WRITING BY NUMBERS?!

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One, two, thesis to do;
Three, four, cite some more;
Five, Six, grammar to fix;
Seven, Eight, my tenth "A" straight!

As I ponder my ongoing task of teaching writing to undergraduates or evaluating their work, nothing frightens me more than the daunting conviction that most students assume there is a magic rubric that will guarantee them an "easy A" if only they check off each task as they go. The arguable need to respond to their work in a more formalized way—beyond the grammatical edits and contextual notes with which I am accustomed to filling the margins of their papers—only compounds this sense that our current collegiate *zeitgeist* is more that of "writing to task" than "writing to persuade" or "writing to illuminate." And forget writing for the sheer joy of it!

Perhaps the "teach to test" mentality that most students have endured in their secondary educations is to blame; perhaps our mediatized culture somehow is. [Personally, I believe that so many students are unable to write coherent narratives today because they have read so few of them in traditional print or edited formats.] Regardless, each year I increasingly feel that the majority of our students view writing as a "to do" list rather than the most powerful of discursive and creative tools. Many of them seemingly could care less about crafting a powerful argument with nuanced reasoning and daring rhetoric; they'd rather identify the two or three "quick fixes" they can address on subsequent assignments to ensure a better grade (that being an A, of course). When that rare writer comes along who truly understands the allure and weight of the written word, it is a sheer joy to nurture and guide their efforts. Much of the time, however, I must confess to dreading student papers in my larger classes, knowing that the formulaic responses will far outnumber the truly inspired ones, and that my job will be to convince these students that they deserved the (gasp!) B they were awarded rather than truly engage with them in an evolving discourse.

Ultimately, I fear that students have lost the joy of the *journey*—learning to craft and refine a written piece in any number of styles—for the sake of the *destination*—the presumed, guaranteed A. I hope that in choosing exciting topics for class discussion and by assigning a diverse array of topics/styles, some of the enthusiasm and rigor from their verbal discourse will carry over into that of their written work. Yet I still can't shake that feeling of apprehension each time the papers come in that I'm about to be buried under several more "write by numbers" efforts from even the best-intentioned students. Writing is not necessarily a dying art, but it does seem to be suffering from some serious *rigor mortis*…

Such, at least, has been my experience with a growing number—arguably, a standing majority—of students both within my own major field of study as well as within the various General Education courses I teach. More than a decade of teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (wildly rewarding as it has been for a variety of reasons!) has both proven this "rule" with increasing alacrity, as well as provided some notable exceptions to it. Many of the student assumptions about the nature and "numerology" of writing in this *particular* course may come from its very designation as a "CORE" course or its "Writing Intensive" moniker: for them, it's merely one last hoop to jump through in the Gen Ed curriculum prior to graduation. Their expectations for this or any other interdisciplinary course might well hinge on its required status, prompting them to think that there is a hidden rubric that their professors want them to learn and that by following a prescribed pattern they can cross off yet another category on their graduation check-list in exemplary fashion. Consequently, before I taught this course for the first time six

years ago, I found myself somewhat dreading the "write by numbers" phenomenon it might engender, much as I genuinely enjoy reading and responding to strong cases of student writing.

First and foremost, then, I sought an overall topic that might "speak to" my student audience in such a fashion that they didn't merely regard it as yet another requirement, but rather an area of personal interest and investment. Drawing from my own enduring fascination with mythological traditions and their incessant reformulation in popular culture traditions, I arrived at what I thought would be one of those elusive, "sexy" titles so many of us craft in an effort to draw in our students: "Archetypes Through the Ages: The Evolution of World Mythologies, from Osiris to Obi Wan." [And yes, if you're wondering, the first time I offered this course it coincided perfectly with the release of George Lucas's *Revenge of the Sith*; each year since then, I've had any number of block-buster movies to choose from as the required outing that ties back to our core concepts in the class.] In this fashion, I hoped to enroll students who were not merely ticking off another requirement in a time-slot that complimented their daily schedules, but rather those pop-culture savvy individuals who would take a real interest in the mediatized images of ancient archetypes that surround them on a daily basis—and, consequently, to put the time and effort into various written assignments detailing this phenomenon.

Cribbing an excellent technique from my own graduate school education, I initially envisioned a series of short papers (1-2 pages each) written in response to a series of prompts I would offer every few weeks throughout the quarter. By making the students write constantly throughout the quarter rather than in one big push at the end of the term, it was my intent to build up "muscle tone" in writing over time. Rather than sprinting in the final week(s) to collate a number of ideas and images into a grand project, they would incrementally think about smaller facets of our overall philosophical trajectory, drawing from their own experience to provide concrete examples of these trends. To my great relief (and wee bit of surprise, I must admit), these short papers elicited much better written responses than I initially expected. Furthermore, I could see demonstrable progress from those students who took the time to read both my grammatical edits and content notes on each short paper, eliminating mistakes over time and developing a more astute discourse with each new prompt or iteration. [It goes without saying that other students—those who did not pay attention to my feedback—did not make the same progress in their writing skills, but there was enough significant progress from those who did to convince me I was on to something good here.] Then, at the end of the quarter when they were required to submit the "grand project" to me synthesizing the theoretical concepts we'd explored and which they'd applied to an archetypal figure of their choice, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the bulk of papers I received were not merely written "by the numbers" according to the criteria on the assignment sheet, but rather well considered and constructed discourses that were fuelled by personal passion and interest. The melding of topic and style through constant practice had paid off in large part, and encourage me to keep developing the course along these lines in the years that followed.

Beginning with three short papers in the first year, I refined my topics and added additional prompts in the years to follow, resulting in a course that required five short responses (now 2-3 pages each), one mid-term project (3-4 pages), and one final essay (10-12 pages)—in addition to a rather rigorous open-book exam at the midterm to ensure that students were keeping up with the reading. To be frank, the course had been "writing intensive" in terms of sheer number of pages required for some time—and yet I didn't feel that I was teaching the art of writing as effectively as I might, especially when faced with 35-40 students in a class that typically over-enrolled based on demand and where I could only dole out so much to a GTA limited to 10 hours of work a week. I consequently leapt at the chance to convert this course to a "WI" section, eliminating the midterm exam in favor of even more in-class time dedicated to teaching students how to effectively construct and persuasively argue theses from a myriad of prompts. The reduction of the class from 30(+) to 15 students will also afford me the opportunity to require re-writes and successive drafts of the shorter papers, a "luxury" I never could have managed with the larger class. Effectually, then, I have been able

not only to preserve the course's content and focus in the conversion, but also to augment it through the writing process itself, illuminating for my students in on-going written statements the on-going process of archetypal reformulation itself.

Specifically, I have the following writing exercises in place for my next "Archetypes" course, with the goal of constant, incremental writing and revision leading to a substantive, polished verbal argument at the conclusion of the quarter.

1. Define "archetype" and "stereotype" using a dictionary and your own extrapolations of these terms. How are they similar, different or connected? Provide an example of each from contemporary culture, and note if these might change over time. (1-2 pages)
2. Write your own, original Creation Myth incorporating the major themes we've encountered thus far in class. Remember, even if you subscribe to a particular religious or scientific worldview, you job is to write a fictional, hypothetical myth that covers the same "big questions" as other myths we've seen. P.S. If it's "plausible" in *your* universe, it doesn't necessarily have to be "possible" in ours. (2-3 pages)
3. Argue pro or con for the following: modern rhapsodes carry on the same essential duties as their ancient predecessors. You'll need to: define a "rhapsode," noting techniques and goals; look at 20/21c culture, determine who or what—a person/character, institution, form of media, etc.—best fulfills this ancient role (if at all!); and note if there are any telling discrepancies between the classical model and more modern examples. (2-3 pages)
4. Why do we have "Super-Heroes" in the 20/21c, while classical societies merely had "Heroes"? What's the difference, and when/why might it have come about? And why do today's "Super-Heroes" need a "secret identity," while ancient heroes did not? Has something changed in society or our ideals? (2-3 pages)
5. Using the summary provided by your readings in Bierlein's *Parallel Myths*, write a "position paper" supporting the views of Myth and Archetypes as professed by S. Freud, C. Jung <u>or</u> C. Levi-Strauss (choose one!). To do this effectively, you'll need to note how your chosen figure differs from the other two in their approaches to the purpose, function and future of these supposedly "universal" ideas and figures. (2-3 pages)

Students will henceforth be required to revise at least two of these short responses, though I'm still debating whether or not to assign which specific ones that should be or to allow the student to choose which ones (s)he wishes to re-assay. My fear with the latter scenario is that students will automatically select those responses for which they received a lower mark (more on my grading schema to follow), rather than choosing to re-write those topics which deserve the most elaboration and refinement—even if they earned a decent score for it to begin with! My inclination at present is that I will split the difference with these revisions, meaning that I will dictate a particular short response that each individual student must revise as per my notes *and* that each student will be able to select another short paper to re-work (or even the one I've selected, in yet another iteration?) within one week of its receipt. This will, ideally, both spread my own grading workload out more so throughout the quarter, as well as provide each student with a sense of agency in the selection of which piece(s) of writing they wish to refine in an attempt to improve their rhetorical skills.

Students will also be required to submit a smaller project on an "intermediary archetype" near the midterm mark, falling between the third and fourth prompts listed above. The specifics for this written assignment are as follows:

> Once you have selected an ancient archetype of which you are particularly fond (e.g. the Trickster as seen in the Norse stories of Loki), your job will be to trace the evolution of your figure over time and/or geographical distance. You need to be able to tell me what specific form this archetype took in both time(s) and place(s) (note any essential characteristics or symbols); what connections there are between the two societies (e.g. influence *a la* Greece →

Rome, or absorption *a la* Slavs → Christianity); and how each incarnation of your archetype embodies certain social or philosophical "norms" for the time and place where you find it.

Your "original" archetype can be from ANY ANCIENT CIVILIZATION we've studied in class; your "reincarnated" archetype MUST PRE-DATE THE 20TH CENTURY (i.e., come from late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the 18-19th centuries). You will NOT be dealing with 20/21c archetypes until your final project…though you may well set yourself up for that by tracing a figure of interest that you can follow through at a later date right up to the modern day! You will need to turn in a slightly longer response paper (3-4 pages) to trace this "evolution," as well as additionally provide at least one image of both your "original" and "reincarnated" archetype. You will then be asked to BRIEFLY (5-7 minutes) give an overview to the class for our discussion that day.

While this assignment has always been a part of the course, the elimination of the midterm and my renewed focus on writing have increased its importance on the whole. I envision asking each student to revise and expand upon a particular portion (1-2 pages) of this project as per my response to each individual, in this fashion urging them to consider how one strand of a larger argument can be "teased out" in a meaningful way. This is perhaps *the most frequent content note* I give on student papers overall (i.e. "develop this idea in greater depth!"), and avoids the potential pitfall of students revising a short project by merely tweaking or "padding" out small parts of it on the whole.

It is my ardent hope and intent that the preceding writing "practice" has then adequately prepared the student to undertake the final project for the course, which must address the following criteria:

> As a culminating experience for this course, you now get to choose a specific <u>contemporary archetype</u> that resonates with you on a personal level, and then connect that "ground" figure or idea with both an urban legend (folktale) and a mythological antecedent (source).
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> Specifically, you will need to identify the following in a **10-12 page essay** (exclusive of the required iconography):
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> 1. **A single modern-day (mid 20c-21c) archetype**, enumerating what it/they stand(s) for in the popular consciousness.
> 2. **A single modern urban legend** that deals with a similar theme/mythic construct as your chosen archetype, noting in what ways it is similar &/or different.
> 3. **A single classical mythological "source" (figure, idea)** that you can plausibly argue was the model for your modern archetype, noting similarities & differences.
> 4. **An overview of your personal credo** as to WHY myths exist, HOW myths work, and in what way your chosen figures "MIRROR" their respective cultures (accounting for differences between eras and ideologies). In essence, what are the meanings and methods of "archetypes through the ages," as SPECIFICALLY evidenced by your chosen materials.
> 5. **An iconography** providing visual "proof" of #1, 2, 3.
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> You may address the preceding elements in whatever order or style best serves your argument—just be sure to address all of them somewhere in your paper. Assume your audience is educated yet not familiar with the specific terminology or tropes covered in our class (i.e., you will need to briefly define your terms). You should make frequent use of the *critical readings* in this course to substantiate your hypotheses, as well as the *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (on reserve); but also feel free to *intelligently speculate* if there are no "experts" to back up your particular point of view. Ideally, by choosing an area of personal interest, this assignment will be both exciting and challenging, synthesizing the many concepts we've broached in this course thus far.

While these final projects have, to date, been surprisingly strong on the whole, I believe the course's renewed focus on persuasive writing techniques will bolster the overall quality of these arguments. It has always been my intent that the short response prompts and the midterm project would all "feed into" the final project in some fashion, as each raises a vital point of discussion and broaches issues of cultural transmission

in line with the goals of the culminating essay. Indeed, over the years I have increasingly stressed to my students that all of their previous written work in the course has been a preparation for the final written project: while they cannot merely "recycle" the shorter papers wholesale into the longer one, the additive process of their various written responses can and should contribute to the larger discussion I'm asking them to engage in here. Thus, I am hoping to gradually lead them into the thoughtful construction of a grand written argument step-by-step, rather than asking them to create one *en toto* during the harried final weeks of the quarter. With the relative "luxury" of added time to respond to student writing and a reduced number of writers on the whole, I am confident that my attempt to guide them incrementally to an evolving, well-informed narrative will help alleviate the "write by numbers" phenomenon I so fear from my student authors; and maybe, just maybe, they'll start to conceive of writing as a process of investigation, revision, and collation rather than a singular "mind dump" in response to discrete criteria.

On the subject of grading the shorter responses, I can confidently say that a "sliding scale" of check-pluses and check-minuses has worked rather well through the years, particularly in urging the students to consider their overall progression as a writer rather than the concrete numerical scores they so crave and expect. If a student has addressed the core components of the assignment in an adequate fashion (with no egregious grammatical errors or leaps of logic), then they earn a solid "check" for their efforts. If a student falls short of this mark by omitting an element of the prompt or due to disruptive grammar, syntax or logic, then they earn a "check-(minus)" for this work. If a student surpasses the basic requirements and displays solid writing skills and rhetoric throughout, then (s)he earns a "check-(plus)." Finally, in those rare cases when a student produces a truly exemplary piece of work in both form and content, greatly surpassing my expectations for the given assignment, then they may earn the elusive "check-plus." The benefit of this grading system—apart from removing the numerical scores that seem to obsess most students today—is that it gives me room for a bit of "subjectivity" in that I can reward those students whose work consistently climbs the grading scale throughout the quarter, without having to "bend" literal numbers in the grade-book. For the midterm projects, the students *are* given a numerical score on a 100-point scale; but this is accompanied by a grading rubric addressing such criteria as focus, details, connections between ideas, iconography, etc. This rubric will then be re-applied to the portion of the written project I am requiring that they re-write as of this year. And on the final project—which, alas, very few students over the years have actually picked up the following quarter!—the students will be given two grades out of a 100-point scale, one for content and one for style. These grades are then averaged for a final project grade, and collated with the preceding short responses to arrive at a course grade. In this fashion, the bulk of their performance in the course (in addition to daily participation) is dependent on successive writing assignments and revisions, yet I have allowed for a "sliding scale" with the check (+/-) system throughout the quarter that emphasizes quality over quantity and rewards studied application and process more than a straight numerical scale for each paper.

I have, incidentally, employed a similar style of short responses and a sliding grade scale for my First Year Seminar throughout the years. It may be worth noting that not only are these freshmen less indoctrinated in the "write by numbers" approach than their upperclassmen peers seem to be of late, but on the rare occasion that I have a former FSEM student subsequently join my CORE class their written performance tends to exceed that of those classmates who have not been consistently exposed to these types of assignments. Now, I can in no way infer that this approach is better (or worse) than others I have encountered, but merely that it beneficially addresses my specific fears of the "write by numbers" phenomenon that seems to be increasing with the years. In conjunction with the Writing Program's focus on styles of rhetoric and writing, and in support of the soon-to-be implemented Advanced Seminars, it remains my steadfast hope that students can and will be introduced to writing as a "way of life" and the strongest tool in their personal or professional arsenal, and not merely the formulaic product of a "to-do list" that we—their very professors—may have inadvertently held up as the standard to meet. In facing my own demons when it comes to assigning writing in the classroom, I hope to re-write the norm for my students as well, ultimately arriving at a far more productive "archetype" for the process of writing itself.:

One, two, think it through;
Three, four, revise it some more;
Five, Six, can't rely on tricks;
Seven, Eight, I've got worlds to create!