



# Writing across the University of Alberta

WRITING WHERE OUR VOICES TAKE US



Featuring work by Joel Leslie, Jianqiao Chen, Haolin Yu, Peyton Donovan, Valerie Sytnik, Dalton Low, Lauren Bayne, Kim Jashua Rojas Dacutanan, Diego Martinez Ortiz, Ayah Altahouni, Yingdi (Alexandra) Ma, Gillian Wood, Navdeep Badhan, Zuairia Shahrin,

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# Writing Where Our Voices Take Us

*Welcome to Volume 5 of WAUA*

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the fifth issue of *Writing across the University of Alberta (WAUA)*.

We are thrilled to be celebrating a milestone – five years of WAUA! This has been a journey filled with hard work, lack of sleep, worry, and uncertainty, but also joy, curiosity, and amazement at the quality of writing that U of A students continue to produce. We are happy to report that this is our largest issue to date. Thanks to you, our contributors, volunteers, and editors, we have kept WAUA alive during the hard years of budget cuts and the pandemic.

The fifth issue of the journal displays a wide range of voices that go through various writing journeys, and for this reason, we have titled it “Writing Where Our Voices Take Us.” This issue features writing in diverse genres, including reflective essays, poetry, fictional stories, audio transcripts, and memes. Our writers have explored diverse topics such as disability and identity, learning professional communication, dreams, writer’s block, and writing to conquer anxiety. This is just a tiny taste of what this issue offers.

The fifth issue of WAUA features the written works by **Joel Leslie, Jianqiao Chen, Haolin Yu, Peyton Donovan, Valerie Sytnik, Dalton Low, Lauren Bayne, Kim Jashua Rojas Dacutanan, Diego Martinez Ortiz, Ayah Altahouni, Yingdi Alexandra Ma, Gillian Wood, Navdeep Badhan, and Zuairia Shahrin.**

With the publication of our fifth issue behind us, we are now accepting submissions for our sixth issue, which we hope to publish in Fall 2025. Students interested in submitting their work will find information on how to do so here:

<https://writingacrossuofa.ca/index.php/writingacrossuofa/about/submissions>.

Sincerely,

The WAUA Editorial Team (Nancy Bray, Anna Chilewska, Karly Coleman, Anita Parker, Lexi LaLonde, Lisa (Melissa) Haynes, Alp Cervime, Yingdi (Alexandra) Ma, and August Suarez at Millan)  
November 2024

## Lessons on Ableism and Inclusion: A Reflection

Joel Leslie<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In Joel Leslie's moving and insightful reflective essay, he recounts his experiences negotiating the post-secondary system as a person with disabilities. Joel explores how internalized ableism, inclusive and accessible pedagogy, and marginalization have impacted his life as a student, and he connects these insights with academic thinking on these topics. This essay is an outstanding example of a reflection that weaves between personal and academic knowledge and leaves us better off for having taken the time to read it.

*Keywords:* disability, writing studies, ableism, internalized ableism, combating ableism in university classrooms



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## *Introduction*

I am a disabled student. Historically, I have not often allowed myself to show vulnerability regarding disability. My ADHD, genetic connective tissue disorder, and speech disorder have resulted in internalized ableism, exclusion, and marginalization. Ableism is an often systemically upheld belief that the able-bodied have more inherent worth than the disabled. Disablism, contrastingly, is the belief that disability makes someone inferior. My internalized ableism has been challenged through my experiences in this class. In higher education, this form of ableism often results, and has resulted for me, in an understanding of oneself as “deficient” and “burdensome” (Nieminen 614). Inclusive pedagogy has influenced the lectures and group activities of this class and has been a key factor in my attempts to overcome complex feelings of inadequacy.

Ableism often leads to marginalization and dehumanization: “dehumanization ... is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire 44). Freire includes both those who have been dehumanized and those who dehumanize others as victims of this distortion. The atmosphere within the classroom this semester has enlightened me about how being dehumanized makes me feel and how ableism harms those who perpetuate it. Reflecting on this writing course, and my identity as a disabled student, brought to mind the negative psychosocial and academic impacts on students with disabilities. Opposing systemic ableism in the classroom is a shared responsibility of recognizing internalized ableism and marginalization in disabled students by advocating for accessibility and inclusion.

## *Internalized Ableism*

Prior to this class, I had an assumption that my disability would burden others. Campbell claims that “... internalized ableism refers to how disabled people learn to view themselves as lesser...” (qtd. in Nieminen 618). This is the sentiment that I had regarding my disability, particularly my speech disorder. I often find myself existing in two forms as a student. I am simultaneously a ghost and a force within myself. In class discussions, I only participate if I know that I have something worthwhile to add. Given the speed of spoken conversation, this often leads to me not contributing. My self-imposed silence has led to a profound feeling of isolation throughout my undergraduate studies. Being isolated from my peers has resulted in a deep sense of otherness. This is not abnormal. Isolation can have severe impacts on the mental health of students with disabilities; we have significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to non-disabled students (Solís García et al. 111). My reluctance to participate in class discussions in this writing course was directly related to my anxiety about being seen as defective.

To feel worthy of my spot in class, I overextend myself in group assignments. There have been many assignments where I have made sure to participate beyond what my group members expected. I feared becoming a burden to the group due to my disability if I did not participate to my capacity or beyond. Paradoxically, my intrinsic sense of being burdensome is also a feeling of not being disabled enough to warrant an inferiority complex. While I am not an academic, I can relate to the academics who “not only measured themselves against the societally acceptable, standardized norms but also against internalized criteria of disability” (Brown and Ramlackhan 1232). I have felt the need to not only prove myself as capable as my peers but also to fight against my internal feelings of not being disabled enough to claim that identity. Acknowledging my internalized ableism is a key aspect of opposing systemic ableism. Increasing my awareness of internalized bias has been crucial to accepting the necessity of accessibility as a shared responsibility.

### *Inclusion and Accessibility*

Our professor advocated for inclusion and accessibility from the first class; this has been a method of mitigating systemic ableism in this writing course. The promotion of inclusion by students and faculty can create a sense of belonging for disabled students (Taff and Clifton 127). Prior to starting the course, a meeting I had with the professor set the trajectory for how I would go on to view the class. She was incredibly kind and collaborated with me to ensure I had access to appropriate accommodations for class discussions. In addition to this, she chose to be open about her ADHD and explained how this impacts her in the classroom. Seeing someone in a position of leadership demonstrate confidence regarding disability had a positive effect on my view of myself. The idea that inclusion is the responsibility of everyone was openly communicated to the class, and I was never singled out. Using inclusion as a method of accommodating disability is in direct opposition to ableism. Accommodations can be a “mechanism of ableism... [when they are] ... framed as students’ personal responsibility rather than as a structural issue” (Nieminen 626). Requesting and receiving accommodations is primarily my responsibility as a disabled student, and the collaborative effort that I experienced in this writing course has been a rarity at the University. This is the reality of systemic ableism.

By reinforcing our collective responsibility to help accommodate one another, our professor directly destigmatized accommodations in the classroom. I was struck by the respectful communication that she used to make the class accessible. My accommodations in university have often been an afterthought, but communication in this class was a priority for everyone. Being able to communicate via a shared class document increased my confidence throughout the course. In university, some “...pathological conceptions remain intact and detrimentally shape the higher education experiences of faculty, staff, and students with disabilities” (Brown and Ramlackhan 1226). Our professor demonstrated that

there is a way to move away from pathologizing disability and that doing so can be beneficial to the learning environment. By participating in class, I have been able to make connections with my classmates, and I can only hope that they have found collaborating with me beneficial in turn. Through reflection, I can say that inclusion and accommodations have only had a positive impact on my psychosocial and academic health in this writing course. Advocating for future accommodations and inclusive environments is an aspect of combating my marginalization and that of others.

### *Marginalization*

The importance of recognizing marginalization has been made clear to me in this writing course. I feel that internalized ableism is a tool perpetuated by a larger system of oppression toward disabled people. “In education, disablism often manifests through the segregation of disabled students” (Nieminen 618). I want to make it clear that there have been no overt displays of ableism directed toward me in this class. However, systemic ableism seeps into the subconscious of disabled people like myself. There is no need for overt discrimination when I am willing to segregate myself on behalf of this system. I remember the feeling of not being able to speak during a presentation in this class. I helped to plan the presentation with the group. My hands were shaking as I typed up my ideas because I knew that I would not be able to present the information that we had brainstormed together. I was not a contributing member; I was ashamed. So, not knowing how to participate in the presentation, I chose to sit and watch my group members instead. I segregated myself, not due to internalized ableism, but on behalf of the system which has existed long before my birth. If I could go back to that moment, I would have asked my classmates how I could participate in our presentation instead of assuming I should stay on the margins.

While researching ableism, I read Campbell’s idea that disability can be “cast as a diminished state of being human” (qtd. in Brown and Ramlackhan 1227). This idea of being, frankly, subhuman is embedded in my psyche. This is why learning to recognize and reject, the systemic marginalization of disabled people is necessary. In the introduction of this paper, I openly stated what my disabilities are. I have come to learn, through my experiences in this class, that I must be bold enough to do so. “Declaring a disability can become a political act...” because it requires disabled people to have the audacity to be authentic (Brown and Leigh 175). Having this audacity is not easy for me, but if I want to have positive psychosocial and academic experiences in the future, I must allow this form of politics to guide my actions. I must recognize systemic marginalization and move against it with vigour. This has been, perhaps, the most important lesson of this writing course for me.

### *Implications and Concluding Remarks*

While this reflection has given me some insight into my own capacity to mitigate systemic ableism, it is important to consider a theoretical framework for the future. One which stood out to me while reading about disability and ableism is the social model: “...The social model has guided accessible assessment design that seeks to “design out” barriers and thus reduce the need for accommodations” (Nieminen 614). I believe that this view of disability would allow for further integration between abled and disabled students. It is also important to note that my reflective insight is limited; it is a single data point in a campus that has many disabled students. My commitment to opposing systemic ableism through the promotion of inclusive and egalitarian classroom environments has been forged by reflecting on internalized ableism and marginalization. My experiences during group work, presentations, and interactions with peers and our professor in this writing course have been instrumental in confronting my biases surrounding the psychosocial and academic outcomes of disability. What I thought made me less-than-human is a difference which humanizes us all.

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# Be a Realistic Walker During the Dark Time: A Mirror Dream

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## Introduction

Jianqiao Chen's journey into an English-language post-secondary institution began with the International English Language Testing System, otherwise known as the IELTS exam. In this story, written for WRS 101 class, Jianqiao takes the readers on his personal quest as he prepares to take the exam. Part realistic struggles, part dream, the paper shows how hard work, self-reflection and regular practice yield positive results.

*Keywords:* dream, IELTS, mirror, pressure, writing practice



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Two years ago, I was still in China. During that time, I was doing my university studies. To get into a good foreign university, I kept on studying English to get a perfect International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score. This was my first time learning about writing in English around the world, and I took a serious attitude about writing.

When I was a kid, I hated language learning because I thought it was boring and useless. Sleeping in classes, getting bad scores on exams—those things always happened. So, when I wanted to get perfect IELTS grades for a good foreign university, I felt helpless. To be honest, a fear came out of my mind during that time. I just couldn't stop thinking, "I'll never write an essay which can be called good; what am I gonna do?"

I felt lost, and, unfortunately, countless and repetitive assignments were making this feeling even worse. I was under huge pressure for the IELTS exam. "I just can't believe what I am doing! English is too hard for me!" I said millions of times to myself. Sometimes, I even tried to find some reasons for my failures. "I was born in a small town in a small province where there are few people who are good at English. So, it's reasonable that I suck at English, isn't it?"

The IELTS exam is a marathon, which means that time is a challenge. People need to be quick and correct when they are doing the exam, which means they feel huge pressure. Well, I was doing my practice exams again and again every day, due to the asking of my teacher. Her idea was practice makes perfect. However, I just felt much more stressed than before. There were a couple of times that I wished I could give up.

For the four parts of the IELTS exam (reading, listening, writing, and speaking), reading and listening were the most stressful for me. Time was limited, and I had to make decisions as fast as I could. Luckily, my writing was not bad (when compared with the other three parts of IELTS). Honestly, my writing skill level just met the standard. My whole essay was messy and terrible on practice exams. Actually, when I think about it, my Chinese writing had the same problem. "What? Does that mean I do not get a chance to fix it? No way!" I said. Although the situation seemed worse than ever, I still didn't want to give up. I really hoped to go abroad. But my past told me to give it up.

One day, when I was doing my daily assignment of the practice exam, again, I tried to do my best on the questions. It was already midnight. I wished to be perfect. But it seemed impossible. I still wanted to continue. The last score of my written essay was still 5.0 out of 9; I hated this terrible score. However, my eyes couldn't stop from closing, and I fell asleep. In a dream, I saw an old man standing in front of a flock of sheep, and the fence was broken. Lots

of wolves came to catch food. The number of sheep was dropping rapidly. I was worried, and I asked the old man, “Why didn’t you do anything to fix your fence?”

He said, “Who are you? How dare you say that? You don’t know what happened at all! At first, it was a small piece broken in my fence, so I didn’t care. Then, the broken piece became bigger and bigger. I can’t earn thousands of dollars anymore! I won’t waste any more time on it!”

Hearing about that, I got very angry and turned my face away. Damn it, I was gonna help you; why don’t you just listen and try one time? Is it the point to earn lots of money right now? Shouldn’t you aim at how to keep your money right now, OLD MAN? I turned around and tried to argue with him, but he had disappeared. In front of me was a lake now. I looked around, and suddenly, I found the old man was on the surface of the lake. I was so surprised. The weirder thing was he looked as surprised as me. I was scared and stepped back; he also stepped back. Then I realized the old man was my reflection on the surface of water. But why?

I looked at the surface of the lake, and I understood. Oh, oh, oh, I shouldn’t be angry with you, because I am you. I am doing the same thing as you! Exactly! How dare me? That’s right: I can’t face the failure of my English, even if it meets the deadline. Just like you can’t face your broken fence. At first, the broken part of your fence was too small to notice; when I was a child, I also didn’t care about my English learning. Similarly, you want to give up just because you can’t become a rich man. But isn’t it kind of crazy for a shepherd to become a rich man? What you need to do is to try to be realistic—to fix your fence and save sheep as much as you can. Same for me—do I really need to master English? No, I just need to pass the exam! Try to fix the problems you can do right now instead of thinking about your past troubles. It’s useless, and it keeps adding stress on you.

I started to check my writing problems carefully, first my grammar and second my structure. I thought I had lots of work to do. All of them were totally fresh for me. It was huge work for me. Unluckily, I didn’t get too much time to prepare. My deadline was coming soon. But I just kept writing. I wrote an essay and edited it, fixing the problems I could see, again and again. I tried to improve, bit by bit, piece by piece. The second thing is that I lowered my expectations about my scores. I used to aim for 6.5 on the IELTS written scores, and I changed it to 5.5 or 6.0. Because of what I did, some surprises happened. I felt much more relaxed than before, and I got the motivation and power to deal with those tons of assignments. I was looking forward to it. HAHA, who is the best now? Finally, the day of the IELTS exam came, and I successfully finished it. After days of waiting, when I saw my grades, I knew it would work. Well, I just met my goal: no more, no less. Don’t dream too big; instead, move step by step. It’s what we do during hard times. Thanks to the old man!

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## Poetry and Enlightenment

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### Introduction

Haolin wrote this paper for WRS 101 class. Students were asked to write a story about a writing event that they experienced at some point in their lives. They were also asked to reflect on the social significance of that writing in terms of what it meant to them, what they had learnt from it and whether or not the event helped shape their writing in any way. Haolin chose an appealing story the time he was asked to write a poem and how relating to Edgar Allan Poe as well as having an encouraging teacher helped him overcome his lack of writing confidence.

*Keywords:* emotion, loneliness, poetry, writing skills



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I still remember my days in English class at my high school three years ago. Ms. Monroe always looked at me smiling when I entered the classroom at 9 o'clock daily. It was my first time in Canada, and I was very unfamiliar with the learning environment here, and I was still afraid of the teachers. Ms. Monroe guided me through each English class and kept me interested in the content. She taught me how to write brilliant narratives; one of my most memorable moments was a poem.

That day, Ms. Monroe gave us an assignment; each one of us wrote a poem with rhyme and poetic conception. This type of writing was a great challenge for me. I had never experienced writing a poem by myself in school; all the time, we were always reading poems from famous poets to memorize them. So, choosing a theme was a fundamental question. As I thought about how to work around my theme, Ms. Monroe seemed to see my confusion. She asked me, "You seem a little puzzled. Do you need help?"

"I don't know what way I should go about writing my poem."

"Have you ever tried to explain poetic conception?"

"I've thought about writing out some verses about my life, but my life doesn't seem to have any story for me to write about..."

"You should probably go ahead and think about your situation; you think your life is boring, so why don't you describe yourself as a lonely warrior?"

I was very inspired by Ms. Monroe's words; maybe my life will be boring, but why can't I vividly describe this boring life? So, I started an initial creation.

I spent the next few days feeling what state my life was in. I kept a daily log of what I did throughout the day. I watched and wrote diary entries for three days and realized that my life hadn't changed much; I always went to school, played sports, and played video games. It was in this little recording that I felt alone, so I wrote out eight stanzas about my feelings and gave them to Ms. Monroe for her advice. After she read my draft, she gently said, "Your rhymes are good, but I have a hard time feeling your loneliness. Your stanzas are rhyming for the sake of rhyming, and that's not right. Can you try to decrease your poetry skill and add more personal emotion?" She didn't reject my poem, thus going on to affirm something. I understood Ms. Monroe was helping me write a beautiful poem.

From that day on, I began to study verses, and I felt the meaning of famous poets from what they expressed in their verses. When I came across Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," I immediately experienced that sense of loneliness. The scene in his verse describes a lonely man, lost and sitting in his chamber, remembering his deceased. I immediately felt

his loneliness when I saw the contrast between the luxurious chamber and the one man. I was so inspired that I immediately began to write that raven of my own.

I felt the loneliness that belonged to Edgar Allan Poe in his verses. Then, I imitated his rhymes and style and wrote a poem about loneliness. I gave my verses to Ms. Monroe again. When Ms. Monroe finished reading it, she said to me, “Your verses are a little bit better than last time, and not only that, but you described your feelings of loneliness better than last time. However, you are trying to imitate Edgar Allan Poe's style and rhyme. Such imitation will make you easily lose that sense of loneliness that belongs to you. You may use its poetic techniques, but do not imitate them too much.” With Ms. Monroe's comments, I knew I could write an excellent poem.

The day before Submission Day arrived, I wrote my poem again and added some of Edgar Allan Poe's rhymes, but I only used some of his poetic techniques this time. Then, I combined them with my experiences and day-to-day state to describe a feeling of loneliness completely different from Edgar Allan Poe's. This was one of the most perfect and expressive poems I had written in this period. I had a lot of confidence in this poem.

It was finally time to submit, and I was very nervous that day. When we were done submitting, Ms. Monroe suddenly asked us to read our verses. So, everyone needed to go to the front and read their written verses. At that moment, probably because I had never presented my poem, my body trembled uncontrollably. Ms. Monroe saw my fear, smiled, and said, “Don't be afraid; you're just showing them who you are. They won't laugh at you; trust yourself and your poem, and you'll be able to make the other students feel it.” So, after listening to the poems written by the other students, it was finally my turn. As I stood at the front, my breathing became rapid, my hands couldn't stop shaking, and my mind went blank momentarily. I looked over to Ms. Monroe, sitting in her seat, looking at me with a smile the whole time; it was a very warm smile, as if a kind mother was looking at her child. At that moment, I was encouraged and began reading my poem. It was a poem about loneliness, and I wrote about the distance between me, my friends, and the world. When I finished the poem, the class applauded me, and Ms. Monroe started to celebrate after giving me a complimentary look. At that moment, I felt warmth for the first time in Canada.

From that day on, Ms. Monroe would always tell me to pay attention to tabulating my ideas, and that was one of the first very important phrases for me in English writing. I learned how to express my ideas through words. Not only that, but this behaviour helped me a lot in analyzing my academic papers and essays in the future. She inspired me to write about hope and passion instead of loneliness.

I am still very grateful to Ms. Monroe. She is the one who taught me how to write, and she is the one who made me feel the power of literature. I learned a lot about writing from

her class, and at the same time, she taught me one of the most important things: how to express my emotions and thoughts through words.

## Hamsterdammed

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### Introduction

“Hamsterdammed” is a clever story about writing from the perspective of an enterprising but controlling hamster named Ernest. Ernest scripts the life of a human Lucine, and Lucine’s life follows the rather dull rhythms of Ernest’s scripts until, one day, Hamsterdam’s Script Submitter fails. Ernest and Lucine both have to learn what it is like to write and live more spontaneously. Peyton Donovan wrote this story for WRS 101.

This wonderfully inventive piece has some important messages about the tension between invention and structure in writing.

*Keywords:* creativity, drafting, writer’s block, writing process



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Ten little hamsters slowly glanced back towards the looming office that overlooked them, raised above on a platform. This platform served as an intentional reminder for the little hamsters, constantly providing them with a feeling of inferiority. The little hamsters liked it this way, being constantly reminded of who was the boss. At least they told Ernest that, for the little hamsters, who were just mere specks in the scriptwriting process, wouldn't say otherwise.

Ernest, the lead hamster, emerged from his space. Simultaneously, a loud sigh of relief flowed through the cubicles of Hamsterdam. As the head writer of Hamsterdam, Ernest wore a proud look on his face and held a several-page script in his paw.

“Well, my subordinates, I—I mean we—have done it again!”

A cheer erupted from the cubicles. Ernest smiled, for being the head writer was a very tedious task. He deserved the praise. He tightened his tie, straightened his jacket, and turned toward the Script Submitter. This device allowed his script to be real, applying his written instructions to the human's day. It beeped joyfully as it pulled the script in, and in an instant, the large screen at the front of Hamsterdam began to light up. The screen displayed a first-person view of the human's day to the hamsters. Murmurs and a thin hum of conversation began.

“Oh, Lucine! She's waking up.”

“That script came out just in time. I feel like Ernest has been cutting it close lately—”

“Hey! Shush! You know not to talk about him like that; he'll cut your wheel time!”

Ernest remained blissfully unaware of the words being spoken. He could hear them, but he chose not to listen, for he did not have time for opinions which were evidently inferior to his. Ernest was aware he had been cutting his script submissions close, but this did not faze him one bit. He had never once failed to submit a script on time, and he never would. His routine was perfected, and he had yet to prove himself otherwise.

You see, Ernest always wanted things in three ways: perfect, uncreative, and routine, which is why Lucine had such a simple life. In a way, he kept her on a little hamster wheel, running her through the same pattern every day, a perpetual cycle of mundane efficiency.

As she woke, Lucine already knew what she would wear: a plain sweater with sweatpants, the same as every day. She already knew what her breakfast would be: plain toast and butter, the same as every day. It brought Ernest great satisfaction to write the same script repeatedly, and he was so stubbornly driven to write something perfect that he would

refuse any aid from his colleagues. If a single hamster dared to mention the concept of change, creativity, or, worst of all, drafting, Ernest would snap, but that had yet to happen.

Some of the little hamsters began to march towards the large couch in front of the screen, grabbing popcorn and various snacks. Others went to rest, preparing for another long night of scriptwriting or, more likely, dealing with Ernest as he frustratingly handled all the work. Ernest plopped down in his office chair, observing the screen through the glass wall.

Lucine went to school, as per the script. She engaged socially with no one, only paying attention to her classes. She went straight home at the end of her day. She spoke minimally to her family at dinner, and when they asked her how her day went, she said the same thing as always: “It was fine,” followed by a quick “I am heading upstairs. Goodnight.”

As the screen slowly dimmed and Lucine fell asleep, Ernest shuffled back to his office, seemingly prepared to write another script. He doused his face in cold water, attempting to wake himself up, and stared into the mirror in front of him.

*I will write, he thought to himself. I will write and I will maintain simplicity, for simplicity and routine and perfection are the only acceptable way to live.*

Ernest sat down in his chair, pulled his typewriter towards him, and took a sip from his water bottle, which hung from the roof next to him. He stretched his paws wide, as he always did before starting a script, and moved about in his seat until he found himself comfortable. He double-checked the ink ribbon and after verifying it was full, checked it once more, just to be safe. His finger met the first key, and he began the script as he always did.

October 16, 2023. Lucine – Day 7,060.

*I feel like Ernest has been cutting it close lately...*

The little hamster’s words echoed through his head. He shoed them away, taking a sip of his water to try and drown all thoughts of self-doubt.

He attempted to type the basic details of her day: what she would wear, what she would eat. He stumbled over words, forgetting to add in certain details, which typically seemed to flow so easily. His brain came up blank when thinking of the next word to write, and his internal monologue, which usually guided him through his thoughts, went mute. Refusing to draft his writing and aiming for a perfect script first try resulted in many crumpled balls of paper on the floor, all scripts that were not deemed perfect enough. He slouched in frustration, yanking on his whiskers in desperation. Not a single idea popped into his head.

“Why, why is my routine failing me now? Why is it not good enough!?”

Ernest’s head sunk into his desk with a loud thud. A knock came on the door.

“Ernest, everything alright?” a muffled voice asked, one of the hamsters checking in on him. There was no doubt the entirety of Hamsterdam could hear his frustrated groans. His office was made of glass, after all.

“Ernest, do you need help with the script?” another voice asked.

*Oh, just lovely! Lovely! They all know what’s going on.*

Ernest rose from his desk, his back stiff with stress. He glanced towards the clock. Midnight. He had six hours until Lucine would wake. Six hours to produce a script. Panic filled his body. His stomach twisted into knots they had never been twisted in before. He took a deep breath, shuffled towards the door, and opened it, forcing a calm look onto his face and wiping the endless drops of sweat off his forehead with his tie.

Not only were there two little hamsters, as he had expected, but the entirety of Hamsterdam’s staff stood outside his door, all with wide eyes and a look of worry painted on their faces.

“Oh,” he muttered, “Hello, my subordinates.” He looked towards his shoes in embarrassment, for his staff were never supposed to see him like this. He was perfect, after all, and how could he expect so much of his staff if he could not live up to his own expectations?

“Do you need some help, Ernest?” a voice chimed in from the back of the crowd.

“Yeah, Ernest, we are hired to help you after all. Let us help!” another pleaded.

Ernest shook his head. “I do not need help. Return to your cubicles and continue whatever previous work you were doing.” He shooed them with his paw. “Go on. Tsk. Leave me be. I will be fine. Just a bit tired, that’s all.”

He was lying through his teeth. He needed help. He knew it; they knew it. He would never admit such a vulnerable thing, however.

Most of the little hamsters made their way back to their desks, but one stuck behind.

“Why not try something new, Ernest? You might enjoy being creative for once.” The hamster glanced back towards his coworkers to provide backup on his statement, but they had already fled the scene, fearful of the assault Ernest would throw upon them. He sighed,

“Also, why not attempt drafting your scripts? We can always help revise them. After all, it isn’t like you to not give us *any* work.”

The little hamster began to turn around when Ernest appeared in front of him.

“What did you just say?”

“Well, sir, you do write the same script every time. Hard to make something perfect if you’ve done it thousands of times already.”

A vein began to bulge in Ernest’s forehead. His cheeks grew red in anger. “How *dare* you say such a thing! You have no right. None.” He turned towards the cubicles, attempting to make his point clear to all who attempted to change his ways. “This script concerns me, and me alone. All those who interfere will be writing lines until they collapse. Do I make myself clear?”

A hum of agreement came from the cubicles. Ernest flipped back towards the single little hamster, who was now sweating and quivering. Gone was his confidence to speak up, and what came in its place was unwavering fear. He attempted to make his way back to his cubicle but was cut off by his boss once more.

“Pathetic, what was your name?”

“Lewy.”

“Ah well, Lewy, here is a token of advice from a prolific writer,” Ernest aggressively adjusted his tie, attempting to intimidate the already-shaking hamster. “Learn to keep your mouth shut, and don’t give advice where it isn’t warranted.”

Lewy glanced at Ernest, a crushed look in his eyes. He headed towards his cubicle, carrying an overbearing weight of humiliation on his shoulders.

Ernest made his way to his office, slamming the door behind him. He plopped back down into his chair, pulled the typewriter towards him, and attempted to write again. Lewy’s words replayed in his mind.

*You do write the same script every time.*

Was that true? Did he constantly repeat himself? Even if he did, was there such an issue with it? He had seemed to perfect his formula when it came to scriptwriting.

His fingers hit the keys again, this time in a more aggressive manner. More crumpled papers ended up scattered around the office. His whiskers were being yanked out in pawfuls now. His tie was tossed on the floor, feeling less like a clothing item and more like a noose.

The clock ticked on—one a.m., two a.m. There were more papers on the floor, but still no script. Three a.m., four a.m. Fewer whiskers on his face, still no script. A writer’s block had engulfed him whole, leaving him to fall into an endless pit of self-doubt and despair. His mind felt foggy. He desperately needed sleep but persisted in vain. He would finish a script. No, not would; he *had* to finish a script.

*What will happen to poor Lucine if she falls off her wheel?*

Six a.m.

An alarm rang through Hamsterdam. The Script Submitter had yet to engulf any of Ernest’s work. A blank page rested in front of Ernest. The ink ribbon was still full. Ernest drowned in crumpled papers. He had failed. He felt nauseous. He had never failed to submit a script on time.

Little hamsters sprinted around in panic as red lights flashed across their faces. Some ran towards their wheels in the back, and others fainted. Ernest rose from his chair groggily, observing the chaos in front of him. He couldn’t bear to present himself to his subordinates, a wave of shame crushing him, pulling him violently into a stream of panic. No matter how hard he attempted to withstand its violent current that thrashed his mind around in all directions at once, he still sunk.

The screen began to light.

Lucine was waking up.

Ernest stared into the screen.

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She woke up stiff and sore, which was quite unusual. She typically felt so rested.

I must have slept poorly, she thought, unaware of the situation deep inside her mind. She groggily made her way towards her closet and for the first time in years, had absolutely no idea what to wear. She dug through her closet, desperate to find something to her taste.

“Gosh, there are too many pairs of sweatpants in here. What is wrong with me?” she scoffed to herself. She reached the far back corner of her closet, which held a bin labelled ‘You don’t like this stuff.’

*Huh, I don’t remember ever hating these.*

She pulled out a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt. Ernest visibly cringed.

“Lucine! No! Not the jeans! They inhibit your ability to focus; they’re so uncomfortable!” He slouched into his chair, knowing Lucine could hear nothing he said.

With her outfit on, she made her way downstairs.

*Hmm... what to eat?*

She opened her pantry door and made her way inside. Her eyes lit up seeing the box of Fruit Loops, and she eagerly grabbed it, pouring herself a bowl.

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Once again, Ernest cringed. He stood up and began tidying the floor, tossing most of the failed scripts into the trash. There was still time to salvage Lucine’s day. So long as he submitted a script at any point during the day, he could put her back on track, forcing her back onto his wheel of perfection. He threw himself into his desk chair, which croaked under the stress of his movements. He seized the typewriter between his paws and pulled it towards himself violently. He didn’t even bother checking the ink ribbon as per usual. His fingers met the keys with loud thuds.

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Lucine made her way to her classes in a more exuberant manner than usual. She spoke to those whom she wouldn’t typically have, those whom Ernest wouldn’t have allowed her to speak to. They were friendly yet seemed off-put by her, one might say... *different* attitude.

Upon entering the library at lunch, Lucine immediately turned towards the stairway. She apparently loved this library, or so her calendar (which she had written under Ernest’s guidance) told her. Ascending several flights of stairs, she entered the fourth floor. It was dead silent. The floor was deserted, save for a few students scattered throughout the overwhelming bookshelves and tables. One could hear a pin drop, a mouse tiptoeing, and the breath of a fly. One could also definitely hear Lucine’s less-quiet-than-usual footsteps as she crept towards an empty table hidden in the back corner of the floor. Encased by books and pure silence, she pulled her notes out of her bag and began to study.

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Ernest smiled towards the screen. “Oh, Lucine! You still heed my orders despite a lack of direct communication.” He dropped his head towards the script, which had appeared to make some progress yet was, as per Ernest’s standards, a complete and utter disaster.

*Oh well, this will do... I am glad to see that calendar come in handy.*

He continued writing, his state so crazed he had thrown caution to the wind. Desperation to control others and to keep Lucine on her wheel coursed through his veins. He didn't feel as if he enjoyed or was even remotely proud of what he was writing; however, he was consumed whole by his need for routine.

The hamsters occasionally glanced at Ernest through the windows, making note of his deranged state. Rumours began to spread.

"I think he has lost it," one hamster groaned.

"Well, yes, I don't disagree," another chimed in joyfully. "But he is working hard, and he even appears to have ended that slump of his!"

"At what cost? You really think whatever he's writing in there is of quality?"

The few gossiping hamsters turned towards the screen, ignoring the anxious nausea that filled their stomachs. Their human appeared to be doing fine, quite better than usual, without Ernest's stranglehold of a script suffocating her lively nature.

"It's a shame Ernest can't see things for how they are." Lewy sighed from his cubicle and allowed himself to doze into a nap.

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*This is stupid. It's too quiet. It's making me uncomfortable.*

Lucine haphazardly tossed her notes in her bag, threw her bag over her shoulder, and marched toward the stairs. She had to get off the fourth floor immediately.

"Why, why did I write that I liked this place?!" Her scream echoed throughout the gloomy stairwell. Lucine put her back to the wall and slid downwards, collapsing into a puddle of confusion. Her fists clenched against her forehead.

*What is wrong with me? Someone could see you any second. Get a grip, Lu.*

She abruptly stood up, collecting her backpack off the floor. Her hands began fanning her face to prevent an offence of tears from streaming down her cheeks. It was too hard not to cry. She felt amnesic, being completely unable to justify her past actions, behaviours, and motives for an extensive amount of time. She began to yell again, tears finally freeing themselves and pouring down her face, and she marched towards the innocent garbage can in the corner.

"I don't like quiet!" She kicked the garbage can. "I don't like sweatpants!" She kicked it once more. "I don't like anything about me, whoever *that* even is!" She kicked it one last

time, harder than her previous attempts. It spun, hit the wall to the right, and collapsed onto the ground, spewing trash as the lid broke off.

“Shoot.”

She crouched to the floor, feeling slightly disgusted by the feeling of trash on her hands. The stairwell wasn't clean to begin with, but this was just gross.

*Consequences of my actions*, she thought.

Something sticky touched her hand. Gum. Ew.

As she fought the urge to puke, footsteps began from the top of the stairwell. She heard the conversation between two people, a male and a female. Suddenly, the gum wasn't so gross, and Lucine began panickily throwing heaps of garbage back into the bin. The voices sounded familiar, but Lucine could not think of a name to associate with their booming voices.

“Preston, we're late!” the female voice yelled.

The male scoffed. “Cilla. We're going to the Olive Garden, not something *legitimately* fancy. We can afford to be a few minutes late.”

Cilla and Preston. Lucine's lab partners. The remaining garbage quickly was tossed into the bin, the broken lid tucked against the wall, and the garbage can pushed back into its spot. Lucine wiped her tears with her sleeve.

“Lucine?” Preston looked surprised to see Lucine not sporting her typical sweatsuit and *trying* to socialize. Lucine turned to see her lab partners in front of her. She smiled, attempting to hide her puffy eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Hi, you guys.” *Oh, how I hope they can't see through me right now.*

Cilla was slightly taken aback as well. She shot Preston a confused look. Her perplexion did not kill her kind nature, however, and she and Preston nodded at each other.

“Lu, Preston and I are meeting some people in our lab at the Olive Garden. Would you like to join us?”

Lucine appeared to think for a second. “Sure, why not?”

Preston and Cilla's jaws smacked the floor, their mouths agape in shock. “You mean, you're *not* saying no to us immediately, and you don't have three hours of homework to get through?” Cilla tapped Preston on the back, prompting him to answer.

“Yeah, Lucine, that’s not like *you* at all,” Preston added.

Lucine thought to herself for a second. *Homework? Immediately saying no? What kind of person am I?* “Well, I have just been really busy lately...”

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Ernest felt so consumed by the atrocious script in front of him that he failed to look up at the screen once. The other hamsters began observing him closely rather than casually, fearful he would send himself into a cardiac arrest of sorts if he continued to be so unhinged. He appeared crazed. His tie was loosened and thrown over his shoulder. His eyes were bloodshot from a lack of sleep. His fur was a disaster, being pulled in all directions and even matted in some spots. He was far from his usual neat and prim self.

“Ha! Ha! I did it!” Ernest yanked the script from his typewriter joyfully. He quickly rose from his chair, which creaked joyfully being freed from his heavy presence. He yanked open the door to his office, skipping into the common area. The lights in Hamsterdam were beginning to dim. Noise from Lucine’s Olive Garden dinner played through the speakers.

The script entailed Lucine going straight home, studying for several hours, burning every pair of jeans she owned, and being in bed early. There were spelling errors throughout the script. Its structure was undefined and messy. It was quite terrible. Yet Ernest persisted, feeling no more adoration for writing and only viewing it as a chore to control others.

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Conversation flowed around the dinner table. There were endless laughs and continuous jokes... and Lucine, for once in a very long time, felt relaxed. She picked up another breadstick from the center of the table and quietly observed the ongoing deliberation between Marshall and Emily, who were apparently in Lucine’s lab. She had clearly failed to ever make note of them.

“How can you *think* that? Jane Austen is not overrated!” Emily scoffed.

“Listen, all I’m saying is that she’s okay. I mean, have you even read *Pride and Prejudice*? Insufferable characters all around! I couldn’t stand any of it.”

Emily’s face began to grow red. The rest of the group started to chuckle, fearing the onslaught her response would bring. She set down her fork and locked eyes with Marshall.

“But you see, you’re not appreciating the bigger picture. Their insufferable nature stems from a place of satire! Perhaps you should re-read it, and this time not on such a surface level.”

The only response Marshall mustered was tossing his unfinished breadstick her way and laughing.

Lucine looked around her, glancing at Emily's joking anger, at the group attempting to ease the argument between the two, and began pondering about a time in her life when she felt so at peace. She would have never gone out like this usually, but she couldn't think of anything better to do with her time.

*Why do I constantly reject new things? Why don't I go out like this more?*

\*\*\*

Ernest watched the gathering through the screen, haphazardly scrambling around Hamsterdam with his script in hand. The other hamsters were asleep, but his crazed state did not seem to wake them. Each time he wandered in front of the screen, he became slowly captivated by the gathering and had to force himself to stay committed to the task at hand. He did not have the time to consider his desires for socialization and entertainment; he *had* to put Lucine back on track.

*If I just submit this script, things will return to how they once were. Routine.*

He smiled at the thought of Lucine falling back into her hamster wheel, but this idea did not bring him the satisfaction it once did. As laughter from the restaurant filled Hamsterdam, and Lucine appeared happier than usual, his internal thoughts of control became dim, and he felt a different way.

*Perhaps the problem, why I failed to submit a script, was because of MY intense devotion to routine and perfection...*

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"Lucine, you're being awfully quiet. What's wrong?"

Cilla's question pulled Lucine out of her thoughts.

"Oh, nothing. Just adjusting to being out and about, that's all." Lucine smiled through her reply, hoping the group would accept her words and return to their previous discussion.

Preston chimed in,

"Yeah, about that. Lu, why don't you come out with us more? You're always welcome, you know."

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Ernest observed the scene and felt something he hadn't felt before.

*Was I too harsh?*

He turned towards the cubicles where the little hamsters rested.

*Why did I always refuse their help?*

He slowly made his way through the rows, glancing at each little hamster's face. They all napped at their desks, some cozily wrapped up in blankets, others with their fluffy foreheads on their desks. The lights above Ernest were off, and the only light in Hamsterdam was gleaming from the screen.

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Lucine had gone mute. Preston's face turned red.

"I'm sorry, Lu, I didn't mean to—"

"No, you didn't do anything," She sighed. "I don't know why I don't come around more. I wish I knew," she shrugged. "I'm having a good time. It's so strange..."

Emily laughed, "Do you have someone controlling you six out of seven weekdays or something?"

"Ha, no. I just feel more like myself today. It's weird."

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Ernest felt a wave of sadness wash over him.

*More like myself.*

Her words played on a loop through his mind. Ernest had stripped away all aspects of Lucine, everything that had made her, well, her.

*Why did it take me so long to realize my faults?*

The script became crumpled in his paw as it became a fist in frustration. In an instant, the script was shredded to bits and left in pieces on the floor. These were remnants of his controlling reign of terror imposed upon the hamsters, Lucine, and himself. He traipsed his way towards a certain hamster's cubicle.

"Lewy?" Ernest put his paw on the hamster's shoulder. "I need your help."

Lewy groggily awoke and looked up with tired, annoyed eyes at Ernest.

“I was asleep.”

“Yes, but I need *your* help.”

“Ye,s but, you see, Ernest, you are not overly kind,” Lewy removed Ernest’s paw from his shoulder. “And therefore, I do not want to help you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need sleep.”

“Lewy. Come on. I’m trying to become a changed Hamster.” Ernest pleaded with desperation. Lewy, who had set his head back on his desk to sleep once more, refused to even meet his boss’ eyes.

“Liar.”

“How do I write a script full of creativity? How, Lewy?” Ernest sunk to the floor and glanced upward. Lewy had lifted his head, clearly trying to see legitimacy in Ernest’s words. “How do I find passion in my writing again?”

Lewy, for once in his life, pitied the head hamster.

“Well, you try something new.”

“I don’t know *how* to do that. I don’t know how to try anything new.”

Lewy groaned. “Oh, stop with the self-loathing Ernest. It’s annoying.” He stood from his chair and pulled Ernest to his back paws. “Now, where is that mean hamster who embarrassed me in front of my colleagues?”

Ernest looked away in shame. “He is gone.”

Lewy nodded. “He was quite the unfriendly fellow, I will say.”

The two hamsters glanced at the screen. Lucine was giggling like a toddler. Ernest had never heard her laugh, had never *allowed* her to laugh. It was a strange yet welcome noise to his ears. Lewy made note of Ernest’s solemn attitude.

“Maybe you shouldn’t control her so closely?” Lewy shrugged, “She seems pretty happy without your paws gripping her life.”

Ernest sighed.

“I know. I don’t want to even write scripts anymore.”

Lewy thought to himself for a minute.

“Perhaps you should take a break? The rest of Hamsterdam can always fill in. I think you need the rest,” Lewy smiled and started walking toward Ernest’s office. “And when you return from your break, I can show you a revised writing process, full of drafting—”

Ernest attempted to hide his visible cringe.

“And peer review—”

There was no possible way he could hide it now.

“And revision. You’ll never get it right on the first time, Ernest. No matter how talented you are.”

A phrase fell out of Ernest’s mouth, one he had never said before.

“You are right. I apologize, Lewy.”

Lewy shrugged, opening the door to Ernest’s office. He glanced at the erratic state it was in and started picking up crumples of paper off the floor.

“I know you are, and I think an apology is owed to all of Hamsterdam’s staff, including yourself.”

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“Merry Christmas!”

Lucine grinned, unwrapping her gift in excitement.

“Oh! The Jane Austen Collection. Thank you, Emily.” She set down her present beside her and tucked it under the tree for safekeeping. Marshall began chuckling.

“Having to convert others now, are we?”

An argument ensued. Preston, Cilla and Lucine looked at each other in unison, nodded, and stood up. The comforting smell of cookies wafted through the air, guiding them towards the kitchen. It was a few days before Christmas, and their annual friend’s gift exchange was taking place at Cilla’s home. Over the past couple of months, Lucine had become quite close with her newfound friends and felt extremely welcomed by them into their circle. She felt an unfamiliar sense of comfort as she looked at the kindness that surrounded her. She smiled to herself and took a bite of a gingersnap.

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Ernest watched the gathering displayed on the screen. He, too, smiled, typing the final few words into the first draft of a script. He pulled the papers from his typewriter, excitedly stood up, and made his way toward Lewy's desk.

Hamsterdam was a much more cheerful place. The hamsters were busy consistently, with Ernest giving them a multitude of tasks, such as revising and providing feedback on his scripts, particularly in the creativity aspect, ensuring he was giving Lucine enough room to breathe. It was a refreshing feeling for Ernest to no longer have writing feel like such a chore that had to be completed but rather an enjoyable pastime full of passion.

"Hello, Ernest," Lewy smiled, reaching out for the script in Ernest's hand. "Another one to revise?"

"Yes, I am quite proud of this one. Only a first draft, though, so I am excited for your suggestions to make it even better." He grinned.

"I appreciate your openness to feedback Ernest, and I am sure the rest of Hamsterdam does as well." Lewy's eyes began to scan the paper. "A party? You're finally letting her—"

Ernest nodded. "Of course, she has to go a bit wild once, at least," He began to turn. "I trust the script is safe in your paws?"

"You know it." Lewy immediately got to work. Ernest nodded in approval and strolled to his office, which was no longer raised on a harsh platform but now sat on the ground, the same level as everyone else.

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## Reading as a Writer: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

Valerie Sytnik<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Written for WRS 101, Valerie Sytnik's reflective essay explores what it means to read like a writer. Valerie argues for a three-part approach to learning to write from the texts that we read. She suggests that we balance our intuition and conscious knowledge about writing as we learn from the texts we read. This balancing act continues as we try to wrestle our ideas into written form. At this stage of the writing process, we must negotiate the tension between our perceptions and reflections. Finally, Valerie suggests that we must learn from example texts and practice what they teach us. This essay is an excellent example of using research sources to support a unique and compelling argument.

*Keywords:* creativity, drafting, reading, writing process



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<sup>2</sup> *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

## *Introduction*

I am an awfully slow reader. I always take my time to reverse-engineer texts in my head to understand how they are created. However, it was not until I read Mike Bunn's article "How to Read Like a Writer" that I realized I read this way in order to learn how to write. This insight inspired me to look back on some of my reading experiences in light of the existing theory on using reading to develop writing. Originally identified as a method by Professor Charles Moran in 1990, "reading like a writer" is referred to by many terms in academic literature, such as "close reading" (Brewer 635), "the whole reading approach" (Daane 184), and "read like a writer (WRS)" process (Bunn 71). An empirical study supports this reading method (Graham et al.), while some authors compare it to the way architects, carpenters, and gardeners study the work of their masters to build houses (Tate 506, Jauss 64), grow apples (Mueller 1021), and cultivate roses (Prose 268) themselves.

Indeed, to read like a writer means to look carefully at various "writerly techniques" (Bunn 72), such as "textures, rhythms, structure, and logic" (Daane 188), or anything else that is "particularly well put" (Smith 563), and decide whether we might use any of those techniques in our own writing. In this essay, I would like to expand on this view by redefining Bunn's concept of RLW into RAW. I propose that RAW stands for both "Reading As a Writer" and "Reading – Awareness – Writing." I believe that RAW is an integral three-part process that consists of reading other authors' raw texts, becoming aware of our own raw ideas, and writing raw drafts. I will address each of these parts in three corresponding sections of this essay. I will reflect on the pitfalls I encountered in the past when trying to craft myself as a writer through reading and discuss how the RAW approach helped me avoid those pitfalls in writing this very essay.

### *Apples and Oranges: Raw Texts*

RAW begins with reading raw texts in a way that is both intuitive and conscious. Frank Smith suggests that we acquire knowledge about writing from reading "without deliberate effort" (560) and realize that we have "vicariously learned" only later when we implement techniques from the texts we have read in our own writing (563). I agree with Smith's idea of intuitive learning. Once, without recalling where I had learnt it, I applied a literary technique to explain an idea with a metaphor in my university financial essay. I illustrated how the relative purchasing power parity (PPP) theory fails in the short run due to the economic laws, much like an apple that falls within a short radius, or "not far from the tree," due to the laws of physics. My professor gave me a low grade with a comment that creative techniques were inappropriate for financial essays.

Obviously, I made no mistake in acquiring knowledge “without awareness,” as Smith states (560), but I faced a pitfall by applying that knowledge without awareness as well. Bunn states that RLW requires not only identifying “writerly choices” (72) but also considering the potential responses of other readers to those choices in our own writing (81). Clearly, I failed to consider the audience for my financial essay. I found myself in what Peter Elbow calls “[a] conflict in [g]oals” between “[b]eing a [w]riter vs. [b]eing an [a]cademic” (A Conflict in Goals 72). Ironically, I attempted to compare apples to oranges by employing a creative writing style in an essay for a strictly academic audience. Although Cynthia Dollins notes that infusing “creative craft” into “boring, basic reports” contributes to developing “a strong, engaging voice” (58), I still should have been more conscious during my RAW process.

In fact, I believe that the reading methods of Smith and Bunn can be synthesized into a single approach with the following equation: Intuition \* Consciousness = Science. By taking seriously Stephen King’s “permission” to read whatever our “little heart desires” (192) and following Adam Savage’s advice to stop “screwing around and ... writ[e] it down,” we can practice RAW in a scientific way. For instance, both my intuitive inclination and conscious evaluation prompted me to think that the creative technique from my financial essay would be a better fit for this essay, as it is a reflective piece for my writing course. Only, instead of adopting a metaphor to explain the PPP formula, I am using a formula to explain the RAW metaphor. And this time, I have chosen the writing technique with my heart and executed it with my mind.

### *From Rigor to Vigor: Raw Ideas*

RAW continues generating raw ideas in a way that honours our freedom to express them. Elbow and Smith concur that schools do not provide an environment where students can become “members of the club of writers” (Smith 566) because the contemporary education system prioritizes “learn[ing] the ideas of others” over having “new ideas of your own” (Elbow, *The War between Reading and Writing* 12). When I was 13, I realized that Fyodor Dostoevsky’s portrayal of his protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, resembled Victor Hugo’s approach to creating his character, Jean Valjean. When I shared my insight with my school teacher, she advised me to postpone my “PhD dissertation on this topic” until I had checked whether someone else had already expressed this idea before me. The rigorous response from my teacher is an example of emphasizing “evaluation over purpose,” which casts a student in the role of “a consumer of knowledge, not a producer” that Smith (566) and Elbow (17) warn about, respectively. Essentially, my teacher implied that my ideas were less worthy than those in the books. As a result, I did not write them down immediately and used reading to “serve” my ideas, as Elbow puts it (21). By the time I confirmed my

realization about Raskolnikov and Valijeau, I had completely forgotten what I, myself, had to say about them.

The truth is that many inspired ideas come to us when our minds hover somewhere between perception and reflection, which I see as Perception \* Reflection = Inspiration. We spend 23% of our reading time wandering in random thoughts, which may reduce our comprehension (Schooler et al. 213) and recall (Dixon et al. 528). Yet, by taking a “pause” (Dixon et al. 528) and becoming aware of our distracted state of mind (Schooler et al. 213), we may achieve deeper levels of reflection (Dixon et al. 518). I would add a level of perception into the equation and argue that it is essential to record all our ideas during the RAW process because, as one of my writing professors says, even mundane thoughts, such as the reminder to purchase milk, can inspire profound ideas. For example, I perceived Elbow’s statement, “Let’s start with what you have to say.” (The War between Reading and Writing 14) when I recalled a Dostoevsky / Hugo episode. Instead of letting this memory simply pass through my mind, I typed it up, as raw as it was: “I wish I had written my idea down back then, it would have brought me rigour.” Suddenly, I realized that the misused words “rigour” and “vigour” perfectly reflected the essence of this section. Thus, the title of this section emerged from the written randomness of my mind.

#### *Copy and Adapt: Raw Drafts*

RAW concludes with writing raw drafts in a way that removes the pressure of being perfect. Mary Daane found that students who barely read struggle with writing more than experienced readers, not because they lack creative ideas or “imaginative language” in their drafts, but because they lack the confidence and skills to weave them into their final papers (187). This is exactly how I felt when I opted out of writing a thesis for my first undergraduate degree. I had equated a dissertation with a major scientific breakthrough that was beyond my reach since I believed I had nothing significant to say. Unfortunately, there was no course to reveal that a bachelor thesis is, in fact, a more down-to-earth undertaking. While Dollins insists that students should be exposed to the same genre in which they learn to write (57), Beth Hewett uses her own writing process as a case study for her students to explore. This type of course would have been invaluable to me then, and it is exactly the type of course I appreciate now. With all the opportunities we have to read about writing, experiment with writing, and comment on writing in our writing class, I might now be one step closer to writing my thesis, after all.

I believe that we discover ourselves as writers through practice by example, which I express as: Example \* Practice = Discovery. Many authors maintain that we improve as writers by emulating the work of other writers. Carillo advises against fixating on the names of authors’ techniques and instead encourages to simply mimic them (22), Dollins calls for

imitating “mentor texts” (49), Brooke suggests emulating authors as individuals rather than their texts (23), and Mueller bluntly states: “steal, and steal from the best!” (1021). Of course, the trick lies not in copying and pasting an author’s work but in borrowing and adapting their approach in a way that sparks our own unique creativity. For instance, inspired by Ellen DeGeneres’ “[w]hat went wrong?” joke about Bruce Dern in her 86th Oscar opening speech, I chose a similar idiom for the title of this essay in order to make it less about me and more about RAW. I also followed the example of the article “Like Watching a Movie”: Notes on the Possibilities of Art in the Anthropocene (Necyk and Harvey) by incorporating a quotation into my title. Initially, I placed the title of Bunn’s article, Reading Like a Writer to the left side of my title. However, after developing my vision of RAW, I replaced “like” with “as.” In this way, I discovered my own writing by practicing writing examples of other writers.

### Conclusion

When we learn to write by studying the written work of others and are open to inspiration, we discover our capacity to create written pieces ourselves. In this essay, I reflect on my experience of learning to write by reading—by viewing it through the theoretical lenses of reading like a writer. I summarize my reflections on the concept of Reading As a Writer (RAW) which implies three aspects: Reading – Awareness – Writing. I believe that reading as a writer is a process of self-discovery. It starts with a self-permission to trust our intuition and our willingness to maintain consciousness while we read the raw texts of others. It continues with an effort to distinguish between procrastinating and productive tendencies of our minds while we generate our own raw ideas. It finishes with a commitment to learn by example and practice on our own while we write our raw drafts. I conceptualize RAW in the formula:  $RAW = Science + Inspiration + Discovery = (Intuition * Consciousness) + (Perception * Reflection) + (Examples * Practice)$ . In its essence, RAW embodies acceptance of who we are as writers and individuals at the present moment in space-time, not constrained by the need to be perfect but motivated by the desire to be better.

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## Second Grade Reading Journey

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### Introduction

For this assignment, students in WRS 101 were asked to write a personal narrative relating in some ways to their writing experience. Dalton Low wrote a charming story about his struggles with learning how to read texts in French. With the help of a tutor in a library, a place he found eerie at first, Dalton not only improved his reading but gained a new perspective on how learning and accepting help can lead to personal growth.

*Keywords:* French immersion, language learning, library, reading, tutoring



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This story takes place when I was in second grade, around 12 years ago. I went to a French Immersion school, meaning that throughout all my classes the teachers would speak in French, and the students would be expected to do the same. Practically every single class would be taught in French with the exception of English class, naturally. Math, Science, History, and even art classes were all taught in French. If a student were to have a poor grasp of the language, it would ripple throughout all their courses, leading to them having a poor grasp of everything because they could not understand what the teacher was teaching them. I was one of the unfortunate few who didn't have the best understanding of the language, leading to me falling further and further behind my peers.

The problem was first noticed by my homeroom teacher who was in charge of running reading tests for every student. I remember that when I did my reading test, I was only able to understand the most basic words. I had great difficulty getting through stories written for students younger than I was. I was about a grade level below what my peers were at. When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, my teacher brought up the concern and illustrated the risk of me falling behind all my classmates. The teacher recommended that my parents hire a tutor for me so that I could catch up to my peers. My parents, wanting me to succeed and have a good education, began the search for a new tutor. They found a female French immersion high school student who was willing to tutor me on weekends at the public library. As a second grader, hearing that I had to go to an extra hour of what was essentially like school on the weekend wasn't the greatest news. I was devastated; I cried and cried until I couldn't keep crying anymore, and then I just pouted and was an angry little child.

When I first started being tutored, the library gave me a strong sense of unease. The walls were a shade of grayish blue that felt like the inside of a hospital room. Light would spill in through the windows, but it only managed to make the walls look even more gray. For my second-grade self, this place felt like a prison that I would be freed from temporarily only to be yanked back inside like some cruel joke. I found my tutor at a table, and I sat down, refusing to look up as if my eyes were glued downward. The blueish-wavy texture of the table is still etched into my mind to this day. My tutor handed me a book and told me to read out loud, and so I did in a tone that made my frustration very clear. Every time I would make a mistake the tutor would explain where I went wrong. At first, I felt as if the tutor correcting me was an attack on my ego and my sense of worth, and I rejected the tutor's attempts to try and help me. Once I started listening to the tutor's instructions, I felt a strong sense of despair. I felt like I would never be able to improve, and I would always struggle to read, making my learning feel pointless. Once both of those feelings had dissipated, I felt ready and capable to try and improve my reading.

As the weeks counted upwards, things began to change. I became more comfortable in the library and with the tutor, and I genuinely began to somewhat enjoy the reading as I got more comfortable with it. With all these changes, I was improving more and more every tutoring session. Where once I would have had incredible difficulty reading the easiest of books, now I could read difficult books with relative ease. Eventually, the tutoring lessons had to stop, and by my final lesson it was staggering how much I had improved within that time. At this point, it was getting near the end of the school year, and there was one final reading test that I had to do.

The teacher called my name, and we went out into the hallway. She handed me the book that I had struggled to read during the first reading test that I did. Now, I read the whole thing without making any mistakes. She handed me more and more advanced books, and I read them all without any errors. The teacher then told me the results of the test, I was now a grade level ahead of my peers. She told my parents that in all her time teaching she had never heard of anyone improving that much. I was moved up into the advanced French writing and reading class, and I had no difficulties. This was the first time I had to struggle to try to improve myself, and it taught me the value of hard work and determination. When I heard the news of how much I had improved, I was ecstatic. Even for my second-grade self, it felt as if all the work had I put in was all worth it in the end. In future school years, I would advance to higher levels in French writing competitions. I graduated high school with a bilingual mention, which will allow me many more opportunities for further education and employment. The time I spent learning and growing as an individual paid off, and I had learned many important lessons along the way. I learned the value of hard work, I learned how to grow as a person and why that is important, but most importantly at the time, I learned to read.

This story is about overcoming obstacles, about bettering yourself even when it's difficult. My parents could have heard that I was struggling, decided that French wasn't for me, and switched me to an English school. But that wasn't the route we took, and I am very thankful for that. Perhaps if I had rejected the idea of bettering myself, that would have become the precedent, and I wouldn't have developed as much as a person because of it. If I had moved to an English program, I likely would never know many of the people I met through the French Immersion program that helped shape who I became as a person. I would never have known the teachers who inspired my love for Math, Science, and History. If it were not for my efforts in trying to improve my reading, I would be an entirely different person in an entirely different place. My journey to better my reading and writing also happens to be my journey to better myself. We must embrace the difficult parts of our lives because, in the end, we come out as new people, celebrating a new dawn with a whole new perspective.

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# TikTok is not the Only Echo Chamber: A Rhetorical Analysis

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## Introduction

What techniques do opinion columnists use to persuade us? This question is at the heart of Lauren Bayne's rhetorical analysis of Tasha Kheiriddin's *National Post* opinion piece: "We said we'd never forget the Holocaust, but Gen Z has nothing to remember." Kheiriddin argues that TikTok is undermining Gen Z's understanding of the world, especially when it comes to historical issues like the Holocaust. As Lauren deftly points out, rather than persuading audiences who might disagree with her position, Kheiriddin uses various rhetorical strategies to confirm and reinforce the opinions of her existing readers.

**Keywords:** logical fallacies, Gen Z, Holocaust, rhetorical analysis, stasis questions, TikTok



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Current events in Palestine are generating divisive reports. In an opinion article that appeared in the *National Post* in November 2023 titled “We said we’d never forget the Holocaust, but Gen Z has nothing to remember,” columnist Tasha Kheiriddin responds to rising tensions by pointing out a documented increase in anti-Semitism across Canada. She believes that the problem is Generation Z learning all their information on TikTok rather than from their schools or more traditional popular media sources. The author’s argument relies heavily on the unwavering support from her target audience and their shared biases, thus failing to create an argument that persuades anyone else. Rather than considering and answering stasis questions—a sequence of questions designed to locate the place where the discussion moves from having common ground to being in disagreement on a topic—the author overutilizes logical fallacies, which effectively alienate any readers who are not already in agreement with her perspective. In this rhetorical analysis, I will dissect Kheiriddin’s article with the goal of proving that she did not intend to use persuasion to sway undecided audiences but rather to reinforce pre-existing opinions and biases.

The audience that Kheiriddin is writing for becomes apparent when looking into what and where she has been writing. She often writes about similar topics, such as the current and ongoing genocide in Palestine and the issues surrounding TikTok and its security. She also integrates these discussions into her online presence. Her biases against TikTok and its generally younger users are as evident on her social media accounts as they are in her writing. She has reposted other people’s posts about their hatred of TikTok (Cardy), as well as the failings of Generation Z (Ali). Additionally, she regularly publishes in the *National Post*, which has been documented as being a conservative media outlet that is read by older generations (Britneff). Her opinion pieces are in line with the *National Post*’s audience and are similar to the majority of the other articles written in this newspaper. To anyone who is not older, conservative, or in agreement with the author on the highly debated topics surrounding Palestine, it is evident that this author does not intend to persuade them.

To appeal to her intended audience, the author leans heavily into her use of the populism fallacy, which creates a strong sense of “us vs. them” between the supposedly wise older generations and the allegedly misinformed Generation Z. This not only reinforces the thinking that the author's target audience is an older generation but also alienates any members of the younger generations who may be reading. The author goes so far as to use “we” when describing her experiences, marking these as supposedly universal for those reading. This demonstrates that she has an intended audience and she is writing for no one else. This audience seems to find this stylistic choice compelling since one commenter wrote that this article was an “excellent analysis” and specifically states “we, the over-40 generation” when discussing their shared position (O'Malley). Another commenter said that this was a “beautifully written article that makes valid points” and even believes that this

article is too “generous” to Gen Z (Shigaev). These commenters and others who left similar comments see Kheiriddin as more rational and more believable because she is like them: overly critical of the younger generations.

Another logical fallacy that Kheiriddin uses throughout her piece is the appeal to false authority. First, she cites another National Post article by Sabrina Maddeaux called “Israel is the latest victim of TikTok's relentless propaganda” on matters of technology and algorithms (Maddeaux). This article offers no facts or information from experts to back up its claims, and Maddeaux generally has no understanding of how algorithms work. Instead of facts, this article also uses appeals to false authority, citing The Guardian and using federal politicians’ actions as proof. After citing the article by Maddeaux, Kheiriddin cites an interview-based poll of Canadians on their knowledge of the Holocaust (Schoen Consulting, “Canada”) that offers little to no information on how the data was collected or how participants were chosen, making the results less credible to an audience that cares about the methods of this poll. That being said, to an individual who is already in agreement with Kheiriddin, these citations would be a powerful ethos appeal. They would make the author more credible by reinforcing her point using an outside source. Kheiriddin’s third source was a similar poll done by the same company. However, this poll was not even conducted using Canadian participants. Instead, the company polled Americans on their knowledge of the Holocaust (Schoen Consulting, “Holocaust Knowledge”). Using American data to reinforce a point about Canadian youth and Canadian education systems fails to persuade since it uses the sweeping generalization fallacy by generalizing youth across North America despite their obvious differences. For example, education curriculums are vastly different between countries and even between provinces and states within the countries, meaning that generalizing data about knowledge of historical events across the border offers little persuasive power. Kheiriddin uses tactics, including logical fallacies, that she believes will work to persuade her target audience because she is not writing to persuade anyone who does not already agree with her.

In her article, Kheiriddin ignores the first four stasis questions (questions of fact, questions of definition, questions of cause and consequence, and questions of value). While this does not inherently negate the validity of her argument, it does lead to the conclusion that she is not writing to convince an undecided audience. A public debate on the topic is not able to successfully discuss the final stasis questions (questions of procedure, policy and proposal) because this would mean that they had found common ground on the first four stasis questions. That is to say, undecided or opposed audiences have not agreed on the question of values and morality; they haven’t even established the facts. For example, Kheiriddin says that TikTok is a democracy-destabilizing evil that was created to spread misinformation, leading to an entire generation of uninformed people who are forgetting

past atrocities. Within this idea, she both defines her version of the facts (the goal of TikTok is to spread misinformation for the benefit of autocratic governments) and assigns morality (the things that Gen Z is learning on TikTok are bad). From my experience across my university campus and beyond, there are people who would disagree that these are inherently true. Despite a lack of general agreement on the first few stasis questions, the author begins answering the fifth and final question, procedure and proposal, by proposing that Gen Z needs to have the tragedy of the Holocaust more commonly discussed in their pop culture. She is able to successfully skip to this stasis question because she has considered her audience and is aware that she is writing with their shared answers to the first four stasis questions in mind rather than to answer or discuss those questions for those who may not agree. This is a final piece of evidence that Kheriddin's intent was never to join the discussion in a productive way, and rather, her goal was to write to an audience already in agreement with her.

Since the author is overly reliant on the fact that the most common audience for her piece would already agree with her or at least share her same biases, she fails to create a persuasive argument. While I would agree that social media can create political echo chambers, this article is evidence of the fact that we see this phenomenon elsewhere as well, including in published news media. If someone writes only for an audience that is already in complete agreement with them, the persuasive writing techniques being used are not meant for discussion or for swaying audiences to believe in what they are saying. Rather, they are meant to allow the writer and their readers to fall deeper and deeper into the echo chamber they are already in.

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## Meme Based on Samael's Song "Slavocracy"

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### Introduction

Kim Jashua Rojas Dacutanan created this meme in WRS 206, for an assignment that called for students to react to a song through a visual representation. This student chose a song called "Slavocracy" by the Swedish band Samael. The band sings about the evils of a society that is ruled primarily through slavocracy, and Kim responded to this system with a meme that shows his desire to escape from the stressful life of exploitation into a forest to live free and in peace. The meme cleverly contrasts the song's depiction of a gray, mundane existence with lush and vibrant colours of nature.

*Keywords:* meme, slavocracy, Samael



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Song Reference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMzWysnhr5c>

## A Web of Thoughts, a Storm of Intent, a Tapestry so Resonant

Diego Martinez Ortiz<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

At the end of the semester in WRS 210 Intro to Professional Communication, students are asked to reflect on what they have learned in the course. Typically, students write their reflections in academic prose but are always invited to take different approaches to this assignment. Diego Martinez Ortiz, a graduate student in physics, wrote his reflection in verse, a surprising and delightful choice for a scientist. Diego reflects upon his journey as a communicator and the complexity he discovered in the process of professional communication.

*Keywords:* audience analysis, cohesion, metacognitive reflection, professional communication



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-1-

Written communication was a journey into an unexplored universe for me—a voyage into that which I did not know, a quest with a simple goal.

So foolish of me, blinded by the complexity of my native words of maths and their formulaic song. What else could compare? Simple I had thought, but once embarked on this journey, I had entered a realm so big and vast; a world of words, of means and meaning, a universe through a looking glass.

And yet, the deeper I go, the more I learn, the more I see, the more I feel, the more I realize how little I truly know, and how beautiful such a feeling is.

For the universe of communication is so vast and complex, so infinite and intricate; a web of thoughts, a storm of intent, a tapestry so resonant in its beauty and yet unpretentious.

-2-

I had started on this journey and I could go back no longer, so learning was all that I had.

With this in mind, taught I was, new words, techniques, and phrases; to the strength of a sentence I had been introduced.

With these new concepts, my rhetoric grew, emboldened by the precision I now knew.

With each step and breath, I learned of their power, and my hunger for it grew. With these new ingredients, I desired to cook, to further my understanding of the next step I took: cohesion, a new goal.

And I partook, in this technique, to reach the peak, I had to employ: cohesion. With all my strength bestowed; a gap in my writing I had closed.

So happy I was, to gain a new perspective, a new way of seeing, and a new way of commanding this rhetoric I now had.

-3-

As I travelled deeper into this realm, a communication strategy I undertook; in a group of six, I stood.

So learning I did, learning was all I had, to find new tools that I could use, and difficult this was, for this was new to me.

However, with persistence by my hand, I did not need to look far, for analysis; a now old friend, would help me find this end, this required need: a communication analysis, I did.

I considered the purpose at hand, what message must be said, and why must it be read. The audience! There, the secret it laid, the audience I attended with care, the right information was unlocked, the benefits laid bare.

Soon, with these new tools, the audience's objections were now found, but a lot of work was still abound. To complete this tapestry in a group of six we were arranged, the solution now, but a simple voice in six.

Thus in the hexagram we made, with this new analysis, the audience, again laid bare, their interests I learned, their needs, and their despair; to speak their language, and use their tone.

And soon I had learned, their concept, their intent, and with their voice I too spoke and wrote.

-4-

The storm of intent, as I previously said, was soon to arrive for this group project to withstand.

Group work is a complex art, a cognitive cacophony, a tumultuous sea of bright personalities. And in this sea's depths, there are dangers in the dark, so we must embark.

So dangerous this was, for if brought so close, it could reach that critical point and so be lost at the bottom of its depths. But worried I was not, for learning I had done.

It was clear to me that in a group of six, a leader, I must be; in this universe so vast, naive was my intent, but of the six my experience had outstretched; I possessed an edge.

However, I was not alone, for alternating was this role, and thus it was with a peer by my side we led and steered the team aright. Tasks were broken; I'd designate each role and assign those who were key to take control.

They took the lead, prevented issues in their sphere, and with the clarity of a gentle wind, problems had disappeared.

-5-

Communication is a journey, a voyage into the unknown, a quest with a deceptively simple course, a universe of thoughts unknown.

Communication is not just about what we say but how we say it; the tone, the context, the audience, the moment, and the limits of its reach.

To lose our way on this journey is to be misunderstood, to fail to convey the essence, to miss the entry. Yet to be fully lost enables us to understand, to learn to convey, in essence, it is to enter the unknown world.

And yet, how wondrous it is to start to understand, to succeed in such a task; when my words touch another's heart and to be truly able to convey its art.

For in that moment, I have connected, I have bridged the gap between my world and theirs, between the writer and the reader's lap.

Here and now I reached but this end, but worry not, for me, this is just a simple stop. I may yet discover what lies beyond, perhaps something I can own; a fragment of most brilliant light, I may yet be able to shine ever so bright.

## Ink and Resistance

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Writing across the University of Alberta, 2024<sup>2</sup>  
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### Introduction

Ayah Altahouni's piece explores the role of writing for communities in exile. She imagines a fictional conversation between an exiled Palestinian student and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Set in Paris in 1988, this text examines how writers and poets can preserve cultures and identities facing diaspora and war. This piece was written in WRS 101 for an assignment that asked students to imagine a conversation with a famous writer.

*Keywords:* exile, Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine, writing as resistance



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May 16, 1988 | Place de la Concorde

Diana walked through the square with her pastry in hand looking for a place to take a seat. *It's a beautiful day*, she thought. The rain had finally stopped, and there was some sun. The smell of rain still lingered in the air, but at least it was accompanied by that of blooming flowers.

She decided to enjoy this nice weather, despite the continuous rejections she received from her supposed friends to join her. Their attitude towards her shifted with recent events. She felt alone and targeted.

She had sent letters to her mother, hoping to hear what she had to say on the Intifada. Her mother told her not to take the media seriously, but Diana was afraid she already had. The letters were very vague. *Focus on your studies*, her mother insisted.

She sighed and took a seat beside an old man writing in what looked like a journal. As she was sitting down, she couldn't help but notice it was Arabic.

"Oh! Bitkalem Arabi?" *You speak Arabic?*

He looked up at her and raised his eyebrow.

"Sorry Amo. I meant Asalam wa Alaikum, may I sit here?"

"Wa alaikum asalam. Yes, you can sit here, and yes, ana bitkalem arabi." He smiled at her and moved to make some space for her.

"What's your name? Sho ismik?" The man asked.

"My name is Diana, and I'm a university student at Sorbonne Université." She was so happy to meet someone who could speak her mother tongue. "I rarely meet people here who speak Arabic that I can understand; usually I meet people from the Maghreb and their Arabic is different, but you sound familiar?"

"Because we are both Palestinian, my dear. I'm Mahmoud Darwish. What do you study at Sorbonne?"

"Mahmoud Darwish! What an honour! I'm a political science student, and I'm minoring in writing studies as well."

"Ouh, a political student at such a political time, good for you, my dear! But I see you recognize who I am?"

"Yes! Ya Allah, what an honour! I can't believe I am meeting you! I've read your poems, and back in London me and my cousins would sing *I Long For My Mother's Bread*. My

mother would read your poems and tell me to keep hoping to return., I never imagined this day would come when I would be sitting beside such a genius! A big part of my appreciation for poetry came from you!”

Mahmoud Darwish laughed. He was always glad to meet such enthusiastic youth because they held a light in them that reminded him of the light he once felt when he was Diana’s age.

“You need to tell me everything, Amo Mahmoud! Oh, I wish I brought a pen with me. Then I could write down everything you say!”

“You say London, my dear. Were you born there or in the *bilad*?”

“No, I was born in Jordan, not in Palestine. I’ve never been there. My parents were refugees back in 1960. They fled from our village to Jordan but had to leave in 1967 when the big war happened. I moved to London when I was 4. I have an older brother who stayed behind and joined the Jordanian Forces, but he died.”

Diana didn’t tell anyone about her brother. But she knew she could tell Amo Mahmoud. He wrote about their struggle, after all. He knew the cost of resistance, more than anyone could ever understand.

“I see. Glory to our martyrs.”

Diana nodded. “Amo Mahmoud, do you know anything about the Intifada?” It was her chance to hear the opinion she needed.

“Hmm...this is what I think, my dear. The Intifada is a backlash against laziness and reliance upon the leadership. A backlash against a long slumber. What the television is showing is true, my dear. There is a lot of violence, but when the people took matters into their own hands, it began as a children’s game, with a simple and symbolic weapon, and when they saw it on television—the first time television did anything positive—it urged them on and it became a way of life. They started a job that can’t simply end.”

“Wow! You’re right. But seeing them and hearing all the talk, I feel like I have to hide here. I know what they are doing is what has long been needed, but I’m so sick of the media calling them *terrorists*.”

A heavy silence hung in the air.

“You know, Amo, I feel useless. I feel like a traitor. I know it wasn’t my choice to leave our homeland, but I’m here enjoying my life while our people are there suffering under occupation. I don’t know what to do. I look up to you and your work in giving our people a

voice and writing about our collective identity. I want to do the same because maybe it will make me feel like I am doing something instead of nothing. What do you think? I can't fight anyone, and we both know we aren't allowed back. We are exiles."

"You know, my dear, I love how many Palestinians see my writing as a call for hope and resilience. But if I am to be honest, I never intended it to be. I write because it helps me manage our status as exiles. It allows me to bridge my journey between cultures, people, cities, and languages."

"What do you mean, as a bridge?"

"Well, I am from Al Birwa. It was destroyed. Currently, I am in Paris. But I was in Moscow and Lebanon, then Egypt. I was a communist! I mean, I was never a stationary person. What do you think constant moving around does to a person? For my sanity, I decided to write. Find connections, and make meaning of all the places I've been. Who am I in all of these places? This is important. You're a student, you're from London, you are in Paris as well. But you're still Palestinian. What does this mean to you?"

We've been under occupation for so long that the modern Palestinian identity isn't easily separated by our status as exiles. It's something to be embraced at this point, and to form our mind around. I don't say we should accept ourselves as exiles, but our distance allows us to observe ourselves and our relationship to our situation.

If you want to contribute to our story, then I urge you to start by observing yourself. Who are you, and ask yourself why? Then, answer these questions in your writing in whatever form it takes. Poetry formed the medium to answer my questions. You need to find your own. We can't all join the active resistance, but we can amplify the voices of our struggle and educate the masses either through concrete facts or through emotional gravitas.

We aren't stateless, my dear. We need to affirm this fact, in the way civilizations always have, through records. Creative folk like you and I need to make sure we write our history, our present, and our future. The day we stop is the day of our surrender. Your village was destroyed as was mine. But are we gone? Are we silent? No! So we write, my dear."

Diana was perplexed. She nodded and looked out into the square, observing all the different lives present, spending the day in the sunshine like she planned to do herself.

"Amo, what are you writing in your notebook? Can I see?"

Mohamed Darwish nodded and handed her his journal.

## Transforming Views on Rhetorical Grammar

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Writing across the University of Alberta, 2024<sup>2</sup>  
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### Introduction

Yingdi Alexandra Ma wrote this paper for WRS 206. In this particular class, students were able to choose their own genre and topic for a final project. Alexandra chose to write a change-in-thinking type of story, in which she analyzed how she used to understand and think about grammar and how the course contributed to her change in thinking about grammar not only as a set of rules but also as a system of communication.

*Keywords:* communication, grammar, rhetoric, rhetorical grammar, sentence fragments



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My perspectives on rhetorical grammar changed during this course. I realized that rhetorical grammar is not just a set of rules to follow, but it is more than that. I actually felt the power of grammar, and how rhetorical grammar can construct the English language in a way that is clear and engaging to the audience. I also learned that grammar doesn't have to be as strict as I thought. The class activities and readings made me realize rhetorical grammar is the key to unlocking clearly written work. In this essay, I will tell the story of how our course activities changed my way of perceiving rhetorical grammar through the careful use of pronouns, avoiding empty modifiers, and using sentence fragments as embellishments that enhance humour.

In Exercise A, all the sentences started with “it” or “this.” By revising the beginning of each sentence and connecting them into a coherent paragraph, I actually saw and felt the transformative power of rhetorical grammar in clarifying sentences. Here is an example from the activity we did in class: “It seems academically respectable because it makes the study of English similar to that of Latin—for centuries the staple of English education.” In this activity, I observed that changing “it” to “The English language” made the sentence clearer. This showed me how meaning is affected just by making appropriate word choices.

Exercise A shifted my perspective on the strategic use of pronouns. Before doing this exercise, I never realized how vague “it” and “this” can be. I realized using “it” and “this” in the start of a sentence can cause confusion, just like if I say to my friend, “Give me this” without pointing what I want them to give me. Using Exercise A as an example, the transformation of sentences from starting with vague references like ‘it’ and ‘this’ to beginning with concrete subjects such as ‘The English language’ significantly enhanced clarity. This exercise made me realize that pronouns, when used thoughtfully, can dramatically alter the clarity and impact of our writing.

Exercise B was about reducing redundancy in a sentence. Here is an example: “Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.” By reading this sentence a few times, I realized unnecessary words could be removed without altering the meaning. Eliminating the words “actually,” “certain,” “basically,” and “any particular” enhances the clarity and concision of the sentence. By removing these words, the revised sentence, “Productivity depends on factors that involve psychology more than technology,” becomes clearer for the reader to understand, reducing repetition and enhancing the directness of the content. This exercise changed my view of empty modifiers. Before this exercise, I never realized the difference between empty modifiers in speaking and writing. In speaking, we use empty modifiers because they add rhythm to the conversation, along with body language and eye contact,

which convey additional meaning. However, in writing, these modifiers can dilute the message and reduce clarity, as the written word lacks the context of nonverbal cues of face-to-face interaction. Recognizing this difference has taught me to be more aware of using empty modifiers in my writing. Now, when I write, I see if I can make the sentences more concise by deleting additional words without changing the meaning.

In Exercise C, we focused on clauses and sentence types, which made me realize the power of sentence fragments and their potential to embellish meaning and tone. Here is one example from Hargreaves (an in-class handout): “Due to the requirement for constant nutritional supplementation equal to or greater than my current metabolic expenditure and the fact that I do not currently possess neither liquid nor solid forms of replacement media in my cubicle of employment, I am immediately forced to transport my physical entity to my place of residence using a vehicle powered with an internal combustion engine.” This sentence demonstrates a deliberately overcomplicated way of saying, “I am hungry, so I need to drive home and grab lunch.” However, the art of utilizing embellishments is where the humour is; therefore, we don’t have to reduce anything in the sentence because the originality of the embellishments contains the humour. Another example demonstrated by my instructor showed the powerful impact sentence fragments can have when used appropriately. My instructor effectively used sentence fragments to describe an endless journey: “[A fall] from heaven can feel like a month, a year, a trip that never ends, never slows down, never stops” (Chilewska, 2017). The repetition shows that although the sentence structure may deviate from prescriptive grammar, in rhetorical grammar, describing the length of the journey through three consecutive fragments emphasizes its continuity. This allows readers to truly feel the distance from heaven through the deliberate use of fragments.

The exercise on clauses and sentence types made me realize that the use of embellishments and sentence fragments illustrate deviations from prescriptive grammar, and this has the potential to enrich the text, adding humour or deepening sensational feelings for the readers. For instance, Hargreaves’ intentionally convoluted sentences added humour through this over-elaboration. Similarly, my instructor’s use of repetitive fragments in describing the feeling of eternity allows readers to experience the authentic sensation of endlessness. These two examples made me think about the potential of rhetorical grammar to add texture to writing when used in appropriate settings. While rhetorical grammar can be playfully manipulated to enhance storytelling and create humour, I also realized such creativity is context-dependent. In formal settings, such as scientific reports, clarity and objectivity are paramount, which means adherence to prescriptive grammar rules comes first. However, in more personal or creative contexts, utilizing rhetorical grammar, such as the use of fragments and embellishments, can add a unique voice to the writing. After

completing the clauses- and sentences- types exercise, I realized that knowing the context and having a balance between formality and creativity in language usage is crucial.

Laura Micciche's "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar" is a reading that appeals to me. Micciche argues in her piece that the traditional views of grammar as a set of rules for correct writing can alienate and stigmatize students, especially those labelled as "poor writers" under prescriptive grammar (720). Instead, Micciche advocates for teaching grammar as a rhetorical tool. Micciche also thinks that teaching grammar in the educational process should be about emphasizing its role in crafting effective communication. Micciche addresses the separation of grammar instruction from the teaching of writing in academic discourse, arguing that this division is unhelpful and outdated. She suggests that integrating rhetorical grammar into writing education can help students become more effective in communication and critical thinking. "Rhetorical grammar instruction, I argue here, is just as central to composition's driving commitment to teach critical thinking [...] as is reading rhetorically and understanding the significance of cultural difference" (Micciche 717).

Reflecting on the rhetorical grammar exercises in this class, I see how Micciche's perspectives apply in practice. From addressing the vagueness of pronouns to reducing redundancy in sentences to embracing the power of sentence fragments and embellishments under appropriate situations, I have experienced firsthand how rhetorical grammar works under different situations. The exercises conducted in class brought Micciche's perspectives into action by challenging the traditional boundaries of prescriptive grammar. I learned about the careful use of pronouns, the importance of cutting out unnecessary fillers, the strategic addition of embellishments when necessary, and the contextual use of sentence fragments, all of which have made my writing more engaging and expressive. Micciche's piece influenced how I view rhetorical grammar. Her argument for a more integrated method of teaching grammar, not as a series of rules but as a tool for effective communication, resonates with my own experiences.

To conclude, from our classroom activities and Micciche's enlightening perspective, I've journeyed from seeing grammar as a set of strict rules to recognizing it as a powerful tool for effective communication. This transition fundamentally changed how I approach writing. By engaging with pronouns more thoughtfully, minimizing redundant phrases to have clearer sentences, as well as adding fragments and embellishments when necessary, I've discovered the capacity of rhetorical grammar to convey ideas more effectively and engagingly. These changes in my writing practices reflect a broader shift in my understanding: grammar is not a barrier but a bridge to clearer writing. As I move forward, I'm equipped not only with a deeper appreciation of rhetorical grammar of the English

language but also with a renewed confidence in my ability to manipulate its structures to enrich my writing.

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## Alleviating the Weight of the Mind

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Writing across the University of Alberta, 2024<sup>2</sup>  
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### Introduction

Written for WRS 101, the following piece is a narrative description of an experience with writing, presented as a spoken audio and transcript. Exploring the unique effect of journaling on an unsuspecting individual shows how doubt can be overshadowed by relieving feelings without complex intervention. Beginning with a quiet moment alone, listing the many thoughts crowding one's brain leads to the discovery of how stressful thoughts can be displaced, leading to a feeling of weightlifting off one's shoulders, opening space to welcome positive, mindless perspectives of the day. Surprise and happy confusion describe the individual's emotions as they work through the activity, rifling through incoming thoughts and dispensing those that preceded them.

*Keywords:* anxiety, calm, journaling, narrative, writing for personal development



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A quiet moment in my day prompted me to pick up a book I had received as a gift and had never opened. It wasn't a fictional book that I normally would indulge myself in right away or some self-help solve-your-problems type of book. The cover read "52 Lists for Calm". It was one of those wellness journal-type things, full of prompts and questions I should probably be asking myself but never do.

I always wanted to get into journaling but never found myself able to set aside the time for it. I felt an obligation to at least try it out; the book was a gift, after all, and if it sat unopened on my bookshelf for the rest of the year, *c'est la vie*.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, which was freshly made, in an attempt to do everything possible to procrastinate this endeavour. The book was closed in my lap; my favourite pen was in my hand, waiting for me to take the cap off. I often found journaling to be more stressful than relaxing. Was I getting all my points across in my writing? Did I miss something significant from the day or something I felt so strongly about that was now further from my mind? My brain always ran faster than my hand could write, leaving me to get frustrated and turn the encounter into something extremely unenjoyable rather than the relieving experience I had been told by so many it would be. I took a deep breath to try and rid these thoughts from my brain, the anticipatory dislike already tainting the activity.

I read the enlarged and bolded sentence at the top of the page, "List everything you are thinking about *right now*," the *right now* italicized for emphasis. It invoked a feeling of overwhelm within me; there were so many things on my mind in that moment that I couldn't organize them enough to put them on the page.

Then, I forced my mind to slow down like slamming brakes on a trailer and really asked myself: what is on my mind right now? So many times, I'm stressed about something, but I can't pinpoint what it is, even if someone were to ask me.

I slowed my brain down and jotted exactly what I was thinking about onto the page. I have an assignment due at the end of the week, but tomorrow is my only free day, so I have to get it done then. I forgot to empty the dishwasher. Should I book a nail appointment now or wait until the weekend? I began to separate each thought and catch it like a butterfly in a net as it zoomed past my head, writing it on the page before I could think too hard about it.

Too many times, I have found myself caught up in making my first sentence perfect so that I end up writing nothing at all in fear that it isn't good enough. Now, with the time and space sitting before me, I looked past my mind, moving faster than my hand and allowed the thoughts to come out, rushed and imperfect. They were just thoughts, after all, for me to experience and for no one else to have an opinion on.

When I had emptied my thoughts onto the paper, I felt physically lighter. It boggled me that such a simple exercise as writing down in point form what I was thinking about could relieve me of so much stress. It wasn't as if I had solved anything on the list; I just transferred it somewhere else so my mind had more room. I could sense that my face probably looked as if I had seen something no one wanted to see. I was genuinely confused about how I felt such a physical reaction to something that I felt was almost going to be a chore.

At the bottom of the page was an additional clarifying exercise: cross off anything you can't do in this exact moment and choose one thing you are capable of doing and want to do. I found myself scratching points off one-by-one, until barely any were left untouched. Things I was so worried about but couldn't do anything about at that moment, taking up space, taking up energy, and taking away from solace.

I was allowing these things to maximize my anxiety when they were completely out of my control. By slowing my mind and separating my thoughts, I was able to decipher what was actually causing me stress. Simply sitting on my bed, I felt as if I made less of a dent in the mattress, the top of my head was closer to the ceiling, my face and muscles weren't as tense, and I was almost able to float. The simple acknowledgement of the things that were happening and making me nervous or anxious was all my body needed to release those feelings.

It was the action of physically writing these thoughts down that allowed my brain to work slow enough to understand and acknowledge them, something that didn't happen when I tried to organize them in my brain alone. Something I found to be such a chore ended up being so relieving and helpful; I wanted to bathe in that feeling for the rest of the day.

I closed the book, capped my pen, and stuck them away next to my bed. A small smile sat effortlessly on my face as I glanced out the window and noticed the bright sky and glowing sun for the first time that day; how refreshing it was to allow in a thought that required no exercise.

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# Transitioning from Letter Grades to Pass/Fail System: The Effect on Post-secondary Students and their Academic Performances

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## Introduction

This research paper, written by Navdeep Badhan in WRS 101, compares two grading systems in a post-secondary institution. Written from a student's perspective, the paper engages in an informative and interesting way with traditional and non-traditional ways of assessing student work, and it argues that one system is more favourable than the other in an academic setting.

*Keywords:* academic performance, grading, letter grades, pass/fail system, post-secondary education



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Since the 1960s, there have been strong demands to address growing concerns about how effectively student academic performances are graded in post-secondary education, such as medical and dental school.<sup>3</sup> In this context, academic performance, although an extremely difficult term to objectively define and control, commonly refers to a student's ability to retain and apply knowledge needed for a future career.<sup>8</sup> While institutions acknowledge universally that the design of the assessment process affects how students learn and understand the curriculum,<sup>4</sup> many have questioned the validity of the current grading system and propose that a change is needed. Specifically, two main types of grading systems have emerged and will be discussed in this report.

The first type of assessment is the traditional letter grade system, well-known for having tiers A, B, C, D, and F. Students are assigned a specific letter grade based on their overall percentage, and advocates argue this method encourages students to maintain the strongest motivations and study habits for success.<sup>6</sup> The second type of grading system is the non-traditional pass/fail system, where students are either assigned a passing mark or a failing grade, depending on whether they reach above or below the cutoff set by the institution. This idea places a strong emphasis on collaboration so that students learn and apply concepts in an interdisciplinary environment.<sup>7</sup> The contrast between these two systems in grading students' performance poses an essential question: which grading method provides the best opportunity for strong, academic performance in post-secondary education?

### *The Letter Grading System and Defending the Status Quo*

The research conducted on letter grades dates back to 1991, but Main and Ost discovered in 2014 that the letter grading system positively impacts the student's study habits within a course, leading to students achieving higher grades and stronger academic performance.<sup>5</sup> This idea is supported by the cross-examination of letter grade data and course registration lists from university catalogues, where it was found that a letter of C was enough to exclude students from earning awards. Given that the letter grade is used in determining eligibility for scholarships and other prizes, it serves as a strong motivation to put more effort into preparing for exams and scoring high marks in order to secure scholarships and alleviate potential financial barriers.<sup>2,4</sup>

Moreover, some researchers found that letter grades provide the best possible criteria for assessment in an objective manner.<sup>3</sup> According to a study by Jham et al., standardized exams and letter grade conversion tables allow for a fair comparison among students and provide important reference points to see where improvement is needed for students.<sup>3</sup> Without letter grades, it is hard to know exactly where the student's strengths and weaknesses lie, and it might even create false impressions that a student has achieved a

thorough understanding of the content. Therefore, the letter grading system aims to examine how well a student has performed academically in a comprehensive manner.

Despite its supporting arguments, many critics claim that this system has created high exam failure rates and low performances due to anxiety and poor well-being.<sup>1,9</sup> Also, Chamberlin et al. refute that instead of increasing study motivation, students have given interviews stating that low letter grades cause feelings of incompetence and pressure to pursue a course load that only serves as a GPA booster, even if the learning outcomes are not compatible with the students' interests.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Smith and Piemonte argue that extrinsic factors like letter grades unfairly suppress the intrinsic motivation achieved from the pass/fail system.<sup>8</sup> This is a major drawback because intrinsic motivation serves to represent an individual's inherent desire to pursue an activity not for the sake of materialistic rewards but for personal growth and satisfaction. Research has argued that intrinsic motivation promotes higher academic performance and long-term retention since students have some form of control over learning that genuinely interests them.<sup>9</sup> This is why the advocates of the pass/fail system support grading criteria that give students a chance to think critically about what they are learning through intrinsic motivation.

### *The Pass/Fail System and Introducing Change*

The main reason why the pass/fail system was introduced was to provide students with different criteria for assessing their clinical and practical knowledge.<sup>3,6</sup> Many post-secondary programs, such as medicine and dentistry, require students to be experts in communication and trustworthiness with patients, and the pass/fail system helps provide a complete, longitudinal academic analysis through extensive and detailed feedback.<sup>7</sup> This means that the students are evaluated based on long-term development and changes in their academic performances beyond just a single assessment or moment in time.

Furthermore, the stress and burnout students feel without a pass/fail system has led to increased errors, decreased empathy to others during interactions, and a decline in satisfaction, for both premedical and current medical post-secondary students.<sup>10</sup> To reduce post-secondary education dropout rates, there is a strong appeal to adopt this new system because it promotes student satisfaction and long-term retention of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Academic performance is found to improve if there is a system in place that encourages the application of knowledge rather than pure memorization or cramming for examinations, and this is why supporters argue the pass/fail system is the ideal criteria for grading.

However, many experts oppose this new system as it is impossible to change society's and employers' current norms about using grades as a distinguishing factor

between average and exceptional students.<sup>6</sup> As such, even the slightest shift from effective study habits can affect the likelihood of a student's acceptance into a career. After all, the implementation of a pass/fail system is not feasible and practical at all due to the already inherent competition that exists in universities and in the job market.<sup>6</sup> Critics fear that if the system did change to pass/fail grading, students would no longer push to differentiate themselves from others, and their chances of residency, career success, and employer satisfaction would be negatively affected.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, some scholars argue that the pass/fail system lacks feasibility. A majority of instructors support the pass/fail system in post-secondary institutions; however, around 61% of them are not given sufficient information about the new system.<sup>6</sup> This explains that while faculty staff are ready to work in the new system, they are hesitant about changing their current teaching methods to incorporate more engaging discussions, interactive seminars, and practical exams, all of which are known to increase student academic performance.<sup>2</sup> As such, the pass/fail system faces challenges about ways to incentivize instructors and provide them with an obligation to adapt to the changing circumstances.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, the pass/fail system is the best at supporting student academic performances. Although the traditional grading system does present commendable evidence that letter grades serve as strong motivators for success and provide an objective standard for differentiation, it fails to account for the importance of considering an inclusive, holistic process in today's world to measure academic performance.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it must be substituted with a new system that goes beyond a single letter or number. Letter grades have also been linked to increased burnout rates that have been taking a heavy toll on students and academic performance, leading to depression, dropouts, and even suicides.<sup>10</sup> This is evidence that instead of providing motivation, letter grades are mostly causing undue fear and panic among students.

Therefore, the ideal pass/fail grading system would be one that includes three key points. First, letter grades and consequential standardized ranking would be abolished in order to eliminate areas where students are distracted from pursuing self-reflection.<sup>1</sup> The main criticism might be that students would only attempt to pass and not try their level best. However, this transitions to the second main aspect, which is that there must also be a high passing standard carefully set by the institution.<sup>3,6,7</sup> The purpose is to maximize the academic performances of the students by motivating them for intrinsic academic success and encouraging them to give their best effort without fear of major punishment like decreased letter grades. The third and final component is to grant faculty and university staff members training opportunities to adapt to the new grading system and incorporate new teaching

methods.<sup>6</sup> Teachers would be encouraged to review the overall performance of students beyond just academics and achieve a greater sense of understanding of the students' talents and characteristics. This serves to address the feasibility aspect of a pass/fail system, where critics argue that it is impossible to change the current trend of using letter grades as performance differentiators.<sup>6</sup> However, with the right educational resources and awareness, cooperation among university staff members is vital to bringing change to the way students are assessed, thereby promoting stronger academic performance by students. As such, all three of these elements in the pass/fail system encourage students to strengthen their academic performance and give them a chance to holistically reflect on themselves as future professionals.<sup>4</sup>

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## Peer Tutoring Beyond Borders

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### Introduction

In WRS 301, Zuairia Shahrin had an a-ha moment while learning about cognitive biases. This moment resulted in Zuairia's now long-standing interest in writing across cultures, diversity, and equity, especially in terms of how cognitive biases might affect peer tutoring. Her paper addresses the struggles EAL (English as Additional Language) writers face and brings attention to peer-tutoring practices that emphasize inclusive, diverse and bias-free tutoring practices.

*Keywords:* cognitive bias, EAL writers, peer-tutoring, writing misconceptions



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## *Beyond Phrases and Borders: An Ink-Woven Community*

*With each recipe handed down through kin,  
Somewhere in the world, new family traditions begin.  
Long-distance friends send texts so vast,  
They connect hearts; a friendship that will last.  
Each postcard that travels through oceans,  
Reveals an international student's penned emotions.  
Wrapped in ink, our sentiments are sown,  
Writing is a community where no one is alone.*

*“Unique, intelligent, brave, and prudent”  
These are the words I use to describe an international student.  
As you navigate through these new corridors of uncertainty,  
Try to discard the comments that may be dainty.  
You don't have to be fluent in phrases to be fluent in ideas,  
Because bias creeps into the academic world too, it appears.  
Trust your writing, even when you think your English may stumble,  
And look around you; your peer tutors won't let you fumble.  
For us, accents and languages are not a divide,  
ESL students will always have us as a mentor and a guide.  
We believe in your ideas – they are not frail,  
In this space, I assure you, each novice hand will prevail.  
Wrapped in ink, our sentiments are sown,  
Writing is a community where you will never be alone.*



## *Peer Tutoring Beyond Borders: A Foreword*

Writing is a powerful tool that helps us in countless ways. From making grocery lists to publishing academic journals, it is a major part of our lives. It can foster connections among people, whether that is through simple text messages or longer letters. This united aspect of writing embraces a diverse array of people, including both domestic English speakers and EAL (English as an additional language) speakers, among others. Specifically in academia, writing serves to articulate ideas. However, some students exhibit disinterest when tasked with writing assignments, and in this final project, I aim to explore why this may be the case.

I believe some students develop an aversion to writing due to the grading system used in North American higher education institutions. Many courses with writing components prioritize grammatical fluency and correctness, potentially overshadowing the importance of ideas and concepts. EAL students may find this grading approach unfavourable as it diverts their attention away from the substantive development of ideas and arguments. To an extent, the restrictive nature of education systems contributes to this issue, which has led me to consider whether there is a way to alter this notion and inform EAL students about the broader benefits of writing beyond academic perimeters.

This semester, in my Writing Centre Practice class, a lecture about addressing biases prompted me to evaluate if EAL students were being tutored fairly at my university. I realized that I, along with other new peer tutors, might be unintentionally harbouring biases that could have a detrimental impact on a tutee's learning experience. As guides and mentors, peer tutors should work collaboratively with tutees to enrich their learning experience, without letting cognitive biases interfere. In this project, I aim to encourage and foster the creation of such non-judgmental, inclusive, and collaborative sessions. Following this foreword, I discuss an interview with an instructor in the English and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta, which includes common misconceptions and biases surrounding EAL students.<sup>3</sup> The final segment is a diary entry through which I hope to encourage my fellow peer tutors to address their biases and create a healthy learning environment to support as many tutees as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> The person I interviewed and refer to throughout this project is an instructor in the English and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta who wishes to remain anonymous. Text in quotation marks represent the instructor's words.



## *Navigating Cognitive Biases in EAL Peer Tutoring: An Interview with a University of Alberta Instructor*

During my interview with an instructor in the Writing and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta (my instructor for Writing Studies (WRS) 301), I learned about one of the most common misconceptions held by many educators and peer tutors. They often correlate poor writing skills to poor intelligence, which causes EAL students to be “dismissed as weak students when they are not,” my instructor maintained. Through her teaching practice, my instructor has encountered several EAL students who struggled with English but possessed “the most interesting and creative ideas.” Challenges arise from the difficult and time-consuming nature of acquiring a second or additional language, leaving EAL students feeling “stuck” in articulating their thoughts.” Tony Silva, in his journal article titled “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers,” supports this concept by appreciating students for “their own views and agendas” (2). I agree with Silva because every student can have great ideas, but the problem arises when educators and peer tutors focus on how flawlessly these ideas are written or presented rather than appreciating the ideas for their substance and intrinsic value.

My instructor also explained that across many disciplines, “all EAL students get marked on is the sheer number of mistakes they make,” which highlights an inherent bias within the education system. She argues that EAL students become prey to low grades due to the emphasis placed on the lower-order concerns of writing within grade-oriented curricula. I agree with my instructor’s words because curricula—to an extent, at least—propels EAL students to produce written work that conforms to North American standards. This influence leads to the overshadowing of their ideas and their not “[getting] a chance to shine” academically. In the video “Writing Across Borders” from Oregon State University, a student named Deema Al-Qaissi also shares their opinion on the same, expressing that professors penalize them for deviating from the rules and conventions of English (*Writing Across Borders* 13:18–14:14).

While grammatical rules and conventions are important, they do not establish the ultimate authority in writing. Having read various Bengali novels, poems, and plays written by the renowned Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, I know that writing transcends the confines of grammatical or structural correctness. Although many of Tagore’s works have been translated into English, they often lack the charm and quintessence found in the original Bengali versions; the authenticity is sacrificed to English semantics, grammatical intricacies, and structural regulations. I can imagine the same happening to EAL students, upon observing peer tutoring sessions at the University of Alberta Writing Services. The tutees encounter difficulties translating their ideas in a way that is understandable to the peer tutor. Also, the session is rendered ineffective if the peer tutor finds themselves

compelled to speculate on the tutee's ideas based on vague translations or online tools. Therefore, in my opinion, grammatical and structural rules are in place to bring organization to writing because they enhance readability and not because they determine the quality of the content. When we let conventions overshadow the greater essence of writing, we risk losing ideas to translation and language norms.

The North American culture, educational system, and curricula are very different from that of other nations. The system, as well as its educators and peer tutors, may not consistently acknowledge the cultural differences that can impact each tutee differently. For instance, the argumentation techniques prevalent in Asian countries like Japan strikingly differ from their North American counterparts, where the latter is characterized by a more direct, concise, and focused approach from the beginning (*Writing Across Borders* 11:05-11:56). In Japanese writing, it is the reader's responsibility to comprehend and interpret the writer's message, in contrast to English writing where clarity and explicitness are emphasized (*Writing Across Borders* 11:05-11:56).

Additionally, collectivist cultures like China also hold differing perceptions about plagiarism compared to the standards in North America. These cultures prioritize the sharing of ideas and may not strictly adhere to the concept of "ownership of words or thoughts." This cultural difference can be problematic for new EAL students unfamiliar with the plagiarism regulations in North American institutions. My instructor rightly pointed out that "we don't live in a world where readers of English are open to different structural patterns of writing," which holds in many cases as students are penalized for something they did not naturally learn in the first place. Hence, as peer tutors, we cannot assume that they know these rules or any other regulations that are strongly followed in North American universities and should be prepared to inform and guide them if necessary.

Even in terms of thinking, according to my instructor, Chinese students are different. China's education system prioritizes rote memorization over critical thinking. When superficial, knowledge-based questions are asked, they can quickly recall the answers, having memorized the content so diligently; however, they stumble when sharing personal opinions or thoughts about the subject. This difference in thinking also ties in with the previously discussed bias, wherein poor writing skills are wrongly associated with poor intelligence. As elucidated by Silva, "rhetorical differences may be manifestations of [the students'] cultural backgrounds and not cognitive or educational deficiencies" (2). Silva's argument cannot be denied, because EAL students come from different cultural backgrounds, and I believe that as peer tutors, we should appreciate their unique perspectives that have been shaped by their thoughts, ideas, and culture. Their thoughts may bring out breakthroughs in writing assignments, which can be used to their advantage.

Essentially, EAL students may very well think and write in completely different ways from North American students, but “different” does not mean “incorrect.” New peer tutors need to understand this distinction as it clarifies that a difference in thought or writing style does not correlate to poor intelligence.



*Today, in the Pages of Zuairia’s Journal... How do I Debias Myself?*

Dear Diary,

*Childhood memories flood my thoughts today, asking me to reflect on peer tutoring. As I look back, I appreciate the unique circumstances of my upbringing: having to learn two languages—English and Bengali—simultaneously. So, I have always believed that I speak two first languages, regardless of my fluency in them. I am a Bangladeshi by nationality, but not by heart... perhaps due to the nomadic life I used to lead as a child? Culture considerably influences identity, but, if you ask me, I still don’t know who or what I am.*

*My parents dedicated themselves to ensuring that I had equal exposure to both languages, never favouring one over the other. This came with having a merchant navy engineering officer as a father, whose job required me to travel regularly and live in the UK and other European countries. On the other hand, my mother, a lawyer, almost treated me like one of her court cases and was very strict in ensuring that I spoke both languages well. After all, how else would I live in English-speaking countries if I didn’t know their language well? But somehow, despite hearing both languages equally, I was more inclined towards English. My mom still tells me how she was taken aback when I addressed her for the first time as “mum” instead of “ammu/ma.” Maybe “mum” is an easier word to pronounce, being monosyllabic... I don’t know! But I know that although she wasn’t necessarily disappointed, the Bengali mother in her yearned to be addressed traditionally. So, I often ask myself: does the choice of language matter if the feelings and thoughts are adequately expressed?*

*I attended several British international schools throughout my life and naturally became ingrained with the notion that grammatical fluency was the sole determinant of good writing. However, my perspective changed after enrolling in Writing Studies (WRS) 301 and speaking to my instructor. It became evident to me that my views had been heavily biased. Now as a peer tutor in training, I must address these biases so that I can approach each peer tutoring session with a fresh and unprejudiced perspective. If I let my biases interfere with the session, I will be defeating the whole purpose of peer tutoring, which according to Sanford is to guide tutees toward becoming more confident and independent writers (33).*

*I don’t want to be the kind of peer tutor who fixates on a tutee’s mistakes or over-emphasizes their weaknesses. That’s not who I am or who I want to be. Instead, I want to*

*encourage my tutees to not fear making mistakes (no matter what they are) and learn from them. Harris and Silva believe that “most readers will be interested in primarily what the writer has to say,” and since grammatical correctness is not as crucial as the larger concept, it becomes even more important to help tutees develop their ideas (3). I will follow their advice of “[distinguishing] between errors that interfere with the reader’s understanding of the text (global errors) and those that will not (local errors),” prioritizing the global errors (3). In doing so, I can encourage tutees to recognize the importance of their voice and ideas, which can’t be learned, rather than focusing on lower-order concerns, which can be learned. I think tutees need someone who can help them organize their thoughts and bring them to life... not someone who gives them yet another lecture on grammar and syntax!*

*On another note, hopefully, I will also be fostering an environment where tutees can view mistakes as learning opportunities and not be afraid of them.*

*I know that addressing my cognitive biases is not going to be easy, and it will be a harder task to ensure that these biases don’t interfere with the peer tutoring sessions. However, I plan on using small talk early in the semester to acquaint myself with my tutees and establish a rapport with them. My Writing Studies instructor mentioned that some tutors may find small talk uncomfortable; I know I shared that sentiment in the past. However, I now recognize its strategic value. By engaging in small talk, I hope to gain insights into the tutee’s cultural background, which will allow me to tailor sessions to their individual needs. This approach can also help me understand their preferred learning styles and potentially identify specific concerns, and visible or invisible disabilities, which will also help me incorporate resources that best support their requirements.*

*I think tutees require peer tutors who believe in their ideas and don’t discount them for being inappropriate or unrealistic; this is the kind of peer tutor I want to be. If peer tutors try to understand tutees as individuals, considering their cultural background, peer tutoring will become more inclusive. This collaboration will also help us guide our tutees to become more confident writers. Until then, I will be working towards becoming a non-judgmental peer tutor who encourages tutees to recognize their intellectual capabilities, regardless of their English proficiency, and also someone who emphasizes that they are valued members of a greater community that appreciates their art.*

*Signing off for now...!*

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