplace, mastery of which for Bartholomae is necessary for one's personal invention of the university, does, as Foucault (1972) suggested, maintain and promote social divisions and, more importantly, whether those divisions are barriers, pedestals or plinths.

⁵A nod here to Foucault (1972), who said we need to question our will to truth.

⁶I would suggest that the commonplace extends to oral discourse; e.g., masters of the political science and history commonplaces will know that "Pinochet" can be pronounced "pee-no-shay," "pee-no-chay," or "pee-no-chet"; that working class Chileans are likely to say one of the first two while the upper class and government officials are likely to say the last (and will correct you if you say one of the former two). Initiates into the philosophy commonplace are more likely to pronounce "aberrant" with stress (correctly) on the second syllable while most students will stress the first syllable. I would suggest, further, that the *cultural commonplace* presents a hurdle for L2 learners.

⁷An interesting counterpoint to my argument may be found in the student essay on "creativity" that Bartholomae (2005) mentioned being scorned by fellow students who recognized that wearing white socks in a football game was not an act of creativity but a lie—an imitation of what Billy "White Shoes" Johnson did. But it would appear that the author believed his "white socks" act was original. If so, there was nothing liberating in the act of composing the essay. And what's important for the writer is to know that a lie exposed will lead to derision.

⁸*Liminal* will appear in the commonplaces of anthropology and psychology as well.

⁹Credit for this assignment, along with guidance on personal essays, goes to Dr. Ellen Wolff, Phillips Exeter Academy.

¹⁰Here follows an example of a personal essay assignment that embodies the directives (lies, imagination) previously mentioned. It is intended for those who include Cisneros's (2009) *The House on Mango Street* in their curriculum.

Writing Assignment: *The Mouse on Hango Street*

(An experiment in "point of view." Cisneros starts her introduction not with "I," but with "she"—the young woman in the photograph. You will experiment in a similar manner.)

General Instructions

Describe your house or apartment, all the rooms, and what happens or has happened in them—from the point of view of a **mouse**. The mouse might misinterpret what is happening. What is Hango Street like?

Paragraph 1 Introduction

Say something about the mouse and where it lives from its point of view. Has it always lived there? How long? Likes it? Doesn't like it? How old is the mouse? Any physical problems?

Paragraph 2

What did the mouse smell? Think of the good smells and the bad smells from your house. What does the mouse think of them? Because it is a mouse, it should think differently from the way you think.

Paragraph 3

What did the mouse hear? Delicious rumors? Again, the mouse can interpret a sound differently from the way you might. It can hear things that you never did! Imagine what they might be.

Paragraph 4

What did the mouse see? In the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom, the hallway, the doorway, out the window, through the wall, in the basement? Something small might look big to it.

Paragraph 5

What did the mouse do??! Any adventures?

(Use your imagination. For example: "One day the mouse found an open box of matches. He—it was a boy mouse [they always play with fire]—took the match in his mouth and carried it to his nest. On the way, he scraped the match on the wall and it ignited, so he dropped it and ran away, far away from Hango Street because his house burned down. The mouse wanted to visit his old friend Mickey in Disneyland, but you know how far that is for a mouse with such short legs. "Hey, how did I know?" said the mouse. "I'm just a mouse. I don't know anything about matches, and nobody would believe that a mouse could burn a house down anyway." [Part of this scenario was appreciatively borrowed from Billy Collins's (2002) poem "The Country."])

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