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A Writer's Evolution Essay: Writing for the Author, Not the Audience

I may never understand exactly how I have grown and changed throughout my college years. So much has happened so quickly; in the midst of change it is easy to lose perspective. As philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wisely said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward". It was not until I re-read all my major papers in college that it dawned on me how early papers I had written actually formed the basis for my current interests and passions. In reviewing my own writing, I began to realize that it showed a pattern of development that I hadn't been aware of.

I discovered that even my very earliest college writing contained the seeds of the future direction my life would take. A completed piece of writing serves a greater purpose than its intended function of entertaining or informing an audience. In fact, writing can be more useful to the author than the audience, because it can uncover and stimulate personal development. As my writing has evolved throughout college, so have my interests and life goals—and these two evolutions coexist remarkably, in ways I had not previously understood. In retrospect I am beginning to learn, through my writing, that college has taught me three important things: a passion for social justice, an ability to listen to others and really hear them, and a "voice".

I started my undergraduate studies at Hope College, a small liberal arts school on the west coast of Michigan. Similar to the college of LSA at the University of Michigan, every student was required to take a freshman level English course. I enrolled in mine the first semester of college, and was fortunate enough to have been assigned to my first service based

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course. The service part of the course, which I initially saw as extra work, quickly became a treasured part of my new routine as a college student.

The course required that I seek out a volunteer experience in the community, and spend a minimum of four hours a week at that placement for the semester. This introductory English class was focused on contemporary social justice, and the goal was to be able to connect the experiences you had at weekly placement with the books we were reading and material we were engaging with. Because it was at a time that fit with my schedule, I ended up working as an assistant in homeless shelter daycare center less than ten blocks from campus. Although I had been to homeless shelters and soup kitchens before, never had I played a regular and consistent role in an at-risk child's life.

I can now trace my involvement with this class at the Holland Rescue Mission to the beginning of an ongoing passion for working with children from struggling urban communities. My writing actually helped lead me to my passion for working in urban schools. My final paper in this course, *My Experiences with the Cycle of Family Poverty*, was a combination of a research paper and first hand narrative. It covered why the cycle of family poverty occurs, how it can be prevented, and what I witnessed at the homeless shelter that helped me to understand this vital social issue.

Through writing this paper I became aware of a calling I had to social justice. I received a decent grade on the paper. It was around ten pages, and my first significant piece of writing in college. The paper was riddled with minor structural and grammatical errors, but less was

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expected of me then and I expected less of myself. More importantly, as I re-read the paper, I realized that I had described very personal experiences distantly and academically. Despite all the memories from my time spent at the shelter, I was surprised to see that I had only included one specific anecdote in the entire paper. I began to understand that this piece lacked something crucial—a voice.

Two and half years after my freshman year English course, I was now studying at the University of Michigan and had decided to pursue Sweetland’s Minor in Writing alongside a Bachelor’s degree in psychology. To fulfill a requirement for the minor, I took English 325: Art of the Essay. On the second day of class we were asked to write a narrative of any experience of the past—and turn it into a compelling, meaningful work of art. In other words, we were to take the mundane and make it interesting, to provide insight on ordinary events. I happened to have had the privilege of going to New York City just the week before this class began, so I tried to explore a seemingly “mundane” aspect of the trip.

I thought I had come up with a brilliant and compelling idea. The piece was going to be work-shopped by the whole class and I was eagerly awaiting the compliments that would come with the in-class workshop. Additionally, I thought very highly of my professor and I especially couldn’t wait for him to admire my paper. I was a little alarmed to find that not one person, including the professor, really understood what my vision for the piece was. It was a very humbling moment, and although response to criticism is not one of my strongest characteristics, I sucked it up and took all the advice I was given at the workshop. At that

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moment I seemed to “get it”, realizing what it meant to be a writer and that good writing comes with hard work.

My final product titled *Identity Crisis* was very well received by my professor, and for the first time I felt I had effectively expressed personal material with a strong voice. Part of the theme of the paper was the discomfort with my identity as a tourist on the subway in New York City, and the process of how I became comfortable with and embraced this role. As I state in the paper, “I had been so caught up fantasizing these fictional roles that would relieve me of my identity as a tourist...” However, as I eventually came to terms with my identity as a tourist, I also found my voice through substantial revision. I conclude the paper with the following: “It was strangely comforting not to have to pretend. Sometimes to have a real experience; it is okay to just be *real*”. Although I had to reconstruct the entire thing, I learned a serious lesson in the process. Accepting criticism is a highly beneficial part of a writer’s experience, and crucial for allowing development and progress in your writing. In my case, it helped me to finally take command of a voice and to be honest with myself.

In the same 325 course, our final assignment was to explain how an event of the past shaped the person you are today. In between these assignments I had been working to further develop my voice as a writer. Even after *Identity Crisis*, I believed that I only had a voice when I wrote private journals, but translating this voice over to academic assignments—even if they were assignments I were passionate about, proved difficult. The extra work, however, paid off when I completed an essay titled, *Schools in for Summer*. When analyzed alongside my other works, I found that I had created a piece which unintentionally captured my developed career

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passion in social justice, and my developed voice—both characteristics that evolved directly from prior writing.

Schools in for Summer is a narrative of my experiences working at one of the bottom 3 schools in the state in Southwest Detroit, and how it led me to discover my calling as an urban school psychologist. It looks at both my personal story and the history of social injustices in Detroit to provide a comprehensive analysis of a complex issue, ultimately explaining why I want to be involved with such a system. Although I was uncomfortable with the situation of being an outsider working in such a chaotic environment, I was comfortable and accepting of role I had in the school, as my voice in the paper shows. As quoted from the paper, I was able to wonder, “*Would anybody take me seriously? Could I really teach in a school like this?*”

My experience made the paper academic, yet personal. This narrative became the platform for the personal statements I included in my graduate school applications to Master’s programs in urban school psychology and social work. There is no doubt that the personal development and skills I acquired during the process of writing *My Experiences with the Cycle of Family Poverty* and *Identity Crisis* have significantly influenced both *Schools in For Summer*, and the direction of my life.

When I looked back upon my old papers, I had expected to see improvements in my writing style. I did not, however, expect to see that I had developed a passion for social justice, the ability to truly listen to and learn from criticism, and the skill to speak with an authoritative personal voice through my writing. As I learned to listen and developed a voice, I was able to

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listen to the voice within me and hear my calling to a career in education and social justice.

Upon reflection, my evolution in writing has served a greater purpose than the original function any of my completed pieces were designed for—it has helped catalog and document my personal development in a way that my consciousness had kept hidden from me. While we can't control the rapid pace at which life leads us forward, dissecting the evolution of our writing illuminates the internal growth that we often overlook. If all writing serves this higher personal purpose, I eagerly await what it will teach me in the future.

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Annotated Bibliography for Writers Evolution

Mahr, Conrad. "My Family's Journey to America." *First Year Seminar: Immigration*. Hope College (December 2011).

What was also my first significant paper (not to mention first research paper) in college became the centerpiece for my MIW gateway portfolio. My freshman year at Hope College we were required to take a First Year Seminar—mine was concentrated on the topic of immigration to America. The course took a look at a variety other immigration stories, but a big component was focusing on own family's history in this country, and how we ended up here. Even though this had not been my first choice for a first year seminar, the class resonated with me very deeply since both of my grandparents immigrated to America in their mid-20s from Poland and Ireland respectively. My Polish grandfather in particular had an astonishing, perilous journey that led him to America. My paper encompassed this story, combined with research and statistics on Polish immigrants during World War II.

I selected this piece because it's a very symbolic and representative sample of where my writing was when I entered college. Sure I had significant writing projects in high school, perhaps even longer than the ten page requirement for this paper, but for the first time the expectations were at a collegiate standard, and those expectations took my writing to a new level. This paper is also important to my development because it was the center-piece for my MIW Gateway course and therefore it was repurposed and remediated, making it an integral piece of writing to my collection that received a lot of attention.

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Mahr, Conrad. "My Experiences With the Cycle of Family Poverty." *English 113: Socially Engaged- Making a Difference With Words*. Hope College (December 2011).

During my freshman year at Hope, I was also enrolled in the equivalent of U of M's freshman year English 125. This was a service based course, and my first experience with having community service in the underprivileged sector directly intertwined with academic work. My placement for the semester was at a homeless shelter for women and children only a few blocks from campus where I spent time in the mornings playing with the children in the day care center. The rest of the course was surrounded in literature pertaining to social justice, and for our final paper we had to research a topic related to our placement and engage with what our experiences at the placement taught us about that topic. I had been exposed to a lot at the shelter, most startling of all was that several of the parents at the shelter had actually been raised at the shelter, and found themselves there later in life after they had their own children. Thus I chose to discuss the cycle of family poverty for my paper.

The final paper for this course is significant for two reasons. One is that this experience sparked my college long passion for social justice and working within the urban or impoverished communities. Once I had this initial experience, it was a field that I could not leave alone. Interestingly enough, this is what I am pursuing in my career—specifically working within struggling urban schools. The paper also taught me that writing is not only some abstract exercise for academic development or personal creativity, it can invoke passion and awareness for real social issues.

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Mahr, Conrad. "The Effects of Professional Role on Gender Stereotyping." *Research Methods in Psychology*. Hope College (April 2013).

In the process of my development and learning about writing, the experience of writing this paper taught me exactly what I did *not* want to pursue: research and technical writing. As a psychology major interested in the more social aspects of human behavior and working hands on with adolescents, the Research Methods requirement was already something I was not looking forward to. While the experiment on gender stereotyping that my final paper for this course was about was very interesting, the tedious, mechanical style of writing that the paper required made for an unpleasant experience. Of course, unpleasant experiences often build character. This paper is about an eight page APA format scientific paper that aligns with the standards of a published psychology paper. We had to take the results of a completed psychology experiment and create a paper as if we were the researchers publishing the experiment.

In psychology, research is an opportunity that many students pursue and find valuable. I did actually briefly do psychology research here at the University of Michigan, but this paper confirmed that the repetitive, carefully attentive nature that research requires was neither something I was interested in, nor something I was had any desire to further pursue. This paper signifies a change in the narrowing of my interests in education and writing. Previously research as a job or long term pursuit was not something I had ruled out, but now I was certain it was not something I wanted to be involved in. Technical, procedural writing was also something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

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Mahr, Conrad and Gregory. "Spritual Ecology: Detroit." *Jungian Society for Scholarly Studies*. Loyola University (July 2013).

This is the most unique piece in my annotated bibliography. As if enough my writing and academic experience hasn't revolved around Detroit enough, the summer before I was enrolling at U of M as a junior, I did a collaborated project with my dad documenting sites of spirituality and sacredness within the city of Detroit. It takes the form of an oral poster presentation, yet involved a substantial amount of prose. Between pictures of each site and narrative stories about the histories surrounding them, my father and I gave this presentation together at a national conference for the Jungian Society for Scholarly Studies in an auditorium on Loyola's campus in downtown Chicago. Although I was the youngest member at the conference, the audience was quite receptive to the presentation and we received some good questions.

I included this piece in my annotated bibliography because it represented a shift in the way I've approached academic work. Sadly, a lot of us categorize academic work as something that we have little control over, as things that are assigned to us in order for us to receive a grade in order that benefits us for some future goal. This was the first academic project I tackled for no other purpose than the enjoyment of the experience, and it gave me some serious insight in discovering there were sides of academia I enjoyed. This project also acted a foundation for my academic interests in the city of Detroit, resulting in (partially) how I ended up enrolling in Wayne State for graduate school and certainly why I chose to have my Capstone Project focused on Detroit.

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Mahr, Conrad. "Redefining Piracy: Are We Actually 'Pirates'?" *English 225: Academic Argumentation*. University of Michigan (December 2013).

This was my first significant paper as a student at the University of Michigan, and my last paper before I decided to become a part of Sweetland's Minor in Writing. I will admit that this paper was frustrating for me to develop. In my opinion, English 225 Academic Argumentation (or at least my professor) here at Michigan overemphasized having to cite a claim for every single remark made in a paper. It was impossible for me to run with my thoughts and utilize creative energy when any idea or argument I tried to make had to be cited or referenced in every single assignment. Though I met this with some resistance, I came away smarter and a better argumentative writer.

My final paper in this course "Redefining Piracy: Are We Actually 'Pirates'" demonstrated an ability to listen to criticism (although I didn't effectively make use of it until a later paper that I actually mention in my Writer's Evolution Essay) and my knowledge for how to establish an argument based on citations and logic. While something I didn't value going into the course, these skills shined in my final paper. The course was about plagiarism and its different forms, and how we define intellectual property. My final paper was specifically about how and media piracy is not a crime, and my ability to defend this thesis using highly reputable references certainly enhanced my argument.

Mahr, Conrad. "A Less Glamorous Reminiscence." *Writing 220: Writing Minor Intro*. University of Michigan (March 2014).

I included this piece in my potential exposition for writing development because while I enjoy and appreciate creative writing, I've never really been experimental with different

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formats outside of the standard prose story or essay. For this piece, we had to repurpose a former work to cater to a completely different audience and/or style of publication. I took “My Family’s Journey to America” (as mentioned in the first entry) and repurposed it from a historical research paper into a fictional piece magazine piece for *The New Yorker* complete with tri-column format and small graphics throughout. The *New Yorker* features one fictional, yet intellectual piece with eloquent language each month. My article was designed to be this one fictional piece.

The piece was creative not only because of this format change from prose to magazine article, but I had to create an entire engaging and fictional story based off of some true events that my grandfather experienced. It was also a unique development in my writing to take on a particular language expectation. While in academic writing I normally do try to maintain a certain level of vocabulary, writing a piece for the *New Yorker* required that I extensively use a thesaurus and that I had to be very conscious about my word choice.

Mahr, Conrad. “Words of Wisdom for Future MIW Cohorts.” *Writing 220: Writing Minor Intro*. University of Michigan (April, 2014).

This was my final blog post in the Minor in Writing Gateway section of the MIW blog. Unlike in the Capstone course, the MIW blog actually played a large role in the Gateway course. The posts were something I was compelled to make interesting be well-written, partly because everyone in the course was often required to read and comment on them. In particular, I felt that when asked to give future MIW students words of wisdom for their time in the gateway course and the minor as a whole, I did an effective job. Even though I enjoyed this post and

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enjoyed the reflective nature of writing it, I was still surprised that this semester from the new Minor in Writing cohort I received several comments from Gateway students about how they found my remarks helpful.

Now obviously I am aware that it was a requirement for each student to comment on one of the former student's blog posts, but as I said there were several comments and they seemed surprisingly genuine. My advice was not to treat the gateway like another writing class, with the primary motivation of completing the assignments only being to achieve the best grade you can. The class allows the student so much creative freedom that if you treat the assignments as an opportunity to explore a passion and create something tangible and valuable you will come away with a sense of accomplishment. In fact, two of the biggest assignments for this course have almost no explicit requirements, so don't rush the process of making the most out of these assignments. I don't often write advice with a sense of authority, but as a graduate of the class, the audience seemed to benefit from the advice.

Mahr, Conrad. "Identity Crisis." *English 325: Art of the Essay*. University of Michigan (May 2014).

I knew right away that I would be including this in the final copy of my Writer's Evolution essay. This essay demonstrated massive growth in my voice as a writer, and my ability to maturely grow from constructive criticism and use it as a means to improve my writing. The assignment for this essay was to elaborate on any mundane moment of the very recent past and elaborate on a personal change the moment exhibited. I happened to have traveled to

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New York City the week prior, so I chose to elaborate on a unique moment I encountered on the subway.

I chose this essay because I learned a great lesson in the course of the drafting process. I had a draft of this piece peer reviewed by the entire class, and I assumed that everyone would understand what I was talking about and find my paper interesting. To my surprise, I was met with a lot of awkwardness and a lot of confusion as to what I was even talking about. Instead of getting flustered or defensive as I normally would, I finally learned to listen to the criticism and advice—reconstructing the entire essay in the process. During the reconstructing I also developed a strong voice for the first time, marking a new era in my narrative writing.

Mahr, Conrad. "School's In for Summer." *English 325: Art of the Essay*. University of Michigan (June 2014).

Between this essay and essay above, this course was very transformative for me as a writer. Perhaps it is because I had more time to focus on just the writing because I took this course Spring term, or maybe it was because of how compelling the professor (Fritz Swanson) was, but this course and this essay permanently changed my writing. In "School's In for Summer" I discuss my experiences working in Southwest Detroit at one of the lowest achieving K-8 schools in Michigan and how it led me to my current career aspirations as an urban school psychologist.

This essay used the voicing skills I learned in "Identity Crisis" and took it to a new level of fluidness. It also encompassed my continuing passion for social justice, something developed in the winter of my Freshman year and seen in this paper the summer before my Senior year. In a

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sense, this narrative embodies both of these changes that my writing has undergone throughout college—both a voice and my continuing passion for social justice. This piece also became the foundation for my personal statements I used in graduate school applications (listed as an entry later in this bibliography).

Mahr, Conrad. "Lesson Plan for September 16th." *Psychology 306: Group Leading for Project Outreach*. University of Michigan (September 2014).

Last semester I had my first leadership experience within a collegiate academic setting, I was a 'Group Leader' for service based psychology course on youth and education. The course revolved around volunteer placements and what we learned from them. My placement, and the group of undergraduates I was in charge of, was at a small alternative high school in Whitmore Lake for children on the autism spectrum or with other social/learning disabilities. We came individually or in groups at certain times during the school day to help with in-class tutoring in various subjects.

Every week I had to prepare an hour long discussion section that combined our experiences at the placement that week, various topics to cover, and activities for me to lead. This lesson plan for this discussion had to be approved each week by the graduate student instructor for the course, and writing these lessons became an integral routine for me. The lesson plan for September 16th's discussion is significant because this was the plan I created before leading my very first section. Having no prior experience leading/teaching students my own age, the day before my session was certainly met with some anxiety. Having this plan

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helped reduce some of that anxiety, and it marks a unique moment in my collegiate writing and coursework.

Mahr, Conrad. "Personal Statement." *Wayne State Graduate School Application: School and Community Psychology M.A.* Wayne State University (November 2014).

This essay contains much more weight now that I have been accepted to graduate school at Wayne State and know that this is the program I will be attending. While writing my different personal statements for different graduate school applications, I had to tailor a core message to cater to a few unique schools and master's programs. Wayne State's personal statement for their School and Community Psychology degree felt the most naturally for me to write because I had the most direct experiences that drew me to their program.

I have included this in my annotated bibliography not only because it is an important document but because it represents the evolution of a piece academic writing that I enjoyed, 'School's in For Summer', to something that actually advanced my career aspirations. I am convinced that my Personal Statement carried some weight in the acceptance of my graduate school application, and it was seen as a positive because I was able to articulate the passionate narrative that has driven me into this field.

Mahr, Conrad. "Improving Literacy and Narrowing the Achievement Gap in America: Academic Resilience as a Solution to this Nationwide Epidemic." *Topics in Developmental Psychology: Improving the Literacy Rate in America.* University of Michigan (December 2014).

This was a very comprehensive piece for me. What initially seemed like a daunting task, proposing a novel way to improve literacy in America and backing it up with research, became a powerful and compelling task for me to solve. Psych 457 was an educational psychology

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seminar dedicated to solving the problems presented in urban education, which a special focus on reading and literacy skills. For this paper, I used extensive research about academic resilience in urban, low socioeconomic students and how conditions created by the school and educators can help foster this resilience. Resilience is much more common than we are lead to believe, and my paper explores how academic resilience lowers the achievement gap and can lead to literacy improvement in struggling schools.

I have included this in my annotated bibliography because it shows growth and builds off of “My Experiences With the Cycle of Family Poverty”. While this course wasn’t a service based course, it was committed to social justice. This paper not only examines a national social issue, but displays maturity by offering a realistic plan to actually alleviate problems within the issue. It also happens to be that the inequalities in minority and low socioeconomic status urban education is something my career will directly deal with.