

STRANGENESS, IRREGULARITY, AND NON-LINEARITY

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In my writing intensive Core class (Versions of Egypt) I give my students the option of a couple of writing assignments I will describe in this essay. I use these irregular, nontraditional instructions for expository papers as much to explain how essays work (or can work) as I do to trigger unusual papers (I also give them dozens of traditional assignments). As a teacher of fiction writing I have always been interested in finding the sources of writing, rather than just helping students revise their fiction once they've brought it to class, which is the usual approach of fiction and poetry workshops. I've written two books on this process, *The 3 A.M. Epiphany* and *The 4 A.M. Breakthrough*—which together have 400 exercises for writing fiction. In *The 3 A.M. Epiphany* I say, "I use exercises to derange student stories, find new possibilities, and foster strangeness, irregularity, and non-linearity as much as to encourage revision and cleaning up after yourself, and I don't worry too much about success or failure." Because I teach mostly fiction writing, I've spent less time worrying over expository papers in my classes, but lately I am thinking more about how to startle students into writing unusual essays.

One method of writing papers I propose is that students take six or eight favorite quotations from one of the books they've read. The quotes can be fairly long or quite short. Choosing them is the hard part, but it may not be as difficult as it seems at first. I suggest students choose these selections thematically, if they can, sticking to one or two problems. I tell them to study the quotes they choose over a few days—cutting out parts of the quotation that don't seem useful to the argument or problem that may be forming as they look at the group of them. Eventually I urge them to write a bit about each quote—paraphrasing, summarizing, reacting, or noting other areas in the books that these bits of writing resonate against.

Eventually, in this manner, they may have the rough draft of a paper literally built around the ideas of these other writers. The final product may have very little of the original quotations, or the quotes might remain solid and substantial. In class we talk a lot about what analysis is and isn't. I'll go over a paragraph from one of the books we've read that is both a good example of analysis and needs analysis from us in order to fit it into the context of the course. This approach to writing papers gives me room to talk about basic components of essay writing.

Somewhat in contradiction to this assignment, I also warn students not to rely too heavily on long quotations in their papers. I think one can instruct students to do both things—gather a small collection of quotes to build a paper around and keep the quotes short and sweet. One or two relatively long quotations, though, can be useful and interesting to examine very closely, as a sort of *explication de texte*, the French approach to literary study. M. H. Abrams describes this form of close reading as "the detailed analysis of the complex interrelations and *ambiguities* (multiple meanings) [Abrams' emphasis] of verbal and figurative components with a work." This method of reading usually applies to poetry, but I like asking my students to consider prose in the same fashion. Most of the students in these Core classes have never done close readings of any kind of prose (let alone poetry), so it is useful to guide them in this process.

The old idea of these Core classes at DU, which is being replaced by another form of the Core as of the fall of 2010, was that the courses studied a subject through the lens of at least two scholarly disciplines (the new Core doesn't do interdisciplinary studies). My course examines Cairo and Egypt from the point of view of travel writing (by foreigners), fiction (by Egyptians), and anthropology (by

academics, generally also foreigners). The close analysis of the prose (and methods) of these different disciplines is the heart of this course, something I do during class anyway, so I've found it very valuable to offer a writing assignment that incorporates this simple procedure into the general analysis of the texts.

Another assignment I suggest is for students to write a sort of self-interview. They choose two books as their subject. They are to write down carefully, over a few days or even weeks, ten or twelve questions about both or either of these books. I tell them to revise the questions until they're happy with them and until they see links between the questions—a progression of some sort. They will likely find themselves changing the order of the questions and deleting a few of them as they go along (this is important, I emphasize, that they begin to think about the progression of an argument these questions represent). Once they are satisfied with the integrity and toughness of the questions, I tell them to write down answers, briefly and then eventually at length. Students find that coming up with the answers is not be nearly as difficult as coming up with the questions. I allow them to hand in a finished product that is only these questions and these answers (although I also tell them they can hand in the paper with the questions removed and only the answers to these unseen questions).

In class, I spend a lot of time asking students to come up with questions. I break the class up into groups and tell the groups to write a question about a problem or set of characters in the book we're reading. When they've all written their questions, I transcribe them (often in short hand) onto the blackboard, and we vote on which is the best question. I strongly suggest that the students write down these questions and use some of all of them later. We talk about how the questions work, how they explore complex problems, and whether they seem to provoke good and interesting answers. I also tell students to email me sample questions, if they've chosen this assignment. It is easier to correct or reorient questions like these than to revise excerpts of their papers.

One of the attractions of this assignment for students is that they do the hard work first, and what often seems hard in writing papers—the arrangement of the argument—is more or less done once they've written and polished the questions. Answering the questions is not easy, but it seems easier to think of writing small blocks of prose in response to tough questions than stringing together four or five pages on the same topic. Students also don't think they have to come up with a topic when they write this kind of paper, although the questions always point them toward a topic.

I tell my students these two types of expository writing assignments are related to the one creative project I assign them during the term, which is to write a mock travelogue, as if they'd been to Egypt themselves. I like to point out the close relationship between so-called creative writing and expository prose (I usually note that there is no real difference between the two). In the creative assignment, I suggest, for instance, that they imagine themselves sitting in a café eavesdropping on a conversation between two characters from the fiction they've read (from two different books). Or I suggest they actually have a conversation (or write it down) with one of these characters. The two creative expository assignments work this way—as a form of conversation. The essay built on quotations is a conversation between the student and the prose from the text they're studying. The other essay—the self-interview—is literally a conversation with themselves.

William Butler Yeats said, “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.” I urge students who've done either of these papers to think of them as very good rough drafts of another paper they won't (or may indeed) rewrite. It is important to remind young writers that all writing is part of a process of understanding their own thoughts, not something that is done once and for all as a reflection of what they think their teachers want them to have thought.