

Writing Spaces

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Reflective Agency: Journaling to Locate a Writing Identity

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Reflective Agency: Journaling to Locate a Writing Identity

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Overview

In the first-year writing classroom, often populated by a growing number of first-generation college students, the student's expectation is to respond to assignment prompts as knee-jerk reactions to instructor-curated assignments. While these assignments foster development of the writing process, students can engage these assignments absent of any awareness or inclination toward a writing identity. To come to know oneself in any capacity requires intensive and continual reflection, followed by corrective action. The introductory writing course should allow space for students to explore themselves as writers, to articulate what they understand about writing and to address writing insecurities. Toward this end, we propose a student-composed reflection journal that focuses on the writing process. The proposed drafting journal would allow students to articulate emotions, thoughts, and concerns throughout the drafting process.

By engaging in reflection via the drafting journal, students can begin to locate and articulate a writing identity, advancing student agency and self-awareness, ultimately facilitating self-discovery through writing. The journal also serves as a documentation of the writing process which mitigates the use of AI text generators in and out of the classroom.

Time Commitment

Ten to twenty minutes per journal entry.

Materials

Necessary materials include a Word template posted to an LMS with headings and directives for each section in the journal; students should be encouraged to customize as they please. This document should be shared with the instructor to be accessed at any point.

Activity Process

Students are introduced to the concept of a reflective journal before any writing occurs in the course. We discuss the journal's purpose and format, noting that our thoughts about writing inform its development before, during, and after composing assignments. Students are told that the journals and writing assignments will work in tandem, with the paper being the product and the journal narrating the process. In Donald Murray's 1982 article "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," he likens the composition process to an external/internal dialogue: "The act of writing might be described as a conversation between two workmen muttering to each other at a workbench. The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted" (140). Murray's articulation of the dialogue inherent to the practice of writing elevates the writer as the primary reader, advancing student agency and metacognitive thinking about writing in process. The reflection journal entries serve as artifacts of those internal monologues, a way for students to transpose their thoughts and return for self-guidance in future drafting and brainstorming sessions. The journal entries are composed in one document, beginning with the initial brainstorm of a paper and ending only when the student has concluded all drafting processes.

The Drafting Journal should be introduced to students prior to any formal drafting exercise. Instructors should discuss expectations with students and set directives for students to follow while drafting in all writing situations. Rather than the instructor, students should understand they are to prompt themselves and move to the Drafting Journal to explore and express an emotion surfaced through brainstorming and drafting. The Drafting Journal will exist as a living artifact with recorded moments in which Murray's concept of the "self" and "other self" fully integrate. Students should turn to the writing journal any time they feel negative emotions and identify what evoked those feelings. While some might be comfortable using the drafting journal as a space to articulate emotions about writing, other students might need drafting questions to consider throughout the writing process. Example drafting questions can include the following:

- Getting Started:
 - Do you typically have trouble starting a task? If so, please explain.
 - When you write, how often do you think about a reader? How does the concept of a reader affect your writing?
- Hesitant to begin:
 - What emotions surface when you think about writing? And do those emotions vary by writing situation or environment?
 - Does the memory of a certain event in your writing/language history contribute to this emotion?
- Stuck in brainstorming mode:
 - Are your head and heart competing for a focus in this paper?
 - Do you feel overwhelmed by the possibilities? Perhaps energized? Perhaps concerned about the lack of ideas?
- Overwhelming urge to give up:
 - Has the urge to give up surfaced in other areas of your life?
 - What support can you offer yourself so that this

- o does not hold you back?
 - o What support do you need from your instructor or peer review partner to confront this obstacle?
- Feeling accomplished
 - o What about this task makes you feel accomplished?
 - o Does what you composed thus far give you confidence or concern?
 - o Explain how you overcame his challenge.
- Feeling defeated
 - o What about this task makes you feel defeated?
 - o Does what you composed thus far spark concern?
 - o At what point will you seek help, and from whom?
 - o Does asking for help add to the feeling of defeat?
- Needing limited or tailored feedback
 - o Pose a direct question to your instructor or peer reviewer about a specific section of the essay and express your concern(s).
 - o What additional, and perhaps more general, areas of concern would you like your instructor or peer reviewer to address? Apart from the aforementioned general drafting questions, instructors can create additional/ alternate questions tailored to specific writing situations. For example, reflections on the research process might concern engaging secondary sources, agreeing/ disagreeing with secondary sources, verifying source credibility, confronting personal and authorial biases, etc.

When finished with the first draft, students should read all entries pertaining to the current writing situation, summarize the experience independently from drafting, and discuss expectations for future drafts.

Learning Outcomes

Students who meaningfully engage with the Drafting Journal over the course of the assigned paper should:

- Discover and articulate a writing identity
- Learn and nurture self-assessment practices

- Move toward intentional collaboration with instructor and peers
- Gain writing awareness
- Give and receive meaningful feedback
- Identify and express writing emotions
- Consider writing a holistic and continual process

Learning Accommodations

- For those who prefer to write longhand, students may compose their drafting journals on paper as long as a digital component is readily available for instructor engagement.
- For those who prefer oral articulations of their journals, students may record and link vlogs/voice notes to corresponding journal sections.

Work Cited

Murray, Donald M. "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 33, no. 2, May 1982, pp. 140-147.