Wrestling with the Angel of Writing:
Practical Suggestions for Writing Effective Essays

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Writing is a Way of Learning

Like most valuable and important activities (think of learning to walk, to talk, to love), learning to write excellent academic essays and research papers takes effort and time. I want to encourage you to work hard and to be patient with yourself during the learning process. Improving your writing is a worthwhile endeavor, and not just because you will get better grades. Writing is a way of learning. It helps you understand the subjects that you write about. It is also a way to develop perseverance and self-discipline. For many writers, including me, writing is a spiritual, as well as an intellectual, process. I agree with Alex, the Ukrainian tour guide who discovers, in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, that he loves to write, saying of his new passion for writing: "I can be funny, because I have time to meditate about how to be funny, and I can repair my mistakes when I perform mistakes, and I can be a melancholy person in manners that are interesting, not only melancholy. With writing, we have second chances" (Foer 144).

With writing, as with life, each new situation presents some challenges that you cannot totally prepare in advance to meet. However, you can prepare yourself to meet some of the challenges of academic essays by practicing and learning to brainstorm, getting a first draft done early enough for careful revision, and revising in at least two stages – (1) for the overall coherence of the development of your ideas and (2) for the correctness and elegance of your sentences and wording. Reading any good writer's handbook will provide you with clear and step-by-step explanations of the basic steps in the writing process: generating ideas, creating a draft, and revising effectively.

Seeing your efforts to become an effective writer in the context of your character growth by viewing the process through the lens of Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* can help you better understand how to achieve your goal. Covey divides his seven-habits paradigm into habits of private victory ("be proactive"; "begin with the end in mind"; "put first things first"), habits of public victory ("think win/win"; "seek first to understand, then to be understood"; "synergize"), and the habit of renewal ("sharpen the saw"). In Covey's thinking, private victory precedes public victory. To reinforce the concept for yourself, think about the numerous but unseen hours of training and practice that go into the successful performances of musicians and athletes. This emphasis on private habits makes good spiritual sense, too. Jesus says to clean the inside of the cup first, and his teachings assign more importance to what goes on when you are not seen by others, in your private prayer closet, than to what you do in public to display your faith. These private habits of self-discipline in thought and action are the habits that will help you to control and direct your free will. The self-discipline you develop in writing can enhance your ability to be faithful in your commitments in other parts of your life, as well.

Be Proactive In Your Writing

The first habit (of private victory) is "Be Proactive." For Covey, a proactive approach means "recognizing our responsibility to make things happen" (75), and he urges his readers to "seize the initiative to do whatever is necessary, consistent with correct principles, to get the job done" (75). I encourage you to be proactive in your writing. Being proactive may mean asking a professor to clarify an assignment, going to the writing center well in advance of the assignment due date, ordering books from the library when the assignment is given, gathering and skimming

research materials well in advance of the due date so you have thinking time, doing and reviewing grammar exercises to correct a problem with grammar that you know you have. Being proactive may mean being willing to work to succeed instead of blaming the teacher for an assignment that seems difficult. The most important key to writing better is for you to become actively engaged in studying and improving your own writing.

As you look at the differences between reactive language and proactive language on the following list, taken from Covey, do a self-check. See which words more typically characterize you, especially in regard to writing assignments.

Reactive Language	Proactive Language
There's nothing I can do.	Let [me] look at [my] alternatives.
That's just the way I am.	I can choose a different approach.
He makes me so mad.	I control my own feelings.
They won't allow that.	I can create an effective presentation.
I have to do that.	I will choose an appropriate response. _
I can't.	I choose.
I must.	I prefer.
If only.	I will.

(Covey 78)

Before you continue reading, think of a proactive step you might take to improve your essay and research paper writing and make this a commitment to yourself as you fill in the blank space here: _____ .

Get The Work In

The second habit (of private victory) is "Begin with the End in Mind." Remember your short-term goal – succeeding in your college courses. If you want to succeed in any particular course, you must get the work in. The first step in completing the work is to start it: if you don't start, you can't finish. Similarly, you need to read your assignments in order to write about them effectively. As you begin your reading assignments, keep in mind that, most likely, you will be asked to write about what you read. So, as you read and when you finish an assignment, try to summarize for yourself or someone else the author's key points and main supports. Take notes on key quotations and passages you might want to discuss. If you have a research essay due in a certain documentation style, review the documentation style required for the paper; after all, you can't fulfill the instructor's requirements unless you know what they are. Begin finding adequate and useful research materials for your paper soon after you receive the assignment. As you know, the last minute scramble for source material will force you to settle for anything you find —good or bad, interesting or not. Set aside time to read and write: you can't write about your sources unless you read them. Begin with the end in mind regarding this, too: graduating from college is more important than struggling so hard for perfection that you don't turn in your work. In addition, to motivate yourself to work on your writing, remember that there is life after college: you may want to go to graduate school, get a (better) job, help your children with their homework, create a church newsletter (you supply the goal for yourself). The effort you put into your writing skills will keep paying you dividends for the rest of your life.

Just Start Writing

The third habit (of private victory) is "Put First Things First." Peter Elbow, now a published author with many books and articles to his name, kept getting writer's block while he was trying to complete his doctorate. In desperation, he adopted a technique called freewriting to help him get his work in and attain his goal of being a college teacher. Many students find his approach very helpful, even liberating and life-changing. Elbow strongly recommends writing without editing until you complete a first draft. Then, in his method, you read your very imperfect first draft to determine which ideas in it are most vital. Seeing more clearly now where you want your essay to go, you cut out the ideas that are not essential, organize the ideas that are pertinent and worthwhile, and revise. Elbow regards revision as essential to obtaining a finished product, but he likes to keep his internal editor (the one that lives in his mind) a silent spectator on the sidelines of the writing event until the creative/generative writer within him forges a draft. This approach of putting a rough draft first, according to Elbow and many other writing specialists, actually helps you to discover and clarify your position. Keep in mind as you write that, as one of my undergraduate writing students has said: "The essay is an author's stage; it demonstrates a platform that the author can stand on to be heard" (Gardianos). Welcome the writing assignments you have as opportunities to play your unique role in life's unfolding drama: find what you have to say and say it. I once overheard a student celebrate her acquired academic skills with these words that I include here, as a blessing to you: "By the skills we gain we cast ourselves in the roles we can play on the stage of the world in a play that God calls life."

As you continue in your learning, remember to practice the habits of private victory. Continue building your skills even when no assignments are due. Study what works for you, and don't wait passively for your teachers to remind you about your work and how to improve it.

Don't expect yourself to write effortlessly. When you wrestle with the angel of writing, you can expect to struggle. Be patient, celebrate the progress you make, and recognize that some of the difficulties you face are inherent to the writing process itself. As Elbow points out:

> It is simply a fact that most of the time you can't find the right words till you know exactly what you are saying, but that you can't know exactly what you are saying till you find just the right words. The consequence is that you must *start by writing the wrong meanings in the wrong words* but keep writing till you get to the right meanings in the right words. Only at the end will you know what you are saying. (26)

The ABC Model

The fourth habit (of public victory) is "Think Win/Win." Re-read the particular assignment your teacher has given you several times. Identify for yourself what the teacher hopes for you to gain from this assignment. Be sure to follow the instructions for success. Enter fully into the learning process and make it interesting for yourself, but do not write simply any random way you choose. You have an audience, and that audience will be assigning you a grade based on certain criteria. Meet the criteria. But make the topic interesting for yourself, so that you feel alive and growing. If you're bored with your treatment of the topic, the chances are that your reader will be bored, too. If you have to read extra material to become interested in the topic, do so. The extra effort you extend will give you a better product. If you cannot find a clear organizational pattern for a piece of writing, consider the reliable five-paragraph (or extended five-paragraph) ***ABC*** model:

a. **A**n Introduction: This introductory paragraph contains your thesis and three support points.

b. **B**ody – The body contains three supporting paragraphs that develop your ideas strongly.

c. **C**onclusion – A concluding paragraph that provides closure and a sense of direction for the reader.

Using this model, your ideas are clear; your teacher is pleased and so are you. In addition, you have been proactive in setting your own standards for excellence, standards that use the teacher's standards as a springboard into genuinely college level work.

Building Bridges

The fifth habit (of public victory) is "Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood." In writing a paper, you want to spend time with the topic or source you are writing about, to be sure that you grasp its concepts. Students often begin agreeing or disagreeing with positions of authors before they have grasped the ideas they are responding to, or they write about their initial impressions of a topic without thinking more deeply about the topic. Writing is like building a series of bridges. First, build a bridge between yourself and the material you are working with; stretch your mind to understand the strengths and weaknesses, the principal supports and the gaps in logic, of the source you are considering. Next, build a second bridge within yourself. Communicate with yourself from one part of your mind to another to discover what you have to say about the material. Third, build a bridge that extends from you to your reader: that bridge is, in essence, the core thought structure of your essay. Building this bridge will help you to translate your inner thought process into a form that communicates clearly to your reader.

The Joy of Writing

The sixth habit (of public victory) is "Synergize." Whether you are writing a personal or a research-based essay, your thought and effort will teach you things you did not understand before you wrote. With research work, incorporating evidence, opinions, and perspectives from a variety of sources can be difficult to accomplish. However, be encouraged. The end result of a carefully thought-out research paper will be synergy. The ideas you present will be more dynamic than any you could have come up with simply on your own. If you make a sincere effort to integrate the best of the other thinkers' thoughts, and of your thoughts, and to lean on God for special inspiration and wisdom on the topic, you will produce a perspective that is somewhat different from any other paper written on the topic; it will contain your unique fingerprint. Producing quality work will energize you and your reader. You will sense that you are becoming mature in your ability to think critically, that you are becoming worthy of the degree you will earn, and that you will be an asset to the reputation of your school after you graduate.

The Spirituality of Writing

The seventh habit (of renewal) is "Sharpen the Saw." Find spaces of relaxation and renewal, through worship, through exercise, through observing the beauties of nature, through rewarding times with loved ones. Develop habits of reading and writing even beyond the required assignments; these activities lend a depth to your knowledge base and a joy to your life. In terms of your writing, the topic at hand, I recommend that you explore the joy of writing for personal growth and pleasure. Use your writing to discover a deeper connection with yourself, with God, and with your friends and relatives. Explore personal journals and freewriting. Try

creating fiction, poetry, and drama. Express your deepest thoughts in your writing. If you let yourself fall in love with the process of writing and what it can teach you, you will not resent the time you spend on your papers; your more positive attitude will relieve some of your stress about school, will help you to do better in your work, and will help you to be more generally attuned to the blessings of your life.

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