

Dipping my Toes
in Organic Water

Allen Shen

Final Reflection

At the beginning of the semester, I was confident in my academic and technical writing abilities, but not in my creative writing. At the end of this semester, I feel as if my initial opinion is mostly reaffirmed. My technical writing ability seemed to be above the level of most of my peers and what was expected of me in this class. At the same time, my lack of experience in creative writing had me struggling with macro-level issues such as intent and purpose.

One of the largest differences between creative writing and academic writing is purpose. Academic writing is meant to inform, educate, and explain, while creative writing is meant to narrate and entertain. At the beginning of the semester, I had difficulty figuring out what to write about. My first memoir drew a critique that went something along the lines of “this memoir sounds like a review from Amazon.” Indeed, my first memoir, about my computer mouse, was more of an explanation than it was a story. I eventually came to the realization that memoirs, and creative writing in general, needed to be stories, either a memorable or entertaining one. Simply describing an object that I felt was significant wasn’t sufficient; anyone could look up the details of my computer mouse. However, no one else can explain why said mouse is relevant to me specifically. My personal experiences and ideas provide a niche within the pseudo-infinitely sized space of ideas and stories that humankind can conjure, a niche that I have the exclusive ability to write about and narrate with.

This niche extends to and exists within everyone. Intellectually this was and still is really obvious, but even then I was pleasantly surprised by how unique everyone else’s writing felt. I actually enjoyed everyone else’s stories, whether it was about mental issues with toxic work environments, complicated daughter-father relationships, pranking people with smart watches, or even some obsessive woman whose life purpose was to make cubes. While these stories were lower quality than the published novels I have read previously, they were still interesting in their uniqueness.

I think what I had yet to understand, even if I already acknowledged it intellectually, was the sheer extent of variation between people. I think the variety of stories that I was able to read in this class was only possible given the lack of economic filters. Whenever I would read books, short stories, or whatever media exists to be consumed, the stories that I read were ones that were picked out by publishing companies only motivated about profit. All the unique stories that weren’t “interesting” enough to generate enough sales fail to make it to publications. Stories written by college students compelled by their desire to not fail their class don’t have this economic filter, so there is a larger variety in the stories told. As such, even though I used to be

an avid reader and frequently consume modern media, the variety of stories that I was able to read blindsided me somewhat.

In the end, reading other people's stories taught me two things about myself. One is that my experiences are fairly narrow compared to others. The other is my lack of creativity. When combined, those two weaknesses make it difficult to generate interesting stories, so while my writings may be technically superior to my classmates, they are overall less interesting and thus less entertaining because I use the most boring story plots. Even when told to write creatively with near unlimited freedom, the only subjects that I felt comfortable writing were about academics and politics.

The second issue I ran into, and somewhat related to the first, is motivation. Between writing memoirs, short stories and poetry, I felt a lack of purpose. I didn't know why I was writing aside from the fact that the class required it. There were a few moments where this had me struggling to write, as I was unable to force myself to spend even a small amount of time doing something that I felt was just a waste of time. Ironically, my solution to this problem was writing to complain about the course. My second short story was mainly inspired by my frustration that this course was not teaching me what I had expected to learn, nor did I feel it was educating me in any meaningful or practical way. While this was an unorthodox solution, it not only spurred me into writing, but it helped me realize, beyond a meager intellectual level, that writers write because they want to share their ideas. When I came up with the idea to base a short story about my dislike of a course, my motivation completely flipped, and I was able to finish the short story easily. The next realization afterwards was that other writers likely undergo the same experience, where their motivation to write stories partially comes from the desire to share their ideas.

Unfortunately, I'm unsure how I am going to be able to utilize these lessons in the future. Learning to narrate instead of explain, to find purpose before writing, and realizing my lack of creativity and overall narrowness of experiences are nice and all, but are only really helpful within the context of creative writing, which I have no intention of participating in afterwards. In academic writing, which I will have to do, I have to explain rather than narrate, and I already find purpose in learning science or whatever I need to learn. I also don't need to be creative to write a lab report, nor do I need to have a wide breadth of experiences to learn calculus. To be frank, the only reason I'm discussing this is because the prompt requires me to. On the off chance that I am struck by lightning and decide to become an author because of it, maybe I can utilize and build off of what I learned here. Otherwise, I lack the ability to see how any of what I outlined above provide any utility to me in the future.

Memoir

I pay regular attention to politics, particularly U.S. politics. While I am no political scientist, I stay updated on the latest political news.

A common piece of advice is to avoid politics for the sake of mental health. Indeed, politics can be very frustrating, depressing, and worrying. Personally, I do not believe my mental health is strongly affected by political news; I have only felt strong emotions from it twice. One of which was the U.S. 2020 presidential election.

The 2020 presidential election was a tense moment for anyone even remotely attentive to politics. As someone who identifies as a social Democrat, I wanted, like any other liberal, more than anything else, a president that was not Donald Trump. While I assert that my mental health remains unscathed from politics, I always pound my fist mentally when reminded that that hateful, racist, uneducated, idiot of a manbaby who talks like a middle schooler was somehow president of the United State.

As such, I paid close attention to the events leading up to the election. I watched both presidential debates live, though I wanted to tear my eyes out after the first. I participated in political arguments with the rest of my family. There were many arguments at the dinner table during that time period, it even got to the point where my father and I made bets on the winner.

Polling and articles and videos about electoral strategy were also given a fair amount of attention. Fivethirtyeight, a polling aggregate and election news site was one particular site that I often frequented. I still distinctly remember that the night before Election Day, Fivethirtyeight, using polling data and mathematical analysis, had Biden the victor with 9-1 odds.

Of course, as anyone with election experience knows, polls are somewhat unreliable, and Trump in particular was known to confuse polls. Regardless, I had hoped that Biden would win Florida and Texas and the election would be over on Election Day. On Election Day night, while sitting on my computer watching Google's election coverage, my heart plummeted after seeing Trump winning both Florida and Texas with sizable leads.

For anyone unfamiliar with the 2020 presidential electoral map, the most likely route to victory for Trump was winning Texas, Florida, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, and most importantly, Pennsylvania. This was the most likely list of swing states, based on polling, Trump had to win in order to obtain the 270 electoral college votes necessary to win the presidency.

Final polling had both Texas and Florida as closely contested states. On Election Day, when Trump started winning both states with significant leads, it was immediately apparent that the polling was off by a large margin, in Trump's favor. The night of Election Day, I mostly sat in front of my computer, constantly refreshing the web pages of all my news sites and online forums.

Fortunately for me and my sanity, Biden was quickly declared the winner of Arizona. Without Arizona, Trump had to win the Rust Belt swing states (Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania), most of which Biden had around a 10 point poll lead. The next few weeks were tense, despite Biden's significant lead from the beginning. I would, without fail, check the latest election news right before I went to bed and the moment I woke up. My schedule, especially my sleep schedule, became erratic as I was constantly anxious about the election. While most of my friends shared similar political opinions, none of them paid nearly as much attention nor knew the details of the election to the extent I did, so it was difficult to relieve my anxiety through social interaction. Even my family was little help here, as a two week long election proved mostly beyond their attention span.

Ultimately, Trump did not win the Rust Belt, including Pennsylvania. He even lost Georgia, thanks to some heroism by Stacey Abrams. While Biden's victory in Georgia was unnecessary for his presidency, it proved critical in swinging the senate to a Democrat majority.

The morning after Biden's victory was declared (which I believe was the day after Pennsylvania's votes finished counting), news channels showed residents across every major city in the country celebrating. I regret not being in Manhattan that day to hear and join the cheer of New Yorkers, who, like the people of other cities, collectively realized that the political nightmare that was Trump's presidency was finally going to be over.

Most of my friends and my brother felt similar relief, though obviously they didn't have the same anxiety as I did. My father was in denial for a while after, only conceding our bet more than a month after the election result was formally declared.

Overall the experience was quite jarring. While I had initially assumed that I was apathetic towards political news in general, conditioned by daily updates of Trump's atrocities for four years, the two week of election anxiety that I had experienced in November 2020 proved that my mental health and well-being was not immune to news, politics, and world events.

Short Story

Dave rolled up his sleeves and pressed the power button on his laptop, straining his darkness-adjusted eyes when the laptop screen booted up. Both he and Cindy, who was comfortably sleeping on their double bed across the bedroom, just came back from an 8-hour flight from London, and they were exhausted. Dave, still wearing his shirt and jeans, could not rest as he had one last assignment to finish for tomorrow, an assignment from his Argumentative and Persuasive Writing class.

Dave hurriedly signed in to his email to look for the email the professor sent him. Due to his grandpa's sudden stroke towards the end of his vacation, Dave was forced to delay his return to Los Angeles, making him skip his first week of classes. Fortunately, his teachers were very accommodating, and most sent their first assignments and even lecture notes. While Dave had completed most of them on the airplane ride, he had yet to start the one from his English 114 Argumentative and Persuasive Writing class, and he was groaning at having to complete it while so fatigued.

His despair was quickly eliminated when he read the assignment worksheet the professor linked him. On the top of the page, it read:

The Introduction: the hook and thesis

He quickly skimmed the rest of the worksheet, and by the end of it, burst out laughing, his sharp laughter filling the otherwise quiet room. Cindy, who grumpily woke up, turned to face Dave while still lying down, and threw her pillow at him.

“Hey, quiet down, I’m trying to sleep”

“Sorry-” Dave was still giggling, struggling to control his laughter, “Hey Cindy, come take a look at this”

Cindy groaned, but drearily pushed down the purple comforter and rubbed her eyes as she walked towards him, her oversized pajamas almost making her trip over the half opened luggage in the few meters it took to reach him. As she bent over to peer into the computer, eyes squinting to adjust to the laptop screen, her face quickly contorted to one of bemusement and disbelief.

“What the hell is this? Is this your English one fourteen assignment?”

“It is”

“What are the main components of an introduction??? Didn’t we learn this in Middle School? Why are you learning it in a College class?”

“Beats me.” Dave said as he shrugged.

“Wait, you are NOT wasting your time with this. The late deadline for class signup hasn’t passed yet. Drop this class and take something else”

“I would, but this is a required class”

“Really? For a physics major?”

“I could show you my degree requirements if you want”

“No, it's fine.” Cindy stood back up, taking the purple hair tie around her wrist to tie her messy black hair into a loose ponytail. “Doesn’t this kinda suck for you? I thought you hated wasting your time, and now you’re going to have to sit in for lectures that don’t teach you anything”

“O yeah, this blows. Sitting in this class for 2 hours every week just to relearn stuff we learned at middle school couldn’t get any more boring. Hopefully the professor will allow me to use my laptop, I can just browse the news or something.”

“Good luck with that.” Cindy walked out the bedroom, towards the kitchen sink that was located on the other side of the one bedroom apartment. “I’m going back to bed after drinking water. Enjoy the easiest homework of your life.”

“I might finish before you come back.” They both chuckled, and Cindy would eventually return to Dave peacefully sleeping on her pillow.

Poem

Jumping, Flipping, spinning,
The girl somersaults over the yellow fields.
Skipping and prancing across the dirt road,
Sun bearing on her body, her white dress, deflects,
Nothing else matters to the dancing girl

Ponytail bobbing, sneakers twisting,
She sprints against the still wind.
Laughter unbeatable, smile unstoppable,
The girl eagerly awaits her own arrival.

To the few observers around her,
The girl pops out of the scenery
An ever-changing silhouette in a still field of grain and sky
Some cannot help but smile and wave, their own business insignificant
Compared to the pure joy of the dancing girl.

Eventually, the girl reaches her destination
Panting, sweating; aching, and crying.
She is able to breathe out a single phrase:
“I’m Home.”