

USING THE JOURNAL AS A TEACHING TOOL

A WINTER FACULTY ACADEMY SESSION, DEC 14, 2011

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS SESSION

Increasing use of JOURNALS—in some form or version or another—in a range of W&L courses, particularly in Spring Term courses

A number of faculty asking about the use of journals: how to structure the assignment? How to grade the work? What weight to give this sort of work?

Also raises more philosophical questions about this kind of student work: is it objective? subjective? analytical? only responsive?

And how might this sort of assignment fit into one's larger curriculum? How can this assignment be used within a seminar, for example—can we share journal-writing with the class as a whole, or should it be confined to a context of “high safety”?

What are we trying to attain by assigning a journal? What objectives does it help us meet?

BEST PRACTICES: What are our colleagues doing with journals?



HOW I'VE USED JOURNALS IN MY SPRING TERM IN IRELAND COURSE (MARC CONNER)

1) A weekly “site reading” assignment:

While on one of our journeys, students choose a “site” of some sort that interests, puzzles, intrigues, or challenges them. They write a 2-3 page “site reading” of the site/object, approaching it in any interpretive manner they wish: description, argument, interrogation, dialogue, artwork, etc. The writing must offer an interpretive response, but this is widely construed. I then read and respond to the writing. Students write one of these per week, developing over the course of the four-week term a 10-12 page *ongoing interpretive journal of their Ireland experience*.

Evaluation: grade on a 10-point scale; read aloud in seminars; factor into overall course grade.

HOW I'VE USED JOURNALS IN MY SPRING TERM IN IRELAND COURSE (MARC CONNER)

2. A standard “journal” assignment: students keep a journal or diary of their travels, recording whatever interests them, moves them, excites them, occupies them. I recommend writing in this at least every other day. Many students report that this becomes their most cherished piece of writing from the trip.

Evaluation: I don't want to see it. Completely safe for them, but also . . . I don't know how to read, grade, evaluate, respond to these things.

THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL (JOHN LAMBETH)

The reflective journal is intended to be a space to make connections, your connections among the various complementary elements of the course. The object of the journal is not to think like me or to think like everyone else but to develop your own reflection. You will be commenting on each reading assignment, each site visit, each lecture and each discussion. It is difficult to give a precise length but, as a rule of thumb, a good journal entry should be three or four written pages.

Example from syllabus follows:



Reflective Journal

The reflective journal is intended to be a space to make connections, your connections among the various complementary elements of the course. The object of the journal is not to think like me or to think like everyone else but to develop your own reflection. You will be commenting on each reading assignment, each site visit, each lecture and each discussion. The journal is intended to feed the discussions in and outside of the classroom. Journal entries should summarize what you have seen, heard or read and they should end with thoughtful questions to bring to the next discussion. Over the four weeks of the course, as you gain an increasingly complex understanding of minorities and migration within Europe, your journal entries should be making connections among the various elements that affect and are affected by minorities and migration in contemporary Europe.

During the first week I will make suggestions for ways to organize your writing for each of our activities and assignments. In subsequent weeks I will ask you for suggestions about questions to address in the journal entries. I will grade the journals at the end of each week. I will suggest specific ways that you can develop your own reflection each time I grade the journals and I will ask you to share your thoughts with the class.

The nature of this course is discovery and, whereas the readings will offer an interpretive framework, the site visits, the excursions and the visiting lecturers may suggest new ways of understanding and new questions to consider. Depending on issues that arise in our discussions, I will ask you to focus journal entries on certain connections or on certain problems.

It is difficult to give a precise length but, as a rule of thumb, a good journal entry should be three or four written pages.

Grading

Your journal entries will be evaluated based on three criteria:

Commitment, Ambition, and Engagement.

A grade:

Commitment: The writer turns in all journal entries. Entries may vary in length, but they regularly go on for enough time to reflect and accommodate extended thought.

Ambition: Journal entries regularly try to consider issues or pose questions which engage the writer but for which the writer may have no ready answer. The writer is willing to speculate and to try to make connections between this course and his or her experience. The writer is not afraid to address complex and even paradoxical and contradictory ideas.

Engagement: The writer is clearly using the journal entries to ‘push’ his or her understanding of the learning experience in general.

B grade:

Commitment: The writer turns in all but three or four journal entries. The entries often reflect and accommodate extended thought, but at times they seem merely to summarize or to comment on the topic in an unengaged way.

Ambition: Journal entries often try to speculate about issues and questions and to make connections between the course and the writer’s experience. But a number of entries discuss conclusions and/or summarize or respond in an unfocused way to the topic. The writer is also less comfortable with tension, dissonance, and paradox and tries to resolve or ‘iron out’ complexity.

Engagement: The writer sometimes uses journal entries to ‘push’ her or his understanding of the learning experience; a number of entries, however, seem formulaic or completed to fulfill the assignment.

C grade:

Commitment: The writer fails to turn in five or more journal entries

Ambition: The journal entries seem cursory, the result of coercion rather than interest. There is little or no effort to speculate, to reach for more than obvious conclusions, or to connect with the writer’s own experience.

Engagement: The writer rarely if ever uses journal entries to deepen, much less ‘push’ his or her understanding of the text or question in particular and of the travel experience in general.

THREE JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS I HAVE USED...

(DEBORAH MIRANDA)

1. Gleaning
2. Focused Rambling: “Concept” pages
3. In-class Daily 5-minute Journal Entries

Examples of each follow:



Deborah Miranda, English

THREE JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS I HAVE USED...

A. Gleaning.

This works for any course, with some adaptations. This example is from a memoir-writing course:

Instructions to students: Establish a journal-keeping strategy by the second day of class, and keep it up throughout (i.e., use a blank book, a loose-leaf 3 ring binder, a legal pad – a place you will use to record freewrites, reading notes, relevant class notes, in one journaling container). **Bring your journal to class each meeting.**

1. When reading from *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* [substitute any text], copy out sections that
 - a) specifically give advice to other memoir-writers from the authors, or
 - b) provide you with an insight, perhaps less directly, about how to write memoir. Be sure to briefly cite author and page #.
 - c) raise a question for you about your own writing

Pick the advice or insight from this list that really intrigues you. Write 50 words or so in which you discuss how you might try out this technique in your own writing – is there a specific topic it would help you crack open, or open wider than you've managed so far?

2. When reading from *Modern American Memoirs* or handouts of memoir excerpts, keep a list of great passages that inspire you with a **particular writing strategy**. For example:

- great character portraits, p. 45 – how does she describe Annie so well without resorting to pure list of physical attributes?
- flashback, 293 – use of white space plus the phrase, “I remember” to mark the chronological shift
- metaphor that really changes the tone, 22 – elevates the imagery instantly

For each entry, write a few words about what it is about this passage that works so well for you. Alternatively, you can also Xerox that passage, and simply paste it into your journal (still remember to cite page #), making comments all over the excerpt. Or, use a combination of the two ways of listing passages.

We'll use these journal-writings as ways to begin discussions in class, so be prepared to share your observations, passages (and page #), and questions – bring your journal to every class. You will be required to turn it in for credit at the end of the term. 10%.

B. Focused Rambling: “Concept” pages.

Literature class.

Instructions to students: As you read, keep a list of words, phrases, or concepts gleaned from your reading or other materials (videos, etc). These can be recurring culturally specific ideas or words (such as frequent references to *La Virgen*, Fan Mu Lan, or biblical references), or theoretical terms in an article (‘colonization’ or ‘patriarchy’) that aren't sure of in the context of our reading. Very briefly, look these words/phrases up on the internet, dictionary, or other source, to find at least a partial definition. From this daily list, choose one word or concept to focus on; each Tuesday, bring in one typed page of single-spaced writing (300-500 WORDS MAX – so make each word count) in which you explore it as fully as possible (see samples below). Yes--this means you have 'automatic' homework due each Tuesday, for which you must research before each class. You may use the internet, library, other readings, or class discussion, to help you develop this piece. Keep a loose-leaf notebook with each week's Concept Page. Be prepared to read your page in class, and possibly discuss it.

TWO EXAMPLES OF A CONCEPT PAGE

1. CONCEPT: Ghosts

Throughout Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, the characters obsessively describe their interactions with (and sightings of) ghosts. Still, the definition and purpose of a “ghost” remains unclear; are they good or bad? Do they represent some immaterial part of man or are they a completely alien form? Perhaps these manifestations symbolize the ultimate border crossing; to be trapped between life and death, reality and superstition, substance and nothingness? Are ghosts stripped of any and all identity and damned to a fate worse than that of the immigrants? Is ghost-ness what happens to immigrants who don't hang on to their culture?

Women seem more susceptible to these supernatural occurrences than men, perhaps as a result of their lack of authority and agency in Chinese society. One of the few to break gender-stereotypes, Brave Orchid, the narrator's mother, confronts a ghost haunting a room at her medical school. “I do not give in,’ she said. “There is no pain you can inflict that I cannot endure. You're wrong if you think I'm afraid of you. You're no mystery to me. I've heard of you Sitting Ghosts before... You have no power over a strong woman,” she shouts at it while she physically struggles against the suddenly corporeal being (70). Even in the heart of the *all-female* medical school, women struggle against oppressive authority-figures as this ghost pins Brave Orchid to the bed and robs her of her weapon, a knife.

It turns out that this surreal being gains strength and material presence from the fear of the women around it; but Brave Orchid's strength of language throughout this battle, shown by her *naming and taunting* of the figure, allows the mother to rally those around her to battle the ghost too. Maybe the ghost serves as a catalyst, demonstrating the ways in which women can use language to empower other females in the face of the unknown. (317 words)

2. CONCEPT: Telenovelas

“Telenovela” is a word that occurred in our reading this week. My dictionary simply describes it as “a Latin American soap opera usually in a miniseries format.” The term is important for our reading because telenovelas help form women’s beliefs about what their lives as women “should” be like. I viewed excerpts of a few on Youtube. They seem similar to soap operas in the United States, or even popular primetime relationship dramas. Obviously, people should not try to gain relationship advice from these programs. So why does Cisneros include Cleofilas’ love of telenovelas in “Woman Hollering Creek,” this story about a disastrous marriage?

I think that Cisneros uses telenovelas in the story as a symbol of how NOT to have a relationship. Cleofilas compares her husband to the romantic male characters from telenovelas. She says, “He is not very tall, no, and he doesn’t look like the men on the telenovelas. His face is scarred from acne. And he has a bit of a belly from all the beer he drinks. Well, he’s always been husky.” Still, despite his flaws, Cleofilas ends with this bitter promise: “this husband till kingdom come,” because having a man, ANY man, is crucial to her telenovela-based fantasy – he might not be perfect, but he is a necessary device for the role she sees women meant to play. In fact, because of her husband’s violence against her, Cleofilas imagines her life becoming like a telenovela, “the episodes got sadder and sadder ... and no happy ending in sight” (49) – so why resist?

The same pattern can be seen in the story “Barbie-Q,” when the very young girl narrator acts out what she imagines a romantic relationship to be: “Every time the same story...my Barbie’s boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? ... You dumbbell! he’s mine. Oh no he’s not you stinky!” This little girl has absorbed information about relationships between men and women from the adults and larger culture around her, no doubt including telenovelas and women raised on them. (339 words)

C. IN-CLASS DAILY 5-MINUTE JOURNAL

WRIT 100 students: this semester, I began to do informal journaling about halfway through the term as a way for students to collect their thoughts about discussion of Native American Literature. They had originally been assigned the task of writing out a question about the current reading, but that wasn’t working – it had become perfunctory and uninteresting for everyone.

I switched to this: at the beginning of each class day in WRIT 100, I provided 5 minutes for students to journal. I gave them various prompts, such as:

- write about what you consider the most significant/interesting /frustrating or confusing topic in EITHER the reading or in a writing technique (close reading, compare/contrast, motifs, personal essay, humor, etc) we are currently working on.
- Look at the passage about “Spokane Indian Rules of Fisticuffs” on page 48. What is Junior telling his audience about his community’s methods for problem-solving? for

disagreements? for dealing with conflict? Where does that leave someone like Junior, a self-avowed “Indian nerd”?

I referred to this as a “journal free write.” I noticed that after the initial self-consciousness, these journal prompts really took off and sometimes students even came in with an idea they wanted to write about ready to go. Discussion improved and became more student-driven (and encouraged them to turn to the text on their own, using these or their own adaptations of these free-write strategies).

I adapted these free-write guidelines from my creative writing courses for WRIT 100:

**FREE-WRITE GUIDELINES (ADAPTED
FROM NATALIE GOLDBERG)
DON'T WORRY. NO ONE EVER DIED FROM
IT.**

Don't think. Don't chastise yourself, don't congratulate yourself, *don't worry* while free-writing. You will never be asked to turn in a free-write.

Don't stress about punctuation, spelling, grammar, handwriting, paragraph breaks. Who cares? As long as *you* can read it, that's all that counts.

Keep your hand moving. Once you begin, don't stop until I call time. When you feel the need to pause, don't – just write. *Anything*. For example, repeat the prompt: *what do I know about compare and contrast?* or, *if a thesis were an animal, it would be _____ because* and write the first thing that comes to mind.

Lose Control. Say what you have to say. Don't worry if it's politically correct, polite, appropriate, your style, something that would give your professor a heart attack, or your deepest, darkest fears about metaphors. Just let it rip.

Be Specific. Not a verb, but *skittering*. Not fruit, but an apple. Not a frightened little Indian girl defacing a picture of the Devil in the school Bible, but Zitkala-Sa, a courageous young Lakota boarding school student who defends herself with a lead pencil, empowered by literacy but rejecting an ideology that her teacher says allows monsters to eat bad little Indian kids. Get past the easy labels!

Go for the jugular. If a scary-big question comes up, ask it. Maybe even try to list answers. That's where the energy is. Otherwise, you'll spend all your time writing *around* whatever it is that makes you nervous – the “elephant in the living room” syndrome. Your writing will be abstract, bland, and boring because you are avoiding what's urgent. Take risks.

You are free to write the worst junk in America. You can be more specific, if you like: the worst junk in Rockbridge County; your residence hall; the I-81 corridor. IT'S OKAY TO FREEWRITE CRAP. Growing an essay takes *COMPOST*.