# MAKING SELVES AS WE MAKE SCHOLARS:

# THE MANY USES OF LIFE WRITING

# IN COLLEGE ENGLISH

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2022

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my family. I could not have even attempted a PhD without my husband, Buc, holding down the fort while I was off studying. Thanks for sacrificing income and family time during these messy years, and also subjecting our marriage to this testing time. By God's grace, I believe we have emerged stronger than ever! I also wish to thank my mother-in-law, Margie, for teaching my children at school and at home, pre-COVID and post-COVID. What a blessing to have a teacher in the house! Thanks is also due my parents, Daryl and Su, for believing in me, encouraging me from afar, and passing on their love for language in our word-rich home, where this all started.

Second, thanks to my talented English professors, especially Jim Warren, who has always challenged me to see the other side of the argument. Thanks for your spot-on advising and caring mentorship; it was an incredible blessing to work with you again the second time around. Thanks also to my other committee members, Desirée Henderson and Cedrick May. Because of your delightful instruction and mentorship, I am a better teacher and a deeper thinker; plus, I have gained a renewed interest in teaching literature! I would also like to thank those professors who allowed me to explore my ideas on pedagogy in their classes, via seminar papers that formed the basis of these chapters: Amy Tigner, Paul Conrad, and Jackie Fay. In addition, thanks to my Writing Center boss, Michael Brittain, who kept us laughing even when COVID trapped us in Microsoft Teams for the whole year. Lastly, Kathryn Warren has been an excellent graduate advisor and trusted friend; thanks for the walks and the good conversation.

Finally, thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gives me strength to get up each day, and who continues to hold the world in His hands even when it plunges into chaos.

May 2, 2022

Abstract

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

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This dissertation addresses the perennial question, for both new and more seasoned English professors, "What should we teach in English?" In composition, "What types of writing should we teach?" And in literature, "what literature, and which authors, should we read?" In the current age where teachers are concerned with promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, perhaps these questions are more relevant than ever. Thus, employing Wayne Booth's rhetorical stance as my theoretical frame, I inquire 1) what are the most pressing needs of traditional-age college students, and 2) what theories and teaching strategies uncovered in recent English studies have the potential to reach the largest audience and do the most good? To begin answering these questions, I position college students themselves as a crucial consideration in preparing college English curricula. According to the psychology literature, some key tasks faced by this population, often referred to as "emerging adults," are identity exploration, instability, and a feeling of being in-between. Recent statistics also reveal a "mental health crisis" in this population, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these problems, I employ two interventions: the first is my theoretical framework, **the rhetorical stance**, a term coined by Wayne Booth, which holds that in order to effectively reach an audience, a speaker (or

teacher) must balance all three elements of the rhetorical triangle: speaker, topic, and audience. The second is **life writing**, a genre that, in recent decades, has become popular for its inclusive nature. Through using these multipurpose tools of our discipline–the rhetorical stance and various forms of life writing–I argue that teachers can help students not only gain academic skills, but also crucial life skills to help them in private as well as public contexts.

Throughout this dissertation, then, I share research in composition theory as well as life writing studies to discuss ways English teachers can aid students' personal as well as professional and academic development. Specifically, I discuss research and my own teaching experience related to three forms of life writing: free writing or journaling; lower-case expressive writing (a term from composition scholarship); and upper-case Expressive Writing (a term from psychology scholarship). In the latter chapters, I also consider benefits of studying life writing as literature: namely, as literature, life writing is a genre that has historically included men, women, and minority writers of all stripes, and so can be instructive on many levels, personal as well as social. However, whereas many other scholars champion life writing for political ends (and rightly so), as a scholar with deeply held religious beliefs, I also claim life writing for religious teachers and students who would be inspired, and instructed, by reading life stories penned by heroes of their faith. In short, I argue that, for the current cultural moment, life writing is ideal for both composition and literature courses, both as writing activities and as texts of study, because life writing speaks to all audiences, and it invites all to participate. Put another way, life writing offers limitless possibilities for supporting our students not just as scholars, but also as selves.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: What Are We Teaching, and Why?

> My chief concern is that our educational system does not focus on the inner lives of students or help them to acquire the self-understanding that is the basis for a satisfying life. Nor, by and large, does it provide the safe and nurturing environment that people need in order to grow. My teachers have not been of the usual kind–a dog, a course of massages, Alzheimer's patients, homeless people, Buddhist meditation, a nondenominational, charismatic African-American Church. The experiences that have meant the most to me have taken forms that are antithetical to what we mean when we refer to learning in an academic sense. Overcoming my resistance to these nonintellectual modes of knowing has been the work of my life in recent years. What was lacking in me–respect for the whole human organism, emotions, body, and spirit, as well as mind–is what is lacking in American education as well. (Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, p. xii)

"What should I teach?" For as long as English has been a school subject, teachers and scholars in the field have faced this question. What should we teach in our writing and literature classes? In her thought-provoking conclusion to her academic memoir, *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins details some key realizations near the end of her teaching career. Namely, she realizes she has to "unlearn" much of what she learned during her formal schooling, a journey that she characterizes as lonely, frustrating, and "misshapen." By "misshapen," Tompkins means that school did not prepare her for many of the things she needed to do in life. Rather, she notices that American colleges focus almost solely on the development of disciplinary knowledge, with little corresponding attention to what she calls "self-knowledge." In the case of English PhDs, she also notes that attention to pedagogical training is almost completely ignored (at least, she says it was neglected in her program at Yale). To show why this imbalance is so detrimental to professors, not to mention their students, she writes how, despite having and *being* a PhD, she later had to address some serious gaps in her education. Some of the gaps are her lack of listening skills to students in order to provide relevant and useful instruction. Another gap is her lack of being able

to listen to *herself* and articulate her feelings…and thus get *self*-help for lifelong emotional distress. A third gap is her inability to simply enjoy life without always having to work.

By the time Tompkins writes her self-reflective *Life in School*, her mission as a teacher is to find a better way, to offer students a more "integrated" education than what she got: she wants to help her students learn how to cope with the problems of life, not just *study* and *talk about* academic subjects; she also wants to help her students know how to have a life outside of school and enjoy that life. In other words, she is concerned with making selves, not just scholars.

Thus, she embarks on what she calls her "experimental courses," in an effort to provide the "integrated education" she never received, but which she is now trying to gain in her personal time. Devoting or creating time and space to non-academic, relaxing, connective activities–such as *listening to her students*–in fact, is the biggest insight Tompkins gives in regards to creating an "integrated" education. In her latter chapters, she relates that once she got interested in pedagogy, she got interested in both her students' lives, as well as the operation of her campus, Duke University. She started listening more to her students, of course, but she also started interviewing administrators, as well as support staff like deans and campus counselors, to see how they were meeting students' needs. She relates shame that professors, those most highly regarded, are generally unaware of the big picture of students' lives, comparing the professors' jobs to "turning one little screw" in the whole operation, the screw being their one academic specialty. She laments this disconnect between the students' holistic needs and what they are learning in college classrooms. She makes it a goal to create more space for students (and faculty and staff) to share the knowledge and life experience *they* bring with them, and to get more in touch with one another. Literally, she works with the University to create a coffee bar on campus, a place she hopes will become a space where people can commune *as* people; she is

trying to counter the tendency of academics to hole themselves away and work like machines on their papers and projects as if there is no other world. In her words: "Sometimes I think that bringing up the subject of coffee in the right time and at the right place is the best thing I ever did in my career as a professor" (197). Most of the suggestions for teaching she provides, in fact, have to do with creating shared experiences for students to have together: field trips, poetry readings by candlelight, class meetings and parties in students' homes, or her own home.

These innovative teaching ideas only come after her wake-up call, however, only after she realizes that the painstaking literary lectures she's been preparing all these years (made in the image of those she imbibed at Yale), are generally not getting through to students. From a rhetorical analysis standpoint, her lectures are not getting through to students because she has committed the sin described by Wayne Booth, called the "pedant's" stance. (This is a fault that, I'll argue in chapter 4, is also committed by the medievalist and Tompkins contemporary, Jane Chance.) That is, Tompkins has focused most of her energy into displaying her knowledge about her topic, or her disciplinary content, with little regard to either her audience *or* herself as the speaker–audience and speaker being the other two critical ingredients in achieving rhetorical efficacy, according to Wayne Booth. In other words, Tompkins has not achieved that balanced rhetorical stance that the ideal teacher/speaker/writer/communicator would reach. But unlike Jane Chance in the early 1990s, Jane Tompkins admits this glaring fault of her pedagogy. She plainly admits that she formerly hasn't taken her students into account; moreover, she admits that it is her need to appear smart, stemming from childhood insecurity, that has caused this blind spot, driven this obsession to be a disembodied brain. Overall, the book is a refreshing read for educators who are unhappy with the status quo, and/or unhappy with how they were taught and/or are currently teaching, and who are open to change.

Admittedly, Tompkins can afford to make daring admissions like this, since by the 1990s she has made it as a big-time literary scholar. For that matter, now that she has tenure, she can afford to get wildly creative in course design–not to mention daringly personal in academic articles such as "Me and My Shadow." The experimental courses she describes now cater hardly at all to course content and almost wholly to students…or so she thinks. But there's a plot twist: after several more years of experimental classes, she actually admits that she has created these courses based on what *she* needed emotionally.

## A Note on the Style of this Dissertation

In my own life in school, I've sat through many an English class where I've wondered two questions: "Why does this matter?" And "How am I ever going to use this?" In other words, "So what?" "Who cares?"

I am writing this project because I never want to teach a class in which my students wonder those same questions. In addition, I never want my students to feel I am talking over them, or talking at them, or simply showing off my academic vocabulary without letting them inside it. Like Jane Tompkins, I want to do unto my students as I wish my teachers had done unto me.

Ditto for my writing.

I don't appreciate reading articles or books that don't speak to me like a whole person (head and brain only, without a heart or a history). So I'm writing in the style I like to read. As a teacher writing to other teachers (who may or may not have received much pedagogical training), along with giving the requisite research and theory, my goal is to give several

illustrative personal stories and teaching anecdotes. In the tradition of Jane Tompkins, I want this to be a really useful work for fellow teachers, and, by extension, for the students they will teach.[1]

## The Main Question: What Should I Teach?

The main question I set out to answer in this dissertation is "What should I teach?" Although this started out as a personal inquiry some twelve years ago when I, then a timid, insecure twenty-four-year-old, began my teaching career in a small Texas high school, this question has turned into a larger scholarly inquiry: what should *we*, as a discipline–as college English teachers trying to prepare students for the world–teach? As far as college writing, it is taken for granted that composition instructors will teach students to write for college; at least in freshman composition, the question of "what to teach" has been somewhat settled by the WPA. In its most recent position statement, the WPA lists the following three priorities:

- Rhetorical knowledge
- Critical reading, thinking, and composing
- Processes

I agree with all of these, and I base my pedagogy around them, but I will argue, shortly, that that's not enough. As to college literature, the "what to teach" debate is less settled, and possibly growing more contentious in the twenty-first century…which is why I will devote several

[1] Jane Tompkins clearly considered herself a maverick in her heyday; she was one of the earlier, louder voices calling for this integrated education, the personal voice with the scholarly voice, the private along with the public up for discussion and even display. However, since her 1986 manifesto, "Me and My Shadow," and since her 1996 memoir, *A Life in School*, some things have changed; the scholarly climate is different, to the point where I, a no-name academic, am able to write an "integrated" dissertation like this–by integrated, I mean I include both personal and scholarly writing. In 2009, Lynn Z. Bloom used the term *creative nonfiction* to write about personal and once-private stuff from her public/academic platform; in Bloom's words, the porch was "getting crowded" with creative-scholarly writers in the early 2000s, but there was room for more. I concur!

chapters to the question. In any case, I am hoping that my audience can agree with Jane Tompkins and myself that, as we prepare students for *life in school*, we should also be preparing them for *life outside school*. Therefore, my argument rests on the warrant that if certain writing styles, and if certain literatures, prepare students for life, we should teach them. We should teach the disciplinary content most useful to students' lives—i.e., the content/skills with the biggest reach, or with the potential to make the biggest difference in their lives.

In thinking about what the general population of students will have to do over their lifetimes, I have identified three areas where communication is essential to their wellbeing and well-functioning:

Private Life–one's relationship to one's self (and to God). The ability to express one's thoughts and needs, and process one's problems, is important to mental and spiritual health. Therefore we should provide help with and tools for expressing and processing ordinary life as well as extraordinary circumstances.

Interpersonal Life–one's relationship with his or her intimates and acquaintances. Healthy family, friend, and other relationships are an important part of life for most. Therefore, we should help students learn skills for better communication with those surrounding them.

Public Life–one's presentation of the self in public spheres, such as to employers, teachers, coworkers/colleagues.

I think most English teachers can agree that we should prepare students for life in these areas if possible, *if* we have the appropriate training and tools. However, some might say that we are not trained or qualified to help with the first or second items (isn't that the job of parents, pastors, and therapists?). To those educators, I would agree that no, often we are not trained, and thus not qualified to help students with these items. We can't do what we are not trained or

taught to do, as Jane Tompkins shows us. No disagreement. Ah, but when we realize we could do better, I hope that we, like Tompkins, will do what we can, *in our roles as English teachers*, which I define as teachers of language and literature. I, for one, have amassed a collection of life experiences and formal research that I feel have equipped me to speak in certain capacities to the needs on this list; within the archives of our discipline lie tools and vocabulary to address personal and interpersonal life that fall within ethical guidelines of my role as a teacher, and it is our duty, as informed instructors, to learn and leverage them, to the extent that we are able to do so.

## The Answer: Support Selves as We Support Scholars

First, I appreciate the WPA statement; I think it well articulates many of the priorities of successful composition classrooms. However, for myself, the statement leaves out some crucial objectives that I consider my job to address in college composition, and particularly in freshman composition. These objectives pertain to the personal needs of my students—their needs as individuals—as opposed to their needs as academic or public writers. In other words, the statement does a good job at explaining what kinds of knowledge we should impart to students for classroom and workplace success. But, for me, there is a missing element in this description: the students themselves, not to mention their experiences. Seasoned teachers know that students bring a range of abilities and backgrounds to the classroom. We cannot assume all students start with the same knowledge or with any certain skill level in writing. As such, experienced teachers allow for this writing diversity and will often assign a diagnostic essay, in order to measure students' writing skills. But the "diversity" of our students extends far beyond their writing abilities.

In recent decades, scholarship in English has preoccupied itself with recognizing and including many forms of diversity in the canon and in our classrooms—in this domain, "diversity" refers primarily to identity markers such as class, race, and gender. For my purposes, I would like to take a lesson from this "move to inclusion." However, I would like to repurpose the term "diversity" to refer not to class, race, or gender diversity, but to "neurodiversity." This term refers to individuals who struggle with what have traditionally been labeled as mental disabilities. Many definitions of neurodiversity name disorders such as autism or ADHD, but I would like to also include the overwhelmingly common mental struggles of stress, depression, and anxiety. By using this term "neurodiversity," I don't mean to suggest that we can or should try to diagnose our students; that's not our job. What I am saying is that we should be mindful that our students come to us with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and challenges, many that we cannot see on the surface. As researchers like MacCurdy, Carello and Butler, Spear, and Rak have shown, many students come to us carrying invisible trauma; thus, we should strive for "trauma-informed teaching": that is, an awareness that our students each have different needs.

Similar to the literary canon debate, which increasingly calls for scholars and practitioners in English to consider the *individuals* represented in literature anthologies, and include writers of all classes, colors, and genders, I argue that teachers in English need to consider the individuals they are teaching, and invent assignments and writing tasks that consider and work with the "neurodiversity," or we could say the *life* diversity, of all students. My main intervention in this dissertation will be infusing life writing regularly in course design from a rhetorical standpoint.

Namely, in upcoming chapters, I will discuss four forms of life writing that I have found to be particularly helpful to my teaching philosophy:

- free writing or journaling, a type of uncensored personal writing that may or may not be read by the teacher
- lower-case expressive writing (the term comes from composition scholarship), a conversational form of writing that linguist James Britton said was the language "closest to the self," and the basis for acquiring other forms of writing
- upper-case Expressive Writing (a term from psychology scholarship), which connotes writing about traumatic events
- literary forms of life writing, such as autobiography and memoir (I also refer to this variety as "life writing as literature")

Following, using interdisciplinary research from composition, literature, and psychology, I will argue that using these forms of life writing across the English curriculum will help address the neurodiversity, and/or life diversity, of our students, enhance cognition and mental health, assist students in public discourse, and assist with personal development. Before I launch the specifics of this argument, however, let me back up and first consider the "what to teach" question from the standpoint of composition scholarship, since this is where my inquiry began ten years ago.

## Theoretical Background

Answering the "what to teach" question from a philosophical level calls upon one to articulate one's ideology, or call it worldview, or, as James Berlin did, one's version of reality. As he said, "to teach writing is to teach a version of reality" ("Contemporary Composition" 236). If we take Berlin's cue, when we ask ourselves what to teach, we should also ask ourselves these deeper questions: "What do I believe about reality?" In other words, "Where is knowledge

located?" "What kind of knowledge are we talking about?" "Who, if anyone, gets to *make* knowledge?" And, finally, "Who gets to *share* knowledge?"

When I began teaching in 2008, then at a small Texas high school, I frantically asked the question "What should I teach?" I had graduated in May, been hired in June, and faced go-time in August. That year, as I asked "What should I teach," I really meant, "How can I fill up the time?" I remember the year going like this: I rushed at breakneck speed every weekend to try to fill up the minutes and keep my little hellions out of trouble. On the weekdays I came home too exhausted to care about anything other than survival. In other words, you might say I didn't care a fig about Berlin's claim about reality. For me, that first year, competence connoted filling the time, keeping my freshmen out of trouble, and maintaining my sanity.

Seriously. It was not a small task to stay mentally level. I was very depressed that year.[2] Indeed, I could not get to the underlying philosophy of my teaching until I was un-depressed. Thankfully, the summer between my first and second years of teaching hosted dramatic healing; I became, for the first time in over ten years, happy to be alive. By extension, I was happy to teach, and now I could attend to deeper philosophical matters.

Now, before asking "What should I teach in my classes?" I always asked myself: "What are my goals for my students?" "What skills do they most need?" "How can I best help them?" As noted above, we also need to ask ourselves "What am I qualified to teach?" and "How can I leverage the professional training I *do* have in order to best help students?" I pursued these questions through my second and third years of high school teaching, and then, promptly pursued them into graduate school, where I elected to study rhetoric and composition, and write my

[2] I described this year in chapter 18 of *Ending the Pain*

master's thesis[3] on these and similar questions. It was during my master's degree that I was first introduced to the field of composition studies and the deep theoretical debates undergirding the question "What should we teach?"

To return to James Berlin, in the eighties he classified the then-current approaches to teaching composition according to three guiding theories. In his 1982 article "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," he began with the assertion that many theories of writing at the time were getting something wrong: that is, while they correctly defined the features of composition or rhetoric (writer, reality, reader, and language), they incorrectly held that the only difference between the theories was the degree to which each of the features was emphasized. For Berlin, the differences in these theories of composing instead pointed to different interpretations of reality. Hence his claim "To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality" (236).

Continuing, Berlin set out four dominant approaches to composition that represented different ways of conceiving reality: the **Neo-Aristotelians or Classicists**, the **Positivists or Current-Traditionalists** (this view has been pretty well discarded by informed composition teachers; I also discounted it in my thesis), the **Neo-Platonists or Expressionists**, and the **New Rhetoricians**. Said Berlin, from the **Aristotelian view**, reality can "be known and communicated, with language serving as the unproblematic medium of discourse" (237). The purpose of rhetoric, in this sense, becomes finding the best means for persuading an audience

[3] My thesis was entitled *A Graduate English Major's Search for Meaning: Toward a Pedagogy of Creative Rhetoric.*

and/or communicating truth.[4] The next approach, **Neo-Platonism or Expressionism**, holds that truth cannot be apprehended through sensory experience, because the material world is constantly changing; instead, truth is discovered though a "private vision of a world that transcends the physical" (241). In addition, it is believed that individuals can discover truth, but not communicate it: "Truth can be learned but not taught. The purpose of rhetoric then becomes not the transmission of truth, but the correction of error, the removal of that which obstructs the personal apprehension of the truth. And the method is dialectic, the interaction of two interlocuters of good will intent on arriving at knowledge" (241). Berlin stresses that while teachers using this method include group work and discussion, the focus is not on reaching an audience, but using the audience to help the writer remove error, remove "what is false to the self, what is insincere and untrue to the individual's own sense of things" (243). Thus, priority is placed on individuals' expressions of truth, as individuals understand truth.

**The New Rhetoric**, by contrast, denies that truth is discoverable as a "static entity available for retrieval" (244). Berlin argues that instead of truth coming prior to language, language comes prior to truth: truth is made (as a result of the four elements of communication working in a dialectical relationship); truth is not merely found. Berlin aligns with the final group, and argues that, in teaching writing, teachers have the responsibility to help students

[4] Berlin says that most textbooks claiming to be Aristotelian are actually "operating within the paradigm of what has come to be known as the now (in the twenty-first century) unpopular Current-Traditional Rhetoric, or Positivist–the paradigm that "dominate[d] the thinking about writing instruction" at that time (239). Berlin locates the epistemological grounds for this approach in Scottish Common Sense Realism, where it is believed that "All knowledge is founded on the simple correspondence between sense impressions and the faculties of the mind" (239). This method departs from Aristotelian logic in that it relies on induction alone, not deduction: "It is the individual sense impression that provides the basis on which all knowledge can be built. Thus the new scientific logic of Locke replaces the old deductive logic of Aristotle as the method for understanding experience. The world is still rational, but its system is to be discovered through the experimental method, not through logical categories grounded in a mental faculty" (239). This method includes no inventional system, but focuses primarily on developing skill in arrangement and style.

understand reality and their role in it. In his conclusion he adds to this thesis, saying that "Everyone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the *same* process. The test of one's competence as a composition teacher, it seems to me, resides in being able to recognize and justify the version of the process being taught, complete with all of its significance for the student" (249).

While I may not entirely agree with Berlin's view of reality, I *do* agree that the test of one's competence as a teacher involves examining one's own teaching and being able to justify one's methods, according to how they meet students' needs. And that, in a nutshell, is what this project is all about. I was once an incompetent composition teacher; now, I hope to demonstrate that I am a competent teacher, because I know what version of writing I am teaching and I can justify why it is important for my students.

## Further Scholarly Background on this Project

This project takes off from where my master's thesis left off. When I first examined the question "What should we teach?" in 2012, I didn't go too deeply into matters of ideology or versions of reality. Rather, I became fascinated with the "what should we teach" question through that famous CCC dialogue between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in the late eighties and early nineties. (I also gave a brief history of composition studies, which I will not repeat here.) The written record of the "debate" suggested that the two men stood at opposing poles of the "what to teach" spectrum, with Elbow championing personal writing (closest to Berlin's "Neo-Platonism" or "Expressionism"), and Bartholomae holding up academic writing (closest to Berlin's "New Rhetoric") as the gold standard for college composition. It made for an interesting debate and spawned numerous articles over the years. However, after researching and

writing on this topic for my master's thesis, I concluded that the field wasn't really as contentious as it had been made to sound. From what I read, many scholars had demonstrated a continuous loop between expressive and academic (or audience-focused) writing. Even though some scholars believed truth was made (by numerous individuals interacting in society), and others believed truth was found (by single individuals looking inside themselves, or looking to a higher power, or to some Absolute Truth), it seemed that most scholars could agree that both personal writing *and* audience-driven writing were useful in the college classroom.

Now, whether or not most teachers were *employing* the two approaches equally I did not discover. But for my own purposes, I was satisfied that I had discovered ample, and solid, theoretical grounds for teaching a blended pedagogy—one that welcomed expressive writing *alongside* academic and audience-driven discourse. With my pedagogy of "Creative Rhetoric," I also welcomed creativity, both in process and product. I believed that the best writing courses would merge the best aspects of the three approaches I examined in my thesis—academic writing (or any type of audience-focused), expressive writing, and creative writing approaches[5]—and I was excited to try out my ideas.

After completing my master's degree, I was hired to teach writing at Southwestern Adventist University, first as an adjunct, and later as a full-time instructor. There, I had maximum freedom to teach how I wanted, and I did. I loved the assignments and activities I was able to create and facilitate–assignments that asked students to invent original, creative, *fun* essays that also met the needs of particular audiences. And my students seemed to love them as well. One section of Research Writing presented me with a class card and gift on the last day of

[5] Creative writing because, as I argued, this was also a major approach, as important as the others, and it had been overlooked by Berlin, as well as too many of my own writing teachers.

class. The card read: “The difference you make makes all the difference.” One student in that class wrote me a separate card that thanked me for being the one and only English teacher she ever enjoyed. I later published an essay[6] describing my experience with that student: namely, she had started the class glassy-eyed and plagiarized the first essay; I confronted her; she turned her act around and become a top student.

Then, I returned to UTA for my PhD, and the teaching scenery changed. I was assigned to teach freshman composition, which included a series of assignments that were standardized for the purposes of being included in the state-mandated college core. In other words, I did not have freedom with the major essay assignments or most of the readings; however, I *did* have some freedom on the margins, which I put to good use. Namely, while I appreciated the major assignments and fully understood their rationale (they did a great job at incorporating the aims of the WPA), I still found myself wanting to supplement the syllabus a bit, which, thankfully, UTA gave me leeway to do. With the freedom I had in designing daily lessons, I worked to creatively inject expressive assignments into a curriculum that was decidedly argument-focused. (I describe some of my innovations in chapter 3.)

At the same time, in preparation for my comps, I was revisiting the old composition scholarship, including lots of stuff from the eighties—a period that saw renewed attention to audience awareness, in the classical rhetorical tradition, and a new focus on academic discourse communities, in Berlin’s “new rhetorical” tradition. In addition, new theories of social construction were in heated talks with composition’s newish fascination with cognitive process theories, which had been largely popularized in the seventies by scholars like Mina Shaugnessy,

[6] “Learning from the Good Teacher: Spiritual Reflections from the Writing Classroom.” *Southwestern Union Record*, vol. 118, no. 4, July/Aug. 2019.

Janet Emig, and Linda Flower. Encountering the material again in 2019 was invigorating. As I read Donald Murray's manifesto to "Teach writing as process not product," and Elbow's passionate argument for "ignoring audience" ("Closing my Eyes as a I Speak," "Desert Island Discourse"), I felt reenergized as a writing teacher—and inspired as a writer. I also appreciated reading those essays from the non-expressivists—or the more audience-focused theorists—Andrea Lunsford, David Bartholomae, James Berlin, Pat Bizzell, and Ken Bruffee. While I didn't *center* my pedagogy around their work, I recognized that I had learned a lot from them, and so had my students. Their contributions often made it into my teaching.

One article I particularly appreciated, and which, like Berlin's article, gives another snapshot of the critical mood of the day, was Patricia Bizzell's "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing." Bizzell, coming from a viewpoint similar to Berlin's, proceeded to lay out two approaches to teaching writing: **inner-directed** and **outer-directed**. The inner-directed approach resembled Berlin's Neo-Platonism, or Expressionism, and the outer-directed resembled Berlin's New Rhetoric. In her words, "Inner-directed theorists seek to discover writing processes that are so fundamental as to be universal. Later elaborations of thinking and language-using should be understood as outgrowths of individual capacities" (369). From this view, says Bizzell, once students have developed their cognitive abilities, the writing task becomes, mainly, fitting style to audience, or audience analysis (370). On the other hand, Bizzell wrote, outer-directed theorists believed that "thinking and language use can never occur free of a social context that conditions them" (370). She was saying that our language use always develops in response to and is shaped by our discourse communities. Although Bizzell clearly sided more with the second view, in the end, she argued that our writing instruction should be informed by both views.

Like Bizzell, I believe our writing instruction should be informed by both views. However, although I agreed with much of what Bizzell, Berlin, and Bartholomae said, I found myself bristling at times when I read claims stating that we should *primarily* teach academic or audience-focused discourse, such as discourse of the professions (Lindemann). For her part, Bizzell argued that analyzing discourse and teaching discourse communities should be the main business of composition classes; in this way, she said, we could help students reread dominant narratives not as reality or truth, but as constructions of discourse communities.[7] Ken Bruffee, in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" made a similar claim: "Most of what we teach today—or should be teaching—in composition courses is the normal discourse of most academic, professional, and business communities. The rhetoric taught in our composition textbooks comprises—or should comprise—the conventions of normal discourse of those communities" (404). And Erika Lindemann, in her unflinching essay, "Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature," made this bold statement:

> Freshman English does what no high school writing course can do: provide opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes of college writing. Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement. (312)

Huh. Even though I had, since encountering these arguments ten years ago, largely incorporated discourse communities and rhetorical awareness into my pedagogy, I found myself reacting strongly against these arguments upon my second reading. Why?

[7] I particularly like Bizzell's suggestion that we can be more helpful to basic writers if we approach their difficulties with academic language as difficulties joining a discourse community.

The primary shortcoming I saw was that these arguments—arguments that make communicating in public the primary goal—like the WPA statement, downplayed the role of the individual in creating or transmitting knowledge. Now, although I freely admit that I'm an expressivist through and through, I *also* believe, with New Rhetoricians like Berlin, Bizzell, and Bruffee, that *some* kinds of knowledge and truth are made by communities. At the least, I certainly agree that societal norms and conventions are made, or constructed, by discourse communities. I could also agree with Bizzell that deconstructing some of these norms was a good thing. As well, I would say that even the Absolute Truth I subscribe to as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian needs careful interpretation and transmission—and given the slipperiness of language, this requires great rhetorical care, and careful rhetorical training. However, I could *not* agree that teaching students to analyze, deconstruct, and write to fit these socially constructed norms should be the *primary* goal of college composition.

Aside from my personal conviction that not all truth is made, I also noticed that this scholarship of yesteryear necessarily failed to reach certain conclusions of composition scholarship of the nineties and early two-thousands. I am thinking especially of the writing as healing scholarship, which finds value in writing both publicly *and* privately about personal experiences for its many benefits to individuals—not to mention its benefits to their audiences, and even society at large. Throughout this dissertation I will discuss some of the benefits of life writing to individuals: these include improving cognitive functioning and one's writing process (O'Connell and Dyment, Elbow), healing from trauma (MacCurdy, Spear, Pennebaker, Gu, etc.), aiding the grieving process (McClocklin and Lengelle), and altering one's identity (Weiner and Rosenwald, Eakin). But here I will dwell for a moment on the benefits to society when we allow students to process and transmit their personal experiences through writing.

As scholars like Yuleinys Castillo and Jerome Fischer point out, allowing students to write about themselves and their lives enhances their emotional intelligence, and this ultimately can help them deal more effectively with their clients in human service professions. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services points out, human service professionals have important roles in our society involving interpersonal relationships, and these roles and relationships require "listening to people's ideas and concerns" (184). Castillo and Fischer add that these professionals need also to be able to recognize their own feelings and concerns, particularly when they are "in disagreement with the individuals they are serving" (184). Building upon a number of other studies showing expressive writing's role in improving emotional intelligence (EI) (King 2001, 2002; Lepore and Fernandez-Berrocal Ragan & Ramos 2004; Pennebaker 2002), Castillo and Fischer designed a study to test the effect of expressive writing on the emotional intelligence of students destined to become human service professionals. In their study, expressive writing referred to a "program of daily journaling to process emotions." As expected, incorporating expressive writing into the course led to significantly improved scores on two different emotional intelligence tests from the beginning of a fifteen-week semester to the end. These researchers concluded that, since expressive writing led to increased emotional intelligence, "stakeholders in human services education should strive to include this content in program planning and curriculum development" (190). I read this as a call to college writing teachers everywhere, especially teachers of first-year writing.

This is because first-year writing teachers serve on the frontlines of incoming college students, many of whom will go on to human service professions. As Castillo and Fischer state, these students need skills in listening to and responding to feelings, and understanding and expressing their own feelings. However, I would go further than Castillo and Fischer and say that

*all* students—regardless of their professional intentions—need these skills, because all humans have to live and work and dwell among other humans. We composition teachers are also a brand of human service professionals, our job being to equip students with communication skills they need for life, so it only makes sense to include life writing—or writing about the self—in our curriculum.

Indeed, while scholarship in the decades following the eighties has offered numerous reasons for teaching private and/or personal-focused writing alongside public, audience-focused writing, the WPA apparently has not been moved to include private and personal-focused writing in their top objectives. Thus, it seemed to me that someone needed to make an addendum to the WPA's already excellent list of objectives.

So, even though I had made a similar argument before, I decided that certain audiences *still* needed to be convinced of the value of enfolding life writing, but especially private writing, into college English, and especially in the first-year curriculum. Let me be clear: I *do* think that preparing students for writing in the academy and the workplace *is* the business of college composition, and particularly in the first semester. However, I do not think it should be the *only* business. At most, it should be one-half of the curriculum. If we consult the statistics on mental health and college students (see chapter 3)—and if we take time to simply chat with our students—it becomes obvious that students need help with more than just navigating public discourse; they often need some rhetorical resources for talking to *themselves*, and for communicating with others (such as family, friends, and significant others) in other private contexts.

In other words, I am saying that, along with teaching students writing skills for successfully joining public discourse communities, we need to teach writing skills for achieving

success in other contexts. A few of these successes and other contexts I can think of include enhancing mental wellness wherever students may find themselves (in crowded rooms, as well as empty rooms), fostering healthy public *and private* interpersonal communication, and becoming self-actualized individuals who may or may not decide to speak, or write, in the socially constructed discourses surrounding them.

## My Argument

Based on my review of various approaches to teaching composition, as well as my personal and scholarly background in life writing, I ultimately argue that instruction in rhetorical theory, coupled with reading and writing autobiographical forms, also known as life writing, can provide the most useful curriculum to the most students. Where my approach differs from the WPA statement, and UTA's FYW curriculum, is the emphasis I put on private writing. Unlike the WPA statement and UTA's FYW curriculum, which both advocate gearing best practices in writing instruction toward achieving successful public discourse, I advocate for using these same best practices in writing instruction to achieve positive outcomes in both public and private contexts. In short, I believe communicating well in public and private spheres is equally important to student success; therefore, we should strive to equip students for productive communication in both areas.

## Organization

In chapter 2, I review relevant items of research in composition studies and life writing studies. In chapter 3, "Life Writing, Cognition, and Mental Health in Freshman Composition," I begin by addressing the "mental health crisis" of traditional-age college freshmen and suggest

theoretical frameworks, as well as writing assignments, that can not only help students through the college transition, but also fulfill the academic aims of the freshman composition class, as suggested by the WPA. Included will be a look at three kinds of life writing: freewriting, as well as the two different definitions of expressive writing (lower-case and upper-case E), according to research in psychology and in composition studies. At the end of the chapter, I discuss what I did in my freshman composition class at UTA in 2019 in order to address the mental health of my students, while also adhering to the guidelines of UTA's first-year writing program.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Freshman Composition and the Middle Passage: How Slave Narratives Can Support Writing Instruction, Academic Inquiry, and Personal Development," and has been adapted from the first seminar paper I wrote for my PhD program. The class was Eighteenth Century African American Evangelical Literature (spring 2019), and it spurred the germ of this entire dissertation. It was in this paper that I really starting formulating my personal guidelines for teaching literature, as I was currently teaching at a small private institution that required me to teach both composition and literature. So, in this chapter I continue my meditations on the freshman composition course, but this time, I think through what literature I would teach if I *did* teach literature in that course. I outline my philosophy for choosing literature for freshman composition by working from my underlying philosophy of teaching writing, Creative Rhetoric. In a nutshell, I center on slave narratives, and more broadly, eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature. As I work through the explanations to these reasons, I also make pedagogical suggestions for my fellow teachers and graduate students.

Chapter 5, entitled "Life Writing in the Literature Classroom: A Rhetorical Approach," continues my meditations on how to design a rhetorically effective literature class, but this time I consider general education literature courses, which are commonly referred to as "sophomore

literature." In this chapter, I argue that life writing studied *as literature* has something for everyone, because writers of all backgrounds–writers of all cultures, classes, races, religions, and genders–have written about their experiences. In other words, life writing provides an attractive in-road to teachers of all belief systems, ideologies, and backgrounds. Secondly, I discuss how teachers can leverage the rhetorical triangle in many ways as they teach life writing, in order to effectively reach their student audience. For this portion, I examine two case studies from two medieval literature classrooms, along with briefly analyzing *The Book of Margery Kempe,* to think through these points. In the final portion of the chapter, I discuss how I am applying the concepts of life writing and the rhetorical triangle in my own American Literature I class (spring 2022) at Southwestern Adventist University.

In chapter 6, "Life Writing and the Christian Teacher," I address a major identity marker that I as the researcher come with–I am a (Seventh-day Adventist) Christian. As such, I tackle one of the top concerns (Adventist) Christians have historically had when it comes to teaching or reading literature: what should we do about fiction? Specifically, I begin with some concerns on fiction named by Ellen White, the foremother of my own faith tradition, Seventh-day Adventism. Foremost, White is concerned that studying fiction necessarily entails neglecting, and destroying interest in, subject matter of greater importance to the Christian life. Following this discussion on White, I discuss several common responses to White's criticisms on fiction from other Adventist English professionals and then give my own reaction. In the second half of the chapter, I describe how life writing as a viable field of academic inquiry has been a precious discovery for religious teachers who remain concerned with teaching fiction. Secondly, whereas many other scholars champion life writing for political ends (and I can't blame them), I see a huge opportunity for religious teachers to claim life writing as a fruitful method for learning about their faith traditions

and those heroes of their faith who, at some point, decided to write down their experiences. This chapter includes ideas for teaching the writings of William Apess from a rhetorical stance, in both secular and Christian classrooms.

## Methodology

In this dissertation, I take a qualitative approach that could perhaps best be summed up in the term *autoethnography*. Famous autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. xix). Within this methodology, two other concepts I heavily rely on are Rogerian argument and Wayne Booth's rhetorical stance.

Following the Rogerian model of argument, which more recent researchers have updated to simply "rhetorics of listening" or "rhetorics of assent" (Booth and Elbow) or "rhetorics of silence" (Belanoff, Gere), I have spent the last three years "listening" to writers and teachers of many other backgrounds, worldviews, and ideologies to try to understand what *they* understand, and what we can agree on. I have also spent my time in the classroom listening to students and collecting "data" (usually writing samples or surveys) about what *they* say they need, and about what they say we composition teachers should teach. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, I will be synthesizing the scholarly literature that I have found most useful to college English teachers and their students; I will also share data I have collected from my own students.

Secondly, taking Wayne Booth's advice about the rhetorical stance—namely, effective communication must include due attention to the topic, audience, *and* the speaker or writer—I will share some of my own teaching (and student-ing) experiences. As I teach my students, writers and speakers themselves are crucial components of any rhetorical situation. Because I am

arguing that writing classrooms should invite the voices of student writers, I feel it is only fitting for me to include my own voice in this project, the voice of the researcher. Moreover, by including a patchwork of writing styles–life writing alongside academic writing–I hope to show that life writing can be used as a learning, growing, and meaning-making activity for graduate students as well as undergraduates.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review:

## Relevant Developments in Composition and Life Writing Studies

> The thing I want to say is I've been hiding a part of myself for a long time. I've known it was there but I couldn't listen because there was no place for this person in literary criticism. The criticism I would like to write would always take off from personal experience, would always be in some way a chronicle of my hours and days, would speak in a voice which can talk about everything, would reach out to a reader like me and touch me where I want to be touched . . . . I want to speak in what Ursula LeGuin called the mother tongue. (Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," p. 173)
>
> It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned? We all speak the father tongue, which is impersonal, while decrying the fathers' ideas. (Tompkins, p. 174)

I remember the moment well: I was studying in the UTA Writing Center lounge, February 2020, when Jane Tompkins nearly knocked me over. That is, her essay "Me and My Shadow"—a manifesto calling for a personal voice, a voice that connects with others, a voice that captures the human being writing. If I had not been at work, I would have cried openly. Was I reading this right? A prolific literary scholar writing "to hell with it," meaning to hell with the "father tongue," meaning, essentially, to hell with academic-speak?

Tompkins had me from page one, where she describes an internal war between her two selves, her academic self and her personal self. But the part that really got me was her conclusion, this *bitter, confessional* coda that yes, she was an angry feminist, and yes, she had repressed issues (and a therapist), and damn it, she was tired of pretending she didn't, and, well shoot, maybe it was worth putting it out there into the academic world of male privilege. Even if there wasn't much of a precedent for writing this way.

Tompkins wrote this *in the eighties*. By the time I read it, the year was 2020. Where had I been all these years?

The answer is I had been in the rhetoric and composition camp, when last in academia. Since gaining my master's degree in 2012, I'd also been at home with my babies, as well as wrapped up in my own anger issues and repressed emotions. Now I was back at graduate school after a seven-year break, picking up an academic career I'd suspended to, well, have babies, and to write about so many troublesome emotions. During those seven years, I had decided my mission was not only to write to and for women struggling with their mental health, but also to teach college students…many of whom I suspected were also struggling with their mental health.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll talk about the move to include life writing in English curriculum, along with the move to include the personal voice in one's scholarship, in a bit. First, let me revisit some of the best developments in composition studies I discovered during my first time in grad school, which I've brought back with me to graduate school the second time around.

## Literature Review Part 1: Best Developments in Composition Studies

Using a rhetoric of listening, as well as employing Booth's rhetorical stance, which seeks to balance the speaker, topic, and audience, this section aims to answer this question: what theories and strategies uncovered by researchers in English studies in the last fifty years have the potential to reach the largest audience and do the most good for the most teachers and students? As I noted in my introduction, many prominent composition scholars have made it their top concern to prepare our students to write for public discourse communities. Erika Lindemann, Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, and Ken Bruffee are just a few of the composition scholars who have argued that preparing students to write for public audiences, notably academic and

workplace audiences, is "the main business of the classroom" (Lindemann). I share these goals. However, my goals for my own classroom extend beyond the public sphere to the private sphere: that is, home, or even, simply, the self—are students equipped to handle the numerous personal challenges they will face in life?

Much like female scholars who have been marginalized or scholars of color who have faced discrimination—scholars who often advocate for gender or racial equality in their courses—in addition to teaching writing skills, I have added another goal to my pedagogy. As a scholar who has faced debilitating mental health struggles, *my* additional goal is to equip my students to navigate the mental and emotional challenges, if not traumas, that *Writing and Healing* author Marian McCurdy states we all inevitably face. Therefore, in this section I will explore the theories and teaching strategies I have come across in composition research that seem most likely to reach the greatest number of teachers and students.

First, I will detail what I see as the best innovations in teaching public discourse. While I believe teaching public discourse should constitute just one of several goals for college composition, I do want to celebrate the useful concepts that have grown out of this scholarship. Particularly, the concept of discourse communities has been a wonderful invention of rhetorical pedagogy. Discourse communities, we can, and should, explain to students, set the rules for speaking and writing in a given community; by repeated usage and adherence to the rules, a discourse becomes "normalized"… that is, until someone disrupts the discourse and does something new. Then, we get what Richard Rorty calls "abnormal discourse" (I love this term; perhaps it could be said I am writing an abnormal dissertation, just like Jane Tompkins wrote an abnormal essay with "Me and My Shadow").

This development overlaps with another useful turn in composition studies, which, I will argue, as many others have, applies to almost any writing situation. That is, the move to viewing all composing as a rhetorical activity. In the sixties, scholars like Lloyd Bitzer and Wayne Booth helped their colleagues understand that every communicative act derives from a rhetorical situation (Bitzer), or from a series of related factors. If writers understand the elements of their rhetorical situation, they can strike the appropriate rhetorical stance (Booth); that is, they can balance the elements of the rhetorical triangle—speaker, topic, and audience—in order to compose a product that responds the most effectively to the constraints of that situation. In past essays, I have written at length about the importance of teaching the concept of the rhetorical triangle in both literature and writing courses, and the importance of teachers taking these concepts to heart *as teachers*, not just as writers. (I will revisit these concepts in chapter 5.) Toby Fulwiler and Art Young, in their book *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature,* state that, decades ago, composition research diverged from literary research in that compositionists made the study of their students' learning processes part of the business of their research. In other words, compositionists paid attention to their rhetorical situation, especially their audience. It was this attention to audience, Fulwiler and Young argue, that resulted in the great gains in composition research throughout the seventies and eighties, or the heyday of writing process research.

The writing process movement is the next development I want to stress. Just like the rhetorical situation or the rhetorical stance, the concept of "writing as process" has been invaluable to teachers and students of composition. As Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt explain, the writing process grew out of the age of structuralism/constructivism, which they say ran from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. We might note that the movement also grew out of the now

infamous *Newsweek* essay "Why Johnny Can't Write." Suddenly, English teachers were tasked with justifying what they were teaching; a push was made to understand how real writers do their work. So, this age concerned itself with cognitive processes: while literary studies turned to reader response criticism, composition studies turned to research on writing as a process (Emig, Flower and Hayes, Murray). Perhaps not surprisingly, with this focus on the individual, this period also hosted a flowering of expressivism. But more on that in a moment.

Approaching writing as a process seems so commonplace these days that I won't belabor it here. However, as we can see from Donald Murray's late seventies article "Teach the Writing as Process, not Product," as well as a spate of research into cognition and composing, led by Emig, Shaugnessey, and Hayes and Flower, this was not always a common approach; indeed, this was new and exciting territory early in the field of composition studies. While it seems that, by the early 2000s, most composition teachers were using some form of process pedagogy (but Berlin said we weren't all teaching the *same* process), I find that not all *students* have been initiated into this powerful approach to composition. For example, during the 2020-21 school year, when I led UTA's graduate writing center workshops, I made it my habit to ask, at the end of every workshop, which tips were most helpful. Consistently, students told me that viewing writing as a *process*—or, in other words, planning ahead, and seeing *time* as one of their most valuable composing resources—was one of the best tips they had received. These interactions with current graduate students helped me see that the writing process is still a *new* concept to many seasoned students; thus, we should make it our business to actively teach it.

For a final point in this section, I want to briefly revisit the major concept of my master's thesis: how personal writing, often referred to as "expressivism" in the 70s and 80s composition literature, can support academic writing—which concept overlaps with process pedagogy, as

noted above. Again I want to nod to the many researchers who have made connections between the transformations that must go on in writers' brains in order for them to successfully "invent the university" (Bartholomae) or, write in those styles required by various disciplines in the academy. Linda Flower used the terms "writer-based prose" versus "reader-based" prose to talk about how successful academic writers move from placing themselves in the forefront of the composing activity (writer-based prose) to placing their readers in the forefront of their compositions (reader-based prose). Her terms do not exactly overlap with the meanings other scholars have ascribed to the terms "personal" and "academic" writing, but I do think both sets of terms imply a transformation of sorts, whereby writers can use the writing process to move from more familiar discourse to less familiar discourse, such as scholarly writing in the disciplines.

For his part, in the seventies, linguist James Britton laid out a continuum from informal to formal utterances/writing, dividing the continuum into three categories of function:

- **Transactional** is the form of discourse that most fully meets the demands of a participant in events (using language to get things done, to carry out a verbal transaction).
- **Expressive** is the form of discourse in which the distinction between participant and spectator is a shadowy one.
- And **poetic** discourse is the form that most fully meets the demands associated with the role of spectator—demands that are met, we suggested, by MAKING something with the language rather than DOING something with it (158).

Given these categories, we could, for our purposes here, liken academic writing to "transactional" writing, and creative writing to "poetic" writing. Just like in Britton's continuum, academic writing and creative writing have often found themselves at odds in English department (Mayers, Graff). But the role of expressive writing has not always been clearly defined, and has remained somewhere in the fuzzy middle. Britton's extended discussion of expressive writing, which he explained as the language "closest to the self," was particularly helpful to me when writing my master's thesis. Building upon work from Edward Sapir, who said that "ordinary speech is directly expressive" (qtd. in Britton 169), as well as the form of written discourse closest to speech, Britton's research team surmised that expressive writing was the natural starting point for developing the other functions of language: "Expressive writing is thus a matrix from which will develop transactional and poetic writing, as well as the more mature forms of the expressive" (170).

Following Britton's work, Cherryl Armstrong, in her article "Reader-based and Writer-based Perspectives in Composition Instruction," makes some additional, helpful distinctions about expressive language. Drawing on James Britton's useful theories, she says "we can surmise that writer-based prose developmentally precedes reader-based prose. According to Britton, all writing arises initially out of the expressive mode; so the movement to reader-based prose can be seen as a development from expressive into either transactional or poetic forms." Armstrong observes that, in gearing students toward reader-based prose, teachers sometimes guide students away from expressive discourse; however, Armstrong says, writer-based prose is not necessarily produced by the same process as expressive discourse: "We need to remember that the student who has created a writer-based essay (in Flower's terms) has not intended to do so" (84). In Flower's understanding, writer-based prose is a failed attempt to communicate to an

audience. However, James Britton says that expressive discourse is the epitome of effective communication: in his words,

> Thus, the expressive function in our model is not simply the informal end of two scales, the neutral point between participant and spectator role language, but has its own positive function to perform—….The positive function of expressive speech is, in simple terms, to make the most of being with somebody, that is, to enjoy their company, to make their presence fruitful—a process that can profit from exploring with them both the inner and outer aspects of experience. (158-59)

In short, expressive discourse is not the same thing as writer-based prose; expressive discourse is, in fact, a mode of speech that can effectively reach an audience.

Indeed, this work from Britton and Armstrong points out that expressive language can be transactional and, in fact, can prove a very powerful tool in the composition classroom, whether the goal is to write for oneself or write for others. Perhaps expressive writing is not transactional in the way that a traditional argument is, but it can be transactional (can reach an audience) nonetheless. In contrast, as Armstrong observes, basic writers are often unable to ignore audience in order to think about the big picture of what they are trying to express, so their writing comes out garbled; it "does not get ideas straight for the writer, nor does it communicate to a reader" (86). Armstrong concludes with some thoughts about two types of audience awareness: the debilitating type of audience awareness is that of the "teacher as examiner." The productive type of audience, on the other hand, is a group of peers, where the members are not reading to evaluate, but to understand. Based on this research, I think it is safe to say that using the expressive voice, the voice closest to everyday speech, including "I," can be an effective rhetorical tool in the composition classroom and beyond.

To the teachers or scholars who would still argue that students should not use "I," I defer to Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein, who point out in *They Say I Say*, the advice to "never use

I" is outdated. Informed teachers recognize that putting one's ideas and arguments up against the ideas and arguments of other is the business of academic writing, as well as other forms of public writing. So, like Graff and Birkenstein, Britton, and Armstrong, among many others, I argue for allowing students to use their "I's" as they encounter new ideas. Rather than hampering students from learning and engaging in new discourses, I believe this allowance of personal voice and self-expression can lead to more, and more meaningful, engagement.

Following Britton's work, scholars in the 90s and early 2000s surmised that expressive writing was the natural starting point in the freshman composition course. The point here is that, in order to achieve a less familiar discourse, we must move through the channels of discourse we know, and ultimately transform our language in various ways. This connects to the writing process because, of course, going through these transformations takes time.

As I turn to more recent composition scholarship, I want to acknowledge Bizzell's caution that sometimes writing problems in our students are not merely cognitive problems—such as a failure to use the writing process, or failure to adjust writer-based prose to reader-based prose. Sometimes, Bizzell and like scholars remind us, writing problems do not reside in cognitive failure, but rather, they reside in a failure outside the student. For their part, Bizzell, Bartholomae, and others have written of the failure to grasp the conventions of a discourse community, or the failure of teachers to initiate students into relevant discourse communities. These are helpful observations. But as I said before, they are incomplete. These formulations account for problems that may be going on in the classroom, but they do not account for problems going on in students' homes or in their personal lives.

Scholars of the nineties and two-thousands have recognized that an approach that only addresses social conditions, classroom conditions, or even student cognition surrounding the

writing process, is incomplete; fortunately, more recent scholarship has started to fill in these gaps. I'm thinking particularly of the life writing scholarship I referenced in my preface, as well as the "writing as healing" movement that gained traction throughout the nineties and that has remained strong into the twenty-first century. Scholars such as Amy Hamilton Hodges ("First Responders"), Marian MacCurdy (*Writing as Healing*), bell hooks ("Writing Darkness"), Janice Carello and Lisa Butler ("Potentially Perilous Pedagogies"), Cathryn Molloy ("Multimodal Composing as Healing"), Rachel Spear ("Let me Tell you a Story") and Yu Gue, among many others, have acknowledged that students are often troubled by trauma, and teachers need to be aware of it. While some of these scholars argue that we should address the topic of trauma head-on, through class readings and writing assignments centered around trauma (MacCurdy, Spear, Molloy, Gu), others argue that teachers need not (and perhaps *should not*) address trauma head-on, but they still need to be *aware* of the traumas students bring with them (Butler and Carello, Rak). Indeed, when we consider that students come to us not as empty slates but as complex humans with complicated, often traumatic, histories, our goals as educators, and our pedagogies, should expand to make space for the individuals we are teaching and the baggage they are carrying. This "writing as healing" scholarship should aid teachers in helping students confront and/or process their trauma, if and when it comes up, whether environmental trauma (COVID-19, for instance), cultural trauma (racism or sexism), or personal trauma (divorce, abuse, abandonment, loss). In upcoming chapters, I will focus on trauma for numerous reasons, not least of which being that, when students (or citizens) are reeling from trauma, they will be severely limited in how much, or how well, they can engage in other contexts, such as their education, or in the larger society.

On that note, one environmental factor that teachers of composition should pay special attention to is the political climate, and the civic discourse therein. Currently, American society is in a bad way. The country is polarized into two sides that struggle to find common ground, if they even listen to one another at all. I am convinced that one remedy begins in our college classrooms: as teachers of rhetoric and composition, college writing instructors can help students practice and develop skills in responsible rhetoric and respectful civic discourse. For those committed to improving the climate of civic discourse, we can look to the "rhetorics of listening" that were gaining renewed attention at the turn of the century. I think especially of the dialogue from Wayne Booth and Peter Elbow: "The Limits and Alternatives to Skepticism: A Dialogue." Both scholars have the same goal, which is one I share: to help students "enter into or dwell with a point of view that is new or alien," and both build on Carl Rogers's method of listening before speaking or making an argument, famously known as Rogerian Argument. Further, both try to avoid the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism; they both want to expand the focus of rhetoric to not only entail "How can I change *your* mind?" but also "Does *my* mind need changing?" They both "emphasize the role of assent or belief in any model of good thinking, rhetoric, or communicating"; that is, they don't believe that "good thinking" must always equate with "skeptical scrutinizing for flaws and contradictions" (389). They both appreciate critical thinking (in the sense of criticizing or judging) or skeptical thinking, but they emphasize the *limits* of that method; in so doing they also seek to avoid the "either/or trap." In Elbow's words, "We don't seek a monopoly for assent or belief—only to *break* the monopoly of the skeptical, adversarial method" (390).[8] Elbow ends his portion of the dialogue with some suggestions for classroom

[8] Elbow's "small but interesting differences" from Booth are these: he truly equates "critical thinking" with the doubting game, whereas Booth means critical thinking to mean "good thinking"; Booth argues for a middle way and

practices to help with the rhetoric of assent and the believing game. It is thinking skills and rhetorical habits like these that I argue can help students in multiple areas of life: public as well as personal.

On the note of personal life, one last area of research that has gained increasing attention, which I think is worth exploring, and which I *will* explore throughout this project, is life writing in the literature classroom. To connect where I am going to where I have been, let me agree with Elbow's assertion, in his dialogue with Booth, that *story, narrative, and poetry* are useful rhetorical and linguistic devices to "help us dwell in a view or assent or believe" (395), because these devices help us *experience*. In his words, "where doubting thrives on logic, assenting or believing thrives on the imagination and the ability to experience" (395). I argue that literature, and specifically life writing, can aid the development of desired rhetorical skills, because it invites readers to experience life from another's (an "other's") perspective. Life writing invites us to "listen" and enter into other sides. But improved civic discourse is just one of the many benefits life writing can bring to our classrooms. In the following chapters, then, I will expand on these benefits of life writing in the English classroom, especially focusing on the benefits to individual students.

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an ultimate decision, based on the best evidence, whereas Elbow argues for a "kind of figure eight path *all the way around* both Scylla and Charybdis"; in other words, Elbow is not as intent on making a final decision as he is fixed on making sure he has fully and deeply "dwelt in" both sides of the argument. Lastly, Booth's "rhetoric of assent" is more inclined to find agreement, whereas Elbow's believing game "tilts" more toward supporting "individual or minority views that are idiosyncratic, unpopular, or counterintuitive" (392).

Literature Review Part 2: Best Developments in Life Writing Scholarship

Speaking of individual students, when I re-entered graduate school in 2019, I wasn't excited to be a student again. This is because, in the intervening years, I had fully embraced the personal voice via many non-scholarly writing projects. Using terms I knew from my first grad foray, I had styled myself as an "expressive writer," blogger, and memoirist. The kind of scholarly writing I imagined having to write again was, to me, stifling and life-crushing. It choked out emotion; it put on big words to pretend there wasn't a person behind those words. It murdered its authors, in my opinion.

Thankfully, in my second time around as a graduate student, I have found considerable scholarship that validates my choice to use the personal voice. Beginning with Jane Tompkins and the field of "life writing studies," I have also found considerable literary scholarship in which to ground my own scholarly-personal[9] writing style. For instance, Tompkins's sense of her two selves was similar to the same dividing of personalities that compositionist Peter Elbow wrote of at roughly the same time, the late eighties, in his essay "Being a Writer Versus Being an Academic." In this essay, Elbow addresses the dichotomy he sees between the roles of "academic" and "writer," and the division he feels in his own self as a writer and an academic researcher. He says that his opinions are open to sway, but he heavily maintains that, at least in *his* first-year writing classroom, the best practice is to allow students to find their voice and to drill down into their own ideas, as opposed to starting with the ideas of others. Elbow does concede that he wants his students to be comfortable as *both* writers *and* academics, but he

[9] I take this term from Nash, Robert J., and Sydnee Viray, who coauthored an essay entitled "The Who, What, and Why of Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing." *Counterpoints*, vol. 446, Peter Lang AG, 2013, pp. 1–9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42982209.

clearly prioritizes self-expression in his writing assignments over academic forms. Elbow was perhaps my first "academic hero," precisely because his writing felt so *un-academic*. I encountered his ideas in 2011, in one of my first classes as a master's student, and today I continue to rely on his theories and ideas in my own freshman composition classes. (More on Elbow in the next chapter.)

Tompkins's essay also reminded me of Lynn Z. Bloom's work in composition studies. I'm thinking of Bloom's autobiographical collection of essays, *The Seven Deadly Virtues and Other Lively Essays: Coming of Age As a Writer, Teacher, Risk Taker*.[10] In this collection, which spans her multi-decade career as a compositionist, she also, like Elbow, confronts the dichotomy she feels between the scholarly writing she has been required to do in order to move up the academic food chain[11] versus the creative, personal writing she feels called to write, and which she *has* written in spite of norms in her field. I stumbled upon Bloom's collection right at the end of my master's degree in 2012. I felt a kindred spirit with Bloom then, and when I read Tompkins's essay in 2020, at the beginning of my doctoral studies, I felt the same flutter of recognition. Elbow, Bloom, Tompkins. These creative-writer-scholars who felt frustrated, if not marginalized, by normalized academic discourse conventions were my people.

Bloom and Tompkins especially struck a chord with me, because I read how they had been fighting throughout their careers not only for "free speech," so to speak, but also equal rights (equal pay, equal working conditions) with their male counterparts in the English department. Thankfully, by the time I read their essays, I did not see the inequalities they

[10] I'm thinking especially of essays like "Coming of Age in the Field that Had No Name," "Academic Essays and the Vertical Pronoun," "Teaching College English as a Woman," and "Subverting the Academic Masterplot."
[11] In another essay, not in the collection I referenced, "Textual Power, Textual Terror," she refers to this type of writing as a "high priest form of discourse."

described between men's and women's working conditions—at least not in the English departments where I have studied and worked. But I *did* still feel the sting of having to "silence" my *real* voice when writing papers as a graduate student—and when I read Elbow, I know this feeling is not gender-specific. Later, when I read work from Nancy Miller, another noteworthy contemporary of Bloom and Tompkins, I noted similar frustrated feelings about her divided self, as well as at being treated unequally in the English department in the sixties and seventies. In reading Miller and Tompkins especially, I observed a change in their writing over time. In her earlier essays, circa the early nineties, Miller seemed wary of completely throwing off academic writing conventions. Her essay "Teaching Autobiography," similar to Tompkins's essay, is painfully self-conscious of the uneasy politics of personal-scholarly writing at the time (1990), more so than contemporary essays by Elbow and Bloom. Why? Was it perhaps because composition studies was largely pioneered by women in the sixties and seventies (Flynn, "Composing as a Woman"), and coincided with shifting attitudes brought about by second-wave feminism? Therefore, could it be possible that scholars in this emerging field started out with different assumptions and expectations about what "scholarly" writing in their field should look like? In any case, I liked Miller's arguments in the early nineties, but I didn't much like her prose. By contrast, I found Miller's memoir *But Enough about Me*, published in 2002, to be a delightful read; I was glad to see that Miller's prose by this time had become much more colloquial.

Ever since beginning graduate studies, I've thought it a shame that good writers who are also scholars frequently muddy up their prose in the name academic publishing. After all these years, I still can't get over it. In a field where our business is to study and teach great literature, as well as effective rhetoric (or effective communication), it seems patently wrong to write

obscure prose.[12] But I'm encouraged that things are changing, and *have changed*. Thankfully, at least in the English department, academics who also see themselves as creative writers now have options that scholarly writers have not always had. While I'd say that writers in the composition camp exercised these options earlier (I again think of Elbow, along with fellow compositionist Donald Murray, who both published personal-scholarly essays in the seventies), Tompkins's essay showed me that this movement toward the personal voice has also been occurring in literary theory, at least since the eighties.

According to Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt, in their essay "Where Did Composition Studies Come From? An Intellectual History," trends in composition coincided with trends in literary theory and linguistics. In the field of English, they note that whereas model, elite texts used to be studied almost exclusively, scholars by the early nineties were beginning to study "ordinary" speech, ordinary texts, and ordinary writing (304-305). Life writing scholar Jennifor Sinor puts the date even earlier, saying it was in the mid 1970s that "attention in the academy shifted to alternative texts," due to the "waning influence of New Criticism" and the rising influence of feminist theory. For example, Sinor notes, in 1974 the field saw the publication of the first full-length diary studies, offering theories of the diurnal form (30). As I've found out over the past three years of studying life writing—my second scholarly home, after composition studies—there's been an "autobiographical habit" alive and well ever since humans have been writing. What's more, currently the field of life writing scholarship is thriving, and the canon is expanding quickly to include women and minority writers. As scholars

[12] Although this may be changing in published scholarship, I've still encountered obscure prose often when peer reviewing papers from my fellow graduate students. In my work in the UTA writing center from 2019-2021, I saw it quite often as well.

like James Olney, Arnold Krupat, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and Estelle Jelinek have pointed out, life writing is one of the oldest genres, but it is a relatively new field in literary studies. Indeed, until the seventies, scholarship virtually ignored women's writing, as well as minority writers; however, thanks to feminism and other cultural and academic shifts, including multiculturalism and new historicism, scholarship since the seventies has become more inclusive (Jelinek; Smith and Watson; Sinor; Miller; Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt).

While scholarship about life stories used to fall under the term "autobiography," feminist scholars like Jelinek, Sinor, and Smith and Watson have argued that this term promoted certain types of written products that largely excluded the types of products women and minority writers created before the modern era. In *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing,* Jennifer Sinor, for her part, works to claim a spot for "ordinary" women diarists in a literary culture and canon that she says has excluded them. She departs from prior scholars like Robert Fothergill and Mary Jane Moffet and Charlotte Painter who championed diaries based on their literariness and argues that it is a fallacy to read a diary from a literary lens, even the lens of "autobiography." Going on, she says that diaries call for nonliterary critical approaches: namely, diaries must be read and appreciated for their dailyness. Although early autobiography scholars said that traditional (literary) autobiographies encourage deep reflection, plot, character development, etc. (and most of the autobiographies studied were by males), more recent scholars contend that dailyness defies plot or theme; dailiness discourages deep reflection over an entire life. Such scholars have also questioned the common definition of autobiography, and ultimately asked if the diary is not actually *the* quintessential biographical form, capturing as it does life in all its dailiness—all its interruptions, repetition, ordinariness, uncertainty, loose ends, and shifting identities, not to

mention limited by spatial confines (for instance, often diary entries conform to one page) (Sinor, chapter 1).

A particularly interesting discussion within life writing studies is how scholars have gendered certain forms of writing. Estelle Jelinek, for one notable example, observed in 1980 that autobiographical writing by women mirrored the lives of women: fragmented, interrupted, and limited to the domestic sphere. However, this view has since been challenged and complicated. In 1998, almost twenty years after Jelinek, Smith and Watson said that Jelinek gave a simplified picture, and did not take into account differences among women and their writing that arise because of "class, ethnicity, genres, or life cycle"; furthermore, they said Jelinek paid little attention to "geographic or political locations," and "[essentialized] gendered experience to the exclusion of other differences in women's autobiographies in [her] sweeping analogy between lives and texts" (9). In her 2019 user-friendly textbook *How to Read a Diary*, Desirée Henderson makes the similar point that "the diary accommodates a wide range of writing styles, authorial personas, and individual, social, and political goals"(5); for these and other reasons, Henderson seeks to recover the word "diary" and the genre from its "status as a feminized, minimized, and even shameful form of writing" (3). Henderson is right to point out that the diary is not an easily defined genre, just as Smith and Watson are right to point out that women's experiences and writing styles cannot be summed up in one, one-size-fits-all, description. However, that said, using the lens of gender to read historical texts can still yield valuable results: this is because, as Virginia Woolf poignantly argued in *A Room of One's Own*, women historically did not have the same leisure time, education, or simply personal space that men typically had; thus, notable differences appear in men's and women's texts of earlier centuries. I appreciate Sinor's similar concession with regards to women's writing: while she doesn't

necessarily agree that the diary is a "female" form (she also points out that women, like men, used the diary for self-reflection), she *does* state that the diurnal form became especially important to women, one reason being that it was a *private* or domestic form, and women often did not have much of a role in public settings. Desirée Henderson, for her part, reminds us that the diary is commonly seen as having "emerged out of the private or domestic sphere and was designed to record voices that were not granted access to public forms of speech or writing" (12). However, no matter whether one considers autobiographical forms to be primarily male or female, public or private—to name two large discussions in the field—this type of scholarship has enabled a shifting of boundaries regarding what authors, and what texts, are read and studied. And for writers, teachers, and scholars who are not good at fitting into boxes (or traditional genres), that is a happy development.

For decades now, the genre of "life writing" has enabled the study of all kinds of historical writings about the self—notably, diaries, recipe books, slave narratives, and spiritual autobiographies—thus, scholars are increasingly studying the historical writings of women and minority writers. Happily, this turn to "life writing scholarship," and the corresponding turn to the archives, has uncovered previously unexamined literature; for instance, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was only just rediscovered in the eighties,[13] and William Apess's spiritual autobiography and other writings were only discovered and edited by Barry O'Connell shortly thereafter. Life writing studies has also overlapped with the writing as healing movement and has provided some new approaches for teaching writing and literature classes that

[13] The *Norton Anthology* says that the archival scholarship of Jean Fagin Yellin established that this was an autobiographical narrative and not a novel, thus bringing "belated acclaim to the work" (879).

take trauma as an object of study (see, for instance, Anderson and MacCurdy, Spear, Gu, and Molloy). Finally, since the eighties and new historicism, there has also been considerable scholarship on self-fashioning, and how we create identity in narrative (Eakin, Roger Smith, Peter Burke), which conclusion has big implications for college English teachers. Not only has this move to accept more voices and more modes of writing benefited those who want to *read* and *analyze* different types of texts, it has also benefited those who want to *write* and *teach* different types of texts.

It is one of my main contentions in this dissertation that students who are distracted—or distressed—with mental health issues, with stress, with *life*—will be severely limited in the knowledge they can grasp in our classes. Thus, it behooves us as educators who deal in words to do more—to at least do what we can—to help students manage and process their emotions, and to sort through their emerging identities. In this project, I propose a variety of forms of life writing in composition and literature instruction, forms that can function either as alternatives *or* addendums to approaches traditionally taken in our classrooms. The good news is, as already stated, many writer-scholars like Jane Tompkins, Jennifer Sinor, Peter Elbow, Lynn Z. Bloom, and many others have laid a vast and welcoming foundation for my ideas. These scholars write of these ideas, and practice them as creative writers, using many different terms (expressive writing, autobiographical writing, personal writing), but their written products could all be classified under the umbrella of life writing.[14]

[14] In upcoming chapters, I will discuss four forms of life writing that I have found to be particularly helpful in my classrooms: free writing or journaling, a type of uncensored personal writing that may or may not be read by the teacher; (lower-case) expressive writing (the term comes from composition scholarship), a conversational form of writing that linguist James Britton said was language "closest to the self"; (upper-case) Expressive Writing (a term from psychology scholarship), which connotes writing about traumatic events; and life writing studied as literature.

As in my master's thesis, my argument is not against any certain pedagogy; rather, I argue for a blended pedagogy—one that recognizes the strengths of the major pedagogical positions on teaching writing and one that attempts to synthesize them for the greatest good of students. In 2012, I called this blended approach "Creative Rhetoric." The term still fits; however, now that I've discovered a valuable cache of scholarship under the umbrella term life writing, I have chosen to focus principally on benefits that several varieties of life writing can play in this blended curriculum.

So here I go. I'm afraid I've realized my argument is not that original: I'm essentially making the same argument Tompkins did, using some newer terms that were not commonplace in the eighties. However, writing almost thirty years later, with the benefit of some newer scholarship at my fingertips, and with five years of teaching both composition and literature under my belt, not to mention my experience publishing my own life writing for about ten years, perhaps I have some fresh perspectives on how we can integrate education in our ever-changing discipline. In the next chapter, I begin to answer the question of how we can make selves as we make scholars, beginning in the freshman composition class.

# Chapter 3

## Life Writing, Cognition, and Mental Health in Freshman Composition

But just for a moment, before we talk life writing, let's talk mental health. I wouldn't bring this topic up, except it keeps *coming up*, everywhere I turn. For one example, note these distressing statistics on young adults struggling with their mental health:

> From 2009 to 2017, major depression among 20- to 21-year-olds more than doubled, rising from 7% to 15%. Depression surged 69% among 16- to 17-year-olds. Serious psychological distress, which includes feelings of anxiety and hopelessness, jumped 71% among 18- to 25-year-olds from 2008 to 2017. Twice as many 22- to 23-year-olds attempted suicide in 2017 compared with cohorts in 2008, and 55% more had suicidal thoughts. The increases were more pronounced among girls and young women. By 2017, one out of five 12- to 17-year-old girls had experienced major depression in the previous year." (*Physician's Weekly)*

If you've been teaching for awhile, or if you spend a good deal of time with young adults, you probably don't need these statistics to tell you that traditional college students are struggling these days. Maybe you've encountered mental health struggles in response to your writing assignments, or just in your students' faces. Perhaps you've read the topic in an email subject line, in a face-to-face conference, or an administrative notice: *Student withdrew. Student dropped out.* No matter where you've encountered the topic, it's a well-established fact that the college years are peak times for stress and coincide with a rise in mental health struggles, not to mention a rise in suicides. When you add a pandemic on top of this, the numbers only grow worse.

As a teacher of this population, as well as a parent eventually headed for the teen years, I want to help in any way I can. As a fellow sufferer of depression and anxiety who has used writing for many years to cope and heal, I find it my personal and professional duty to investigate the ways in which writing teachers might ethically, in their role as writing teachers, address (and possibly mitigate) mental health issues in their classrooms. After all, as Amy

Hamilton Hodges has pointed out, English teachers, because their job is to read and respond to student writing, are often the "first responders" to student distress ("First Responders: A Pedagogy for Writing and Reading Trauma").

For the purposes of this chapter, then, I investigate what we can teach in freshman composition that can not only help students gain the writing skills they need for college, but might also help them manage mental or cognitive struggles, which researchers have shown often spike during that crucial transition year to college (Arnett, etc.). Following, drawing on research from composition and psychology, I will discuss possibilities for using various forms of life writing in freshman composition, arguing on the grounds that such writing can lead not only to many educational benefits, but also improved mental health. **First,** I will touch on interdisciplinary research that has shown that life writing via journals or commonplace notebooks facilitates learning and audience-based writing, thus, can serve almost any course's pedagogical aims. **Second,** I will further advocate for life writing by drawing upon research in psychology showing that a specific type of life writing, called Expressive Writing, helps with processing trauma and navigating stress—this portion specifically addressing the mental health crisis among young adults. **In a final section**, I will discuss how I put many of these principles into practice in a recent section of freshman composition at UTA.

## Three Varieties of Life Writing for Freshman Composition

In this chapter, I will discuss three varieties of life writing, the first two of which directly overlap with composition scholarship: freewriting or journaling, lower-case "expressive writing," and upper-case Expressive Writing (or EW), a term from psychology. First, Peter

Elbow, popular compositionist and champion of freewriting, defines freewriting exercises like this:

> They are sometimes called "automatic writing," "babbling," or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes. . . . Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. . . . The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck, it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop. (*Writing without Teachers* 3)

Later in this chapter, Elbow refers to freewriting exercises as "mind samples." Obviously what is in the writer's mind could be intensely personal, which is why freewriting can be safely considered a type of life writing.

The lower-case expressive writing refers to writing that is personal, conversational, the writer's natural voice. Think back to the discussion from linguist James Britton in chapter two: expressive writing, in composition scholarship, is writing in the "language of the self." It is similar to the voice we hear in our own heads and the voice we use to communicate with others. We can use this voice to talk about the weather as well as baseball, as well as to admit insecurities about our looks or have deep conversations in our marriages. Upper-case Expressive writing, on the other hand, is more deeply *personal*. Psychologist James Pennebaker, the pioneer of Expressive Writing research, defines it as writing about trauma[15] (*Expressive Writing: Words*

[15] Here is the original prompt Pennebaker used in his first studies on trauma and Expressive Writing:

> *In your writing, I want you to really let go and explore your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your life. In your writing, try to tie this traumatic experience to other parts of your life—your childhood, your relationship with your parents, close friends, lovers, or others important to you. You might link your writing to your future and who you would like to become, to who you have been in the past, or to who you are now. The important thing is that you really let go and write about your deepest emotions and thoughts. You can write about the same thing for all four days or about different things on each day—that is entirely up to you. Many people have not had traumatic experiences, but all of us have faced major conflicts or stressors—and you can write about those as well.*

*that Heal*). So, like lower-case expressive writing, EW is writing using one's personal voice, but it is also writing that discloses the writer's thoughts and feelings about traumatic experiences.

For my own pedagogy in first-year writing, I lean toward explicitly teaching and implementing freewriting/journaling and the former type of expressive writing in my classroom, along with a more implicit teaching and *suggesting* of Expressive Writing. That is, I often ask my students to write in a personal, conversational voice as we encounter course content; I do *not* require my students to write "Expressively," in the Pennebaker sense, about their traumas. However, I *do* let my students know that Expressive Writing, writing on trauma, is a large field of research and should be considered a tool available for their own use if they want to try it. One helpful Pennebaker quote that I sometimes paraphrase for students is this: "Think of Expressive writing as a tool always at your disposal, or like having medicine in your medicine cabinet. No need to take the medicine when you are healthy, but when you are under the weather, you can always turn to it" (25). In chapter 4, I will discuss possibilities for reading life writing on traumatic experiences as literature in college English courses—notably slave narratives—in order to help students process and reflect on their own transition from a familiar to unfamiliar stage of life. But for now, I will primarily focus on freewriting and lower-case expressive writing as aids to jumpstarting cognition and managing stress in freshman composition.

## Ground Rules for Grading Life Writing

Before I get into the benefits of life writing in the composition classroom, it is important to set up a few ground rules about how and where the writing will be done and how it will be graded. First, along with Desirée Henderson, who employs diary-writing in her Life Writing literature class, for the first-year composition course, I recommend having students designate a

notebook or journal for these personal writings, with the reassurance that this journal will always be confidential. That is, teachers should make clear that students will never be asked to share the writing within their notebooks unless they *want* to. Secondly, I concur with Henderson and numerous researchers and teachers, including Peter Elbow, that this writing should not be graded, except, possibly, for a completion grade. In Elbow's words, "Freewritings help you by providing no feedback at all. When I assign one, I invite the writer to let me read it. But I also tell him to keep it if he prefers . . . . The main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all" (*Writing without Teachers* 4). And as O'Connell and Dyment have rightly pointed out, if students know their journals will be read or graded, this can hinder students from being honest, or may result in them merely "writing for the teacher," and not writing for themselves, thus canceling out the potential cognitive and therapeutic benefits of life writing.

But if we want to prioritize life writing in our classes, and if we are not going to require students to show it to us, how can we evaluate this portion of their work? In her life writing literature classroom, Henderson has students write three short reflection papers throughout the semester wherein students can report how their diary-keeping is going. This allows students to conceal or reveal whatever they wish, as well as allowing the teacher to assess (and take a grade for) this portion of the class, without intruding into students' diaries or journals. In a composition class, teachers can take a similar approach.

Whereas the goal in Henderson's class is primarily to have students experience the sustained practice of keeping a diary for its own sake, in my first-year composition courses, the journal, or personal notebook, functions more as an aid, or as scaffolding, to writing for various audiences, including academic audiences. Still, no matter whether one assigns a journal/diary as

an activity ancillary to the course goals or as *the* primary activity, many of the same principles of operation apply: These include not grading the actual writing in the journal as to quality or content—possibly not even *reading* it–but grading only for completion, and allowing students to report back to the teacher how the writing went, along with reflecting on some takeaways from the process. Whereas Henderson employs three reflection papers of several pages each, in freshman composition, I suggest using more frequent, shorter, measures of assessment. For example, one assignment I have used is assigning a 45-minute freewrite—a "writing without stopping" activity—to "grow" a draft of a personal essay (based on Peter Elbow's chapter "Growing Writing" in *Writing without Teachers*). The final essay that this "growing" assignment leads up to will eventually be graded. But the only thing students turn in to me at the end of the "growing" activity is a few sentences telling me what "center of gravity" (Elbow's term) emerged from the writing (that is, what major theme, idea, or argument), along with a quick comment on how this helped their writing process. My rationale for using short and frequent reports like these after freewriting or other life writing activities is to help students raise awareness of their own writing processes. This is because learning and using the writing process is one key goal in my freshman composition course, as I believe it is in any freshman course informed by composition scholarship (see chapters 1 and 2 for more on writing process research). And this leads to my first argument for including life writing in freshman composition.

## Point One: Life Writing Facilitates Learning

As scholarship in writing across the curriculum (WAC) has shown, the practices of freewriting or journaling about course content offers students numerous cognitive benefits. Timothy S. O'Connell and Janet E. Dyment, in their vast study of the benefits and drawbacks of

using reflective journals, concluded that the practice of reflective journaling alongside academic study "foster[s] metacognition, or 'thinking about thinking'" (50). Citing a bevy of researchers across academic disciplines, O'Conell and Dyment describe various forms this metacognition can take:

> Depending on the area of study, metacognition could be considered as thinking about learning or thinking about professional process. Schon (1983) refers to this as reflection *on* action. Journals enable students to step outside those actions/learning and take a critical look at the how, what, why, and when of that experience (Minott, 2008; Sutton et al. 2007). As Hubbbs and Brand (2005) indicated, journals serve as a 'paper mirror.' In a sense, journals give students an 'instant replay' of their experience and of themselves which they can then critically review. In addition, journals provide a venue for struggling with questions and potential solutions to problems (Mezirow, 1991), critically think (Hettich, 1990), and consider their roles as professionals (Plack et al., 2005). Many students recognize that meaningful learning requires them to put some effort into thinking (Cornish & Cantor, 2008). The 'emotionality' of reflective practice may also contribute to students' ability to critically think as the feelings generated by reviewing experiences provide an impetus for new reflection (Ghaye, 2007). (50)

In a discussion of reflective journals like this one, we are largely talking about writing assignments that do not form the major, or capstone, assignments in a class, but assignments that function as daily activities to help students grasp and grapple with new content before the major assessments, usually tests or essays.

In her article "Commonplace books: Writing and a Sense of Self in the 21st Century English Classroom," Pauline Griffiths argues that "writing is epistemic; it constructs and creates knowledge" (84). For her part, Griffiths puts forth a case for using eighteenth-century-inspired commonplace notebooks in the twenty-first century classroom in the service of three "writer-oriented approaches to teaching" (she adapts the three approaches from Ken Hyland's book *Teaching and Researching Writing*). The first approach is "writing as self-expression"; the second, "writing as a cognitive process"; and the third, "writing as a situated act." These three approaches could also be called "personal writing" (writing for the self), "academic writing"

(writing for school tasks), and "rhetorical writing" (writing to communicate with audiences). All three approaches or modes of writing are ones I have grappled with as a writing teacher and wondered how to reconcile in my own classroom; I worked to reconcile them in my master's thesis (Gendke)—and I did reconcile them to an extent. I am very comfortable with the term "rhetorical writing," because such writing allows the self to become a legitimate speaker in a legitimate rhetorical situation. However, until Griffith's article, I still took issue with "academic writing." Academic writing, to me, equaled stuffy, pretentious prose that no one would want to read and no one would want to write. I think of this definition from the OED, referring to the word "academic": "theoretical or hypothetical; not practical, realistic, or directly useful […] learned or scholarly but lacking in worldliness, common sense, or practicality." This is the kind of writing I *don't* want my students doing in my classroom. Let us leave this sense behind, and see how Griffiths repurposes the term "academic writing" through the use of the commonplace notebook, which she calls "a form of journal":

> Academic writing is usually non-fiction, but not always. It can be free writing that explores ideas or short answer questions for classmates, teachers[,] or examiners. It can be a paragraph defining or comparing concepts, or extended writing that investigates a subject more deeply. It can be an 'exit slip' where students write a brief statement about what they have learned during the lesson. It can be writing that informs, persuades, or entertains; it can be assessed or unassessed. In short, it is all the writing, formal or informal, that students do in schools in the course of their learning. (85)

To me, this is a friendly and inviting definition of "academic writing." It helps clarify that many types of "academic writing" are important. What makes these types of writing important is that they are epistemic; they contribute to learning, to knowledge-making. In other words, these are forms of writing to learn.

As we seek to engage students in the learning process, the journal/notebook is useful because it allows students to process course content in their own language. It allows "academic

writing," or writing about course content, to remain somewhat personal, or close to the self. It can also be a starting point for more polished, audience-driven projects that could be published in a class publication, blog, or some other platform. As students travel the continuum from private notebook writing to published writing, they can also understand the sense of satisfaction that comes from "creating" knowledge as authors. Before I move on, I want to clarify my own understanding of rhetorically effective assignments versus rhetorically ineffective assignments.

## Understanding Rhetorically Effective Assignments

"Academic writing" means different things to different instructors, but one commonality is that academic writing is writing done in the academy *for* the academy. To the extent that all teachers assign writing for the purpose of helping students learn, or to assess their learning, we all assign "academic" writing. The difference between rhetorically effective and ineffective "academic" writing assignments, or assignments written for school, is that rhetorically effective assignments make clear the "so what, who cares" factors to students. In other words, students understand why they are being asked to practice certain skills, and why learning these skills is important. Rhetorically effective assignments may also require a certain form, but the form serves clear rhetorical goals—that is, students understand that the form is used in order to communicate a certain message to a certain discourse community. Less rhetorically effective assignments, on the other hand, put forms first—they ask students to reproduce forms without explaining the "so what, who cares" factors—and they don't make clear why students should need or want to use this form.[16]

[16] One reified form I'm thinking of is the research paper. In his article "Creating Possibilities: Embedding Research into Creative Writing." Jason Wirtz, a teacher committed to fostering creativity and personal writing, shares how

I want to give an example of a rhetorically *ineffective* assignment I received when I was an undergrad in my own freshman composition class, because I still feel puzzled by it, almost twenty years later. I am thinking of the assignment to write a critical essay examining whether or not Hamlet was mad. This was the final essay in freshman composition, the capstone to four other essays in the tradition of the modes: prior to this, I had written a narrative essay, a descriptive essay, a definition essay, and a process analysis (how-to) essay. I don't remember the instructor defining an audience for any of these assignments—but luckily I was able to envision audiences for the first four essays. That is, until the final *Hamlet* essay, at which point I found myself clueless.

Because I didn't understand the discourse community of scholars who *write* arguments about literature, I was totally lost on how to go about this writing task. Today I almost laugh out loud remembering how I "essayed" to begin. My opening went something like this: "I don't understand why scholars are arguing over whether or not Hamlet was mad; and I don't understand why this argument has been going on for centuries. I mean, who really cares? He was a fictional character, a figment of Shakespeare's imagination. Who cares whether he was mad or not? For that matter, how can anyone really know, since Shakespeare is dead?"

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he recreated the research paper assignment for his students in order to promote creative thought, and even a more creative approach to the world. In the article, he cites Moulton and Holmes's "The Research Paper: A Historical Perspective." He says the research paper has strayed from its original intent, originally based on the German model of research, to create new knowledge; by the 1910s it had "calcified" into its dull form. This history intrigued him, as did genre theory, which posits that genres are supposed to be generative. Amy Devitt said that genres are supposed to lead to something new (cited in Wirtz 24). Similarly, one of Wirtz's former writing teachers said that genres should "be seen as supporting a writer's work rather than limiting or confining it. He emphasized the genres were places for invention rather than strict conformity" (24). He describes his own "Embedded Research Assignment," which asked students to write a mini-research paper, 2-3 pages, and then craft a short story that "seamlessly embeds" the research into the story. The end of the article makes some larger comments on how the genres we choose to teach will, to an extent, shape how students view the world, or their ideology.

So what, and who cares, indeed? Kudos to Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein, in their genius and highly accessible textbook *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, for tackling that burning question of clueless college students trying to impersonate literary scholars they have never read or conversed with. In their chapter " 'On Closer Examination': Entering Conversations about Literature," Graff and Birkenstein point to the confusion students are likely to have when asked to write about literature, if they don't understand the scholarly conversations preceding their writing task. In their words, a claim about literature, if made in isolation from any prior views, can seem to come "out of the blue, leaving readers [I would add students] wondering why it needs to be said at all" (188). As the authors stress in their text,

> It is the views of others and our desire to respond to these views that gives our [academic] writing its underlying motivation and helps readers see why what we say matters, why others should care, and why we need to say it in the first place. . . . [W]e suggest that this same principle applies to literature. Literary critics, after all, don't make assertions about literary works out of the blue. Rather, they contribute to discussions and debates about the meaning and significance of literary works, some of which may continue for years and even centuries.

Boy, this would have been helpful instruction for my undergraduate self twenty years ago, back when I was trying to write my first college essay (of what would be many) on literature.

Anyway. All that to say, in my own classroom, when I talk of academic writing, I refer to writing to learn or writing to practice critical thinking, not assignments like the *Hamlet* essay. I think that, had the essay been appropriately scaffolded, it *could have been* a rhetorically effective assignment. However, since the teacher did not explain the audience for this kind of writing, I struggled to answer the "so what" or "who cares" questions. And since I did not care about the topic on my own, that essay, along with many others in my memory as an English major,

remains "academic" in the negative sense: that is, I wrote a lot of essays that ultimately felt pointless. Meaning, I did not feel I was writing to learn, or writing to communicate. The only purpose I could see was that I was writing to be evaluated. (And if that was the case, why not choose a more relevant essay topic?)

With this in mind, in my own assignments, the assignments I design as a teacher, I have been working to locate "academic writing" within short tasks that lead up to the major essays, which I would call "rhetorical," or audience-driven. These short assignments are usually no more than a page and a half and require students to practice skills such as writing summaries, writing rhetorical analyses, writing with sources, etc. The goal of these short assignments is to help students practice skills that college will require of them across disciplines, while also helping students focus on the mental work they are doing, and to a lesser extent, the *form* of writing they are producing. These lead up to the major *writing projects*, where students are writing to communicate to audiences beyond just the teacher, or writing for *themselves and the teacher* to express the learning or growth they have done. I always invite student writers to feel free to adopt whatever register or style works best for their particular rhetorical situation.[17] Asked to write on the topics we have been reading about, their essays will naturally involve some summary and analysis (critical thinking skills), but asked to communicate with their peers, their essays will often be strengthened by writing in Britton's expressive voice; as Britton said, expressive language is language that communicates. Before I ask students to communicate with an audience, however, I like to give them plenty of tools for simply getting their ideas going.

[17] In his hardly boring essay "The Rhetorical Stance," Wayne Booth calls out teachers for assigning "pointless" essays, and invites us to recall those boring student essays—clearly written just for the teacher and just for the pointless assignment–that we have all received. Then, he calls us to do better.

Below, I will go more in depth on the benefits of "ignoring audience" earlier in the writing process, as well as address "writer-based" versus "reader-based prose" at some length (Elbow's and Flower's terms, respectively), which concepts help clarify how a writer can successfully move from writing for oneself to writing for an audience.

## Writing-Based Prose in the Beginning of the Writing Process

Indeed, trying on new ideas can be messy business for students—and we as teachers can and should welcome this messiness through "writer-based" writing assignments early in the drafting process, whether in freewrites, journals or other short responses. The term "writer-based prose" has been used by Linda Flower and Cherryl Armstrong to refer to, primarily, cognitive processes, not content of the writing. Flower asserts that "writing prose that actually communicates what we mean to another human being demands more than a simple act of self-expression" (19); it demands a transformation into "reader-based prose." She says that whereas writer-based prose (which she equates with "expressing oneself") is adequate for writers writing to themselves, writer-based prose that remains untransformed into "reader-based prose" is the source of some of the most common and pervasive problems in academic and professional writing" (19). To illustrate, Flower describes a technical writing assignment completed by a student that shared technical content, not personal content; however, the style of the writing was "writer-based," in that the writer had not transformed the technical content into easily usable instructions for a reader. Instead, the piece read more like a process of discovery on the part of the writer; the writer described the information in the order in which they had assimilated the information; they had not yet translated it into user-friendly content. In this sense of "writer-based," then, we are not talking about writing that reveals personal information about the self.

Flower explains such writer-based writing as a failure of communication, because, in such a case, the writer is trying to write for an audience, but has not been able to translate the material into easily used form.

In contrast to this failed "writer-based" prose, Flower offers reader-based prose, what she defines as

> a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader. To do that it creates a shared language and shared context between writer and reader. It also offers the reader an issue-centered rhetorical structure rather than a replay of the writer's discovery process. In its language and structure, Reader-Based prose reflects the *purpose* of the writer's thought; Writer-Based prose tends to reflect its *process*. Good writing, therefore, is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to the reader. (20)

I agree with Flower that writing effectively for an audience often involves transforming our "natural but private expressions" into language that better suits the needs of our audience. However, taking the caution of Peter Elbow, I would also point out that this transformation must entail spending sufficient time "writing to learn," or figuring out what one really wants to say. In other words, we should encourage students to write personally or privately before insisting they turn in audience-based drafts.

As Elbow has pointed out in numerous articles, experienced writers produce a great deal of what could be called "writer-based prose" in the early stages of composing. In his seminal work *Writing without Teachers*, Elbow shares from his own hard-earned experience that freewriting about one's own writing and learning process can be a powerful way to get started on more intimidating, audience-based writing tasks, such as essays for school. For instance, Elbow shares that his book began as a folder of his own notes observing his own writing process during his second attempt at grad school (ironically, he'd dropped out the first time, discouraged by his failure to write). Freewriting, *Elbow's* type of writer-based writing, really began for him, he says,

during this second stint at grad school, when he began setting personal deadlines for himself long before his actual deadlines. Elbow says that planning time for this writer-based practice was when he really began to "force myself to keep writing, even if the writing was terrible. That was the only way I could get twenty pages. Second, I started writing notes to myself when I noticed something going on as I struggled to write. In particular, I tried to figure out what had happened when I got stuck in my writing—and when I got unstuck" (xv). Out of this reflective process grew what became *Writing Without Teachers.* The two main themes of the book are 1) letting go of planning, control, and order over writing; that is, giving up the idea that we can plan the writing ahead of time, and embracing the messiness of the process and 2) learning to write without teachers; that is, learning to drive oneself to write—learning self-starting strategies—as well as learning to write by using group feedback or audience awareness (for an example, Elbow describes how he lost his writer's block when he had to write inter-office memos to colleagues).

Later in his career, writing of the later stages of the writing process—or that transformation from writer-based prose to reader-based prose (or the move to my outer circle)—Elbow further wrote on "the benefits of ignoring audience" in order to write powerful drafts ("Closing my eyes as I Speak"). In his words,

> Putting audience out of mind is of course a traditional practice: serious writers have long used private journals for early explorations of feeling, thinking, or language. But many writing teachers seem to think that students can get along without the private writing serious writers find so crucial—or even that students will *benefit* from keeping their audience in mind the whole time. Things often don't work out that way. (174)

The main takeaway? If teachers are not teaching students to put audience out of mind for a time, then inexperienced writers are unlikely to do this on their own. And that can lead to students freezing up because they can't *stop* thinking about their audience.

Similar to Elbow, Cherryl Armstrong, in her article "Reader-based and Writer-based Perspectives in Composition Instruction," explores the adverse effects of keeping one's audience in mind throughout the entire composing process. Armstrong picks up on Linda Flower's concepts of writer-based and reader-based prose, but with a twist: she says these terms are used backwards. She says that the hallmarks of writer-based prose show up in the writing processes of skilled writers—this is similar to Elbow's argument—while what may appear to be writer-based prose in the products of basic writers may actually be reader-based prose. In other words, basic writers produce awkward texts that seem ungeared for an audience, but the texts are so awkward precisely because they have paid hyper-awareness to writing for their audience. As a result, they have been unsuccessful in producing both writer-based *and* reader-based prose. To put it yet another way, students who can't ignore their audience for awhile—students who can't simply work out their ideas for themselves, in their own, writer-based language first—are likely to get bogged down with too many cognitive tasks; thus, the likely result will be rhetorically ineffective writing.

To Armstrong and Elbow's point that students need to learn to write for themselves before they can write effectively for others, I have worked with many high school and college students who falsely believe that whatever they produce on the page or screen, at any point in the writing process, must be "good enough" to be used in their actual essays. I call this writing with the perpetual "editor looking over the shoulder." Thus, afraid to produce bad writing, these students get blocked and frustrated before they ever begin. This describes one of my students in a recent semester who told me he could not freewrite because he felt all his writing had to be perfect; he could not get the proverbial "editor" off his back. So, during freewriting exercises, he would sit in the front row frowning, alternately staring into space and putting his head down on

the desk. With these kinds of student difficulties in mind, it is our job to help our students understand that some writer-based writing—even if it is messy, or "bad"—is all part of a good and healthy writing process. Writer-based writing via reflective journals, freewrites, notebooks, or any other form, including rough drafts, can and should be part of the warm-up to the final assignments. To those worried that this is license to write badly, I defer to Peter Elbow, who said,

> Some readers feel I am asking them to write as badly as possible. I am not. Your goal is good writing….but a person's best writing is often all mixed up together with his worst….For most people, some of their strongest sounds, rhythms and textures—and some of their best insights—only occur when they stop censoring and write carelessly. (69)

Put another way, "What looks inefficient—a rambling process with lots of writing and lots of throwing away—is really efficient since it's the best way you can work up to what you really want to say and how you can say it" (Elbow 15). While I wish I could tell my frustrated student that the writing process is quick and easy, Elbow and many other writing theorists, not to mention famous authors, have told us that good writing takes hard work. Thus, I invite my students to experience, if not embrace, the messiness of the process.

But there's yet another reason to keep the personal (expressive) voice writing all semester long. I believe that people cannot engage in, much less care about, extra-personal topics if their personal lives are in chaos. For students dealing with those mental health challenges referenced in the opening, it might be impossible to write successful reader-based prose. Therefore, in my classes, at least in my freshman writing classes, I want to allow for this. I want to allow for the fact that many incoming students are dealing with significant mental health challenges—or, in less extreme terms, they are just *really stressed out*. Rather than ignore that fact or fight against it, I want to be proactive, and work with and within the mental challenges that many of my

students are no doubt facing, using these tools from writing process research, as well as tools from the field of psychology.

## The Challenging College Years

Indeed, sometimes students' stressors or mental struggles are so great that other ideas—unless they relate directly to their individual problems—won't be able to get through, until students can work through their angst. In other words, some students we serve desperately need to express their thoughts. However, whether or not our students fall within the one-third of college students who are battling traditional mental health challenges, as cited at the beginning of this chapter, most of them are faced with making the huge leap from adolescent to young adult. Moreover, since March 2020, all of them (like all of us) have had to continually adjust to the various stressors brought on by the pandemic.

The point is, college freshmen (and college students at large) are at a difficult stage in life. Many traditional age freshmen have just left home, family, and, really, all that's familiar. Many are questioning what they believe, what they want to do with their lives, and what's the meaning of it all. At a time when they most desire material familiarity and support (i.e., *real* people around them to support them), they lack it. And non-traditional students are likely to be going through large life adjustments as well, such as transitioning careers or balancing family life along with school *and* work.

So, given the stress of the college years, what teaching possibilities can we find here? Specifically, what teaching tools and possibilities exist within our discipline to help students overall in life and functionality, at the same time we are trying to usher them into public discourse communities? Let's turn again to life writing for some answers.

## Point 2: Life Writing is Therapeutic

Here we turn to the brand of life writing known as upper-case Expressive Writing. Expressive Writing has a slightly different meaning in the psychological community than it does in composition scholarship, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Beyond merely writing with a first-person voice, such as narrating events from a personal viewpoint or giving one's personal opinions on public topics, Expressive Writing in psychology connotes much more intimacy; as one definition from this community puts it, Expressive Writing is "Writing focused on the emotional content of a traumatic event rather than just writing about the facts or narrative of the event itself" (Marcus 367). In other words, Expressive writing in psychology refers to writing that focuses specifically on a person's traumatic experiences, and the person's emotional reactions. For writing teachers who may be considering using life writing in their classrooms, this definition may be scary and off-putting. After all, most of us are not trained counselors.

However, let's not let that definition deter us, but let's proceed wisely. Depending on how comfortable teachers feel, they can stick with the term "journal writing," and completely avoid the conversation about trauma and upper-case Expressive Writing, if desired. Or, if they feel comfortable, they can take a day early in the semester to discuss the prolific research about the benefits of Expressive Writing in the field of psychology. For my part, I am a fan of introducing students to this booming body of research, precisely because many of them are dealing with mental health issues (if we trust the research), yet they likely don't feel comfortable *talking* about mental health. As the resident "experts" in our writing classrooms, we may be able to help normalize discussions of mental health by simply showing that many researchers are excited about the benefits of this form of writing.

Indeed, the research to be found on Expressive Writing and mental health is prolific. Why? As professional-writer-turned clinical-psychologist Peter H. Marcus notes, "improved health follow[s] the experience of writing about a traumatic event." He goes on to say that it is not completely understood how Expressive Writing (EW) works to improve health, but "EW may provide a narrative structure and framework for experiences that were initially chaotic. EW's benefits may also derive from a personal reframing of the patient's perspective or the pairing of a painful experience with emotional language" (367). In short, Expressive Writing helps people process difficult or traumatic events, thus, may help speed the healing process. In addition, Expressive Writing has been shown to result in improved mood, enhanced physical health, cognitive processing, alleviation of anxiety, and increased security, to name a few (Castillo and Yuleiny cite King 2001, 2002; Lepore and Fernandez-Berrocal Ragan & Ramos 2004; Pennebaker 2002).

Research on the mental health benefits of Expressive Writing is not as prolific in composition or literature studies, but it does appear there, too. Yue Gu is one compositionist who argues that the fields of psychology, literature, and composition need to "talk" more, and I agree. In her article entitled "Narrative, Life Writing, and Healing: The Therapeutic Functions of Storytelling," Gu cites a bevy of research showing that life writing has therapeutic functions (MacCurdy, White and Epstein, Abels and Abels, Kotler, for instance), in order to argue for life writing's important place in the composition classroom. Much like the late psychologist Carl Rogers, famous in rhet-comp for fathering "Rogerian Argument," Gu states that narrative therapists act in roles similar to those of writing coaches, and describes how the creative writing classroom (and, I argue, the freshman comp classroom) can serve many therapeutic functions. For Gu, the writing classroom provides a place where people can

> tell stories, listen to stories, give feedback, reflect upon experiences, and revise stories. Indeed, the process of healing through life writing can occur in the classroom setting as well as the clinical setting, in which the teacher functions as an active facilitator who not only provides an environment of openness and empathy but also guides students to explore, negotiate, and re-account their stories. (481)

Gu is writing from her classroom in China, where students have grown up being told to suppress their feelings. The author mentions the challenge of getting students to write about their personal feelings, but that once they did, she saw positive results of healing and closure and students being able to claim newer, healthier identities (482). Marion MacCurdy expands on the classroom benefits of simply expressing what's going on in our lives and thoughts, drawing on Expressive Writing's famous front man, James Pennebaker:

> As Pennebaker and others have shown, most people are helped by speaking or writing to another of their experiences even if the 'other' is not a trained therapist (Christina Miller 75). Felman and Laub argue in their book *Testimony* that personal and cultural recovery from trauma requires a conversation between the victim and a witness, that indeed the witness is an utter necessity to complete the cycle of truth telling. If we shy away from offering our students the opportunity to tell their truths, we may be preventing them from learning what control they can have over their own lives. The more violent and threatening our culture becomes, the more we need to acknowledge the effects of trauma on our students. Those of us whose professional lives are defined by the classroom need to be aware that every pair of eyes facing us has probably borne witness to some difficult moments that can affect learning. (197)

These words from MacCurdy push us to not only *use* expressive (or Expressive) writing in our classrooms, but also to get students to *talk to each other about what they are writing*—or, perhaps, read their writing out loud to one another. Having students share their personal writing in small groups is one option for teachers who are comfortable with it (and whose students are comfortable with it). Of course, as I stated earlier, I never suggest we ask students to share anything they want to keep private; rather, we should invite them to "share anything you've been writing about that you would like to share with the group," and provide alternative discussion topics in case students are not comfortable sharing any of their writing. The key point is that we

offer the opportunity. However, for those teachers who choose, for whatever reason, not to use small groups, there is enough research showing that simply writing for one's own eyes can be healing, and even offer some benefits typically experienced when talking to others.

These benefits can be seen in Gu's extended discussion of the Self-1 and Self-2 concept. This is the idea that students tasked with writing autobiography write from two perspectives, or two identities. Self-1 comprises the remembered self from a past time, while Self-2 represents the present. Self-1 is often emotional and stuck in a "faulty narrative." As Rimmon-Kenan has said, "Mental health is a coherent life story, neurosis is faulty narrative" (qtd. in Gu 486). However, as the student writes, Self-2 also shows up to help interpret, or reinterpret, past events and reconstruct the narrative as well as, so it happens, reconstruct the writer's identity. Self-2 acts like a counselor to help Self-1 work through trauma or faulty narratives, much like a good friend, or even a counselor in a clinical setting helps one to re-see past events and create a new narrative. In this way, student life writers can counsel themselves. By the end of a narrative, Gu notes, usually the two selves merge to demonstrate "a sense of continuity of self across time and place" (Cohler qtd. in Gu 485). As Jerome Bruner has stated, the author of an autobiography "must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness" (Bruner qtd. in Gu 485). This merging usually occurs as some kind of epiphany or lightbulb moment, where the writer now understands something important and illuminating about his or her story. In sum, Gu says life writing is a "meaning-constructing activity that makes sense of experiences," wherein healing takes place when a consistent story is achieved.

This discussion of Narrative Therapy closely resembles principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) put forth in both religious and secular self-help literature stating that

mental health struggles occur when we believe (in the Christian version) lies about ourselves, our situation, others, or the world (see, for instance, Coneff or Backus and Chapian)—or when we entertain negative self-talk (the secular version) about those things (see, for instance, Clark). From the religious (Christian) perspective, healing results from replacing lies with truth; from the secular perspective, healing results from replacing negative self-talk with positive self-talk. However, whatever worldview, or "version of reality," one comes from, healing is achieved through discarding faulty beliefs or stories and substituting new (more truthful or more positive) stories and beliefs.

## Teaching Suggestions for Journals and Diaries

For those of us not comfortable dealing directly with, or even mentioning, students' mental health difficulties or traumatic events, we can still invite our students to simply "write about whatever is on your mind" in private diaries or journals we have designated for that purpose. I suggest, with Henderson, making this a "required" part of the course, but only insofar as we require students to *do* some writing in a diary or journal, and then taking a completion grade. One way we can facilitate this part of the course, and one way I have done it, is to allow time *in class* for students to do these life writing activities. We should not collect this writing, but we should give students credit for being there and writing. When I use this method, I tend to place this activity either in the first ten to fifteen minutes of the class period, or in the last ten to fifteen minutes. It can be used either as a warm-up for the day's lesson, or as a reflection on the day's lesson, or it can be completely unrelated to the lesson. If we choose this last option, we can show our students that we believe freewriting about anything they want to write about is an important practice simply by allowing time for it.

One benefit to placing this writing time in the beginning of the lesson is that it can help students deal with any troublesome emotions, or clear their heads, so to speak, *before* we try to fill their minds with the new content we plan to present that day. Weiner and Rosenwald's research stating that diaries can be used to deal with overwhelming emotions backs up this point, and it is worth quoting some of their findings at length:

> Brand and Powell (1985) suggest that writing always effects a change in emotions, tending to increase positive feelings and weakening what they term 'negative passive emotions.' Litowitz and Gundlach (1987) argue that 'as there is a lessening of affect through mediation from experience to speech, there is a further weakening of affect in writing. Writing can therefore serve to tame and control emotions that threaten to overwhelm the subject' (p. 86). Diaries, in which the management of emotions is often so central, may be useful windows on the processing of emotion more generally. (41)

The takeaway here for me is that simply allowing students to write freely about whatever they want to can help them calm and clear their minds; this is good for them emotionally, and it is good for me, pedagogically, because calmer minds will be more receptive to the content I hope to impart.

Another way we can facilitate the use of journals or diaries is to assign students to write a certain amount of time or a certain amount of entries in their diaries or journals *outside of class,* and later have them report to us on the honor system that they completed the work.

While O'Conell and Dyment present research saying that not all students will benefit from life writing activities such as journaling (but this could probably be said of many educational practices), this should not deter teachers from assigning it. Because we know that increasing numbers of students are struggling with their mental health these days, it seems smart to offer a practice that can potentially help some students process their difficulties—and in so doing, help our students receive the material we want to transmit.

## Should We Directly Address Mental Health in the Freshman Class?

It's worth repeating that often before we can truly listen to others, or listen to academic or public conversations, as we want our students to do, we need to be listened to. I am writing about my students here, but I am also writing from personal experience, remembering my own distressing experience as a college student and the many "big conversations" I missed until my mid-thirties, due to mental health issues. My point is that some students we serve desperately need to be heard. It's been true in my story that sometimes the personal pain and confusion has been so great that bigger ideas—unless they related directly to my individual problems—could not get through. For a teacher like myself who has done a lot of personal-public writing about mental health and healing, the topic is one I feel pretty comfortable deploying in my classes. However, I realize many teachers are not as comfortable dealing head-on with the topic of mental health their classrooms. Then, I would advise, don't use the term "mental health"—but still *address* students' mental health through creating space and giving them tools to express themselves, should they need or want to talk or write about hard experiences. Below are some ways I addressed mental health, both implicitly and explicitly, in my own freshman composition class at UTA.

## Life Writing in Freshman Composition at UTA

As I thought long and hard about how to best help my students in ENGL 1301 at UTA (fall 2019), I decided that simply including life writing activities could provide some needed space for students to express their questions, difficulties, and stresses. Simply creating space for

expressive (or Expressive) writing to happen is my first and biggest point, because college students, like their overworked writing teachers, are often extremely busy people.

Therefore, in addition to teaching the three major required essays—all of which were very audience-based—I used the leeway I was given regarding daily work to add life writing to the syllabus in a variety of ways. I added in two personal essays, one at the beginning of the semester (an "introduce yourself" essay), and one at the end (a course reflection essay), which were graded only for completion. In these assignments, I gave students the option to write in the form of a letter to me, their teacher (in this way, the assignments could also be called rhetorical, or reader-based, but I stressed that I wanted them to use their own voices). I also regularly began classes with short journal prompts, writings sometimes unseen by me, and other times short notes written *to* me, these offered as opportunities for students to tell me how they were doing. So, how *were* they doing?

Without my asking for deep (upper-case Expressive) revelations in these assignments, some students gave them. One example was a female student who admitted from the first "Introduce Yourself" essay that she felt "trapped" in a major she didn't want, by parents who would disown her if she did not follow through. In the final essay of the semester, the "Semester Reflection Essay," she described feeling emotionally abused by her parents whenever she dared to share her true feelings—to cap it off, she even shared some of her suicidal ideations. At this point, I reached out to the campus BIT (Behavioral Intervention Team), because I felt concern for her safety and a responsibility to report what she had shared. I also reached out to her several times via email, but she did not ultimately respond. On a campus as large as UTA, because I did not know how else to reach her, I left her the most encouraging comments I could, and left her case in the hands of the BIT. I wish the best for her and pray she is doing okay. But her story just

underscores the need to allow spaces for students to share difficulties they may not feel comfortable sharing at home.

To that end, below are some other ways I allowed space for students to process and/or express their emotional or mental health difficulties in this course. For one, I actually chose to address mental health head-on. Serendipitously, Mental Health was a "topic cluster"[18] added by UTA the same year I began teaching there; thus, in the middle of the semester, we actually began a mental health unit, and this afforded some very fruitful class activities.

During this mental health unit, I incorporated several "mental health Mondays," where we stepped back from academic topics and our textbooks and students simply talked to one another in small groups about practical matters, such as their best and worst communication practices and experiences. As another idea, for those teachers who don't want to address mental health *head-on*, I suggest that simply making *interpersonal communication* a frequent topic of both formal and informal class discussions can create space to address mental health challenges. "Communicating well is an essential life skill," I told my students from the beginning. As we progressed into our mental health unit, I increasingly talked about good communication as an aid to better mental health, but teachers could also simply stress that good communication facilitates personal wellbeing and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Here's another idea for building from the "interpersonal communication" theme: After one particular mental health Monday, during which we discussed our own communication practices, I assigned students a handwritten "letter to a loved one," preferably to a person they

[18] Topic clusters in the first-year writing program at UTA refer to groups of pre-selected articles on various topics that instructors must choose and then have their students use for source material in the final two required essays. Some other topics currently available in UTA's clusters are Processing Immigration, Plastic Troubles, Climate Change, Photo-shopping the Body, Bio-ethics, and PEDS (Performance Enhancement Drugs).

had been neglecting during their first semester of college. I did not ask to see the letters, but only required students to report to me on Canvas that they had completed the assignment and let me know how it went. Based on the responses from my students, this was a high-yield activity: many reported good results, including reconnecting with friends they were out of touch with, or patching up rocky relationships with parents. Several even thanked me for the assignment.

On another mental health Monday, I used the "exit-slip" technique to have students write one question they had for their fellow students related to mental health before they could leave class. I collected these anonymous questions, and then compiled them into a class survey. After students had taken the survey, anonymously, of course, I compiled the responses and handed back the results. These results, in turn, furnished some classroom statistics and much interesting class discussion, as well as another source students could use in their final essays, in case they wanted to localize their arguments about college students and mental health.

Around the same time in the semester as "mental health Mondays," we read a chilling ESPN article by Kate Fagan, entitled "Split Image," about a college freshman who struggled to communicate a true picture of herself and ended up committing suicide. (This article was actually furnished as one article in the UTA-provided topic cluster.) The article begins, "On Instagram, Madison Holleran's life looked ideal: star athlete, bright student, beloved friend. But the photos hid the reality of someone struggling to go on." We read the long article out loud with our desks in a circle, and I posed the questions *Why did she do it*? and *What is the "argument" of the article*? One astute and un-shy student said, "People who look great on the outside aren't necessarily feeling good on the inside. They can be living a double life." True, that.

My class of twenty-four was the quietest class I've ever taught. Very few of my students ever spoke voluntarily in class, even to one another. But when we took our anonymous mental

health survey at mid-semester, my students learned some troubling things about their classmates. One-third said they were struggling with mental health to the point that it was interfering with their normal activities. This statistic also supported national research we read in class. One student was clearly suicidal, based on his or her anonymous comments. Forty percent reported they were in college not because they wanted to be, but because their parents wanted them to be.

Around the time I gave that survey, a handful of students stopped showing up. A couple did not turn in their second required essay. Though all my students started strong, four of them eventually failed or took incompletes. Except for a couple students whom I couldn't reach, the strugglers eventually admitted to me–via emails, essays, or in person–that they were struggling with depression, anxiety, or relationships (romantic or parental), or all of the above.

For those students who made it to the final essay, an essay synthesizing the sources in our topic cluster on mental health along with their own conclusions, I was saddened when I read statements like "My dad doesn't believe in depression; he just thinks people who claim it are weak." I was also saddened to learn how reluctant my students apparently were to simply talk openly with their parents. Some students admitted, either in their synthesis essay or Semester Reflection essay that they literally didn't feel safe expressing their needs to their parents. One student wrote in her final reflection that she had changed her major from the one her parents selected (a major she hated), but she was keeping the news from them as long as possible out of fear of their reaction. Another admitted that her parents had threatened to disown her if she did not go to college.

So. My quiet class of twenty-four, though they didn't speak up much in class, spoke loudly and clearly by the end of the semester: they had lots of legitimate (and normal) struggles, but they were generally uncomfortable sharing those struggles with others, and notably, often

uncomfortable sharing with their own parents or caregivers. Speaking from my standpoint as a professional communicator, *and* from my personal experience with similar young adult struggles to communicate, they lacked skills in healthy self-expression that I believe could do much to prevent *normal struggles* from turning into *mental health issues*.

One of my final conclusions from this class was that none of the failing students was academically incapable of succeeding in the class—but it was those pesky problems (with depression, anxiety, or failed communication with parents) that had led them to fail the class.

At a public university, I couldn't talk openly about what has most helped me since my own depressed undergraduate years. That is, prayer, small group work, and meditating on Bible promises to replace negative thoughts. But I did tell my students I had struggled mightily in the area of mental health, and that I had gained some victories by learning to better express myself in a variety of contexts: talking honestly with friends, arguing "nicely" with my husband (as in Rogerian argument), and practicing life writing in private as well as in public settings, to name a few.

In my role as a writing teacher, I did what I could; however, I wish I could have done more. I worked hard to design a class that was as useful as possible for my students. Although there will never be a perfect course, I am arguing that teachers who have the leeway should go beyond ensuring their students know how to make an "argument" in a formal essay. In other words, writing teachers should teach students skills in personal and interpersonal communication that will help them in their personal and interpersonal lives, not just skills to help them communicate in public settings.

I'm not satisfied yet with my syllabus, and I'm not yet satisfied that other teachers understand the importance of life writing, reflection, and listening skills in the college

experience, or, for my purposes here, simply in the freshman composition classroom. Thus, it is my ongoing project to keep improving as a teacher, for the benefit of my students. For me, that starts with finding creative ways to include life writing in a curriculum that also teaches crucial skills in rhetoric. In the next chapter, I consider how teachers might incorporate life writing as literature in the freshman course.

# Chapter 4

## Freshman Composition and the Middle Passage: How Slave Narratives Can Support Writing Instruction, Academic Inquiry, and Personal Development

I must admit, for the past five years, I've been trying to decide what to teach in freshman composition. While Erika Lindemann said the freshman course was "no place for literature," I wanted to think through what literature I would teach if I *did* teach literature in that course. Much like the debate about what to teach in freshman composition, the question of what should constitute the literary canon is unsettled and ongoing. Traditionally, literature has been chosen for its "literariness," and it still is. But, increasingly, scholars argue for an expanded canon, or canons, that include historically marginalized voices: African Americans, Native Americans, women, and other minority or underrepresented groups. These types of works may not, and often do not, fit the traditional criteria of literariness; instead, they could more easily be classified as "history writing"–factual accounts of events–or "life writing"–a designation that now includes diaries, recipe books, journals, scrapbooks, letters, commonplace books, even grocery lists and graffiti. The definition of autobiography has likewise expanded to include diaries, which has allowed more writers and scholars into this genre.

Because discussions surrounding the literary canon are so expansive and not likely to be resolved any time soon, I believe the idea of "teaching the canon" is outdated; so is the idea of trying to "serve the profession"[19] through the "correct" choice of literature. Instead, I argue that

[19] I take this phrase from a job interview in which I was asked about what kind of literature I would teach in the context of Christian education. The interviewer was concerned about both responding to concerns of Christian students, as well as "serving the profession"; in this context, he meant teaching traditionally canonized authors.

literature teachers should primarily strive to teach to and serve their *students*. Drawing upon rhetorical theory, which situates a communicative act within a specific situation and in relation to a specific audience, I argue for literature teachers to choose the most appropriate "canons" for their particular classes–that is, they should teach those works of literature that will be most helpful, instructive, and meaningful for their unique student populations. But the question remains: what literature is best for freshman composition?

Thankfully, my first course for my PhD program, Early African American Evangelical Literature, helped me answer this question: slave narratives. How did I come to this conclusion? Note that I came to this conclusion before I began formally studying life writing as a genre. I came to this conclusion by working from the rhetorical theory I brought with me–*and* from the philosophy of teaching writing I had already developed for my master's thesis, Creative Rhetoric. This approach led me to develop the following questions to guide me in forming a philosophy for teaching literature, a set of questions that, I think, would prove useful to any English teacher, or prospective English teacher, who is working to articulate a philosophy for choosing literature in a writing classroom:

1. What literature will be most helpful for my students as scholars and writers? In other words, what literature can best support best practices in rhetoric and composition?
2. What literature can I teach that supports academic inquiry and civic discourse and doesn't work against the values I hold, or the values of the institution where I teach?
3. What literature will be most impactful/helpful to my students personally—that is, to their development as well-functioning human beings?

In a nutshell, early on in my thought process, I centered on slave narratives, and more broadly, eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature, because this body of literature passes all three tests. Namely,

1. Slave narratives can be used to support the goals of almost any composition pedagogy I can think of, from expressive, to rhetorical, to critical approaches.
2. Following a flurry of recent research into religious rhetoric, slave narratives furnish morally and ethically acceptable, and academically sound, materials for Christian and secular teachers alike.
3. Finally, slave narratives are ideal for college freshmen because of the touchstones, the opportunities for personal connection and transcendence, they offer a population who, like enslaved African Americans, find themselves in a new and unfamiliar location, and who may be working either to understand the belief systems they grew up with or looking for new beliefs, worldviews, or theoretical frames to adopt.

In short, I've decided that slave narratives are a pedagogically sound choice on many fronts—really, every front I can think of. No matter whether one's philosophy is rooted in expressive or rhetorical pedagogy, no matter whether one wishes to engage social or religious issues, slave narratives fit the bill. As I will argue in my conclusion, they may even make a big difference in their students' personal lives. As I work through the explanations to these reasons, I will also make pedagogical suggestions for my fellow teachers and graduate students.

## Background: Trends in Composition Pedagogy, and the Pedagogy of Creative Rhetoric

As we've seen, the question of what to teach in freshman composition is an old, yet unsettled one. For a new graduate student or teacher studying composition pedagogy, the range

of different approaches can be dizzying. The oft-referenced *Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, a textbook used in the Comp and Rhet program at UTA, for instance, describes seventeen different approaches to or considerations in teaching composition in seventeen different chapters (Tate, Amy Taggart, Schick, and Hessler). In addition to chapters describing the major theoretical stances, such as Expressive and Rhetorical (or "Rhetoric and Argumentation") the book also includes chapters entitled Genre Pedagogy and Literature and Composition. As quickly becomes clear to the new grad student or teacher of composition, there is no consensus—no prescribed course—on what to teach in freshman composition, including whether or not to teach literature, or even what modes of writing[20] to teach. Aside from teaching assistants who are prescribed a common menu of readings, as they are at UTA, the questions of what literature to include in the composition class, and what modes to teach, are questions all new teachers face—and this is exactly where I have been in my career for the past few years, as I've skated back-and-forth between professor and graduate student.

My task of designing curriculum has been made a little easier by the work I did for my 2012 master's thesis, *A Graduate English Major's Search for Meaning: Toward a Pedagogy of Creative Rhetoric.* In that project, I worked out an underlying philosophy for what modes of texts I believe should be *produced* in composition courses—giving me a starting point for choosing what types of texts should be *consumed*. Building upon work by Gerald Graff, Tim Mayers, Douglas Hesse, and Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll, I proposed a pedagogical approach that integrated creative writing with rhetoric, much like creative writing studies, circa the early

[20] Some composition teachers use the acronym EDNA to represent the modes: Exposition, Description, Narration, and Argumentation.

2000s, was integrating creative writing with literature. I called my approach *Creative Rhetoric*. Creative Rhetoric is a pedagogy that, as I stated, "champions authentic communications for authentic audiences (the rhetorical consideration), while also engendering creativity both in process and in product (the creative consideration)" (iv). The fusion of expressive, rhetorical, and creative writing modes I employed in writing my thesis, and that I am employing in this dissertation, is an example of the blended style I have in mind with the term "creative rhetoric."

I articulated my philosophy of Creative Rhetoric primarily as a response to my own frustrations as an undergraduate student in the English department—and also as a response to Wendy Bishop's call for more research into actual student experiences within composition classrooms. Bishop argued that compositionists would do well to stop reading and writing *about* students so much and simply *ask them* what they thought. With that invitation, I was happy to offer my two cents. I wrote about my frustration of not being allowed to use "I" during most of my undergraduate program in English—I felt like my voice was not considered important—thereby calling attention to the value of (lower-case) expressive writing. I wrote about my frustration with only once being asked to write a creative paper–one bright spot out of dozens of literary analysis assignments that felt as useful to me as the infamous *Hamlet* essay I mentioned in the previous chapter–thereby showing that a topic-centered approach to writing alienated expressive and creative writers like myself (if not most other students as well). At the same time, I argued for a fusion of expressive writing with rhetorical writing, citing a number of scholars who had found a valuable, and pedagogically sound, synthesis of these two forms. Indeed, the scholarship even by the mid-nineties reflected an encouraging blending of two modes, expressive and rhetorical, that were, at one time, considered incompatible.

Since James Britton had argued that the expressive mode (or the "expressive function") preceded the transactional and poetic modes (or functions) in a writer's linguistic development (see chapter 2, section 1, for a review of these terms), it has since been argued that expressive writing should be taught early in a writer's development and other modes should come later. I have no disagreement with this approach. What I *do* take issue with is the trend of leaving expressive language behind—and often the autobiographical "I" with it—as the course progresses to other modes. Thankfully this outdated pedagogical approach was challenged in the eighties and nineties, with calls for expressive writing to occur throughout a writer's education (Elbow, Macrorie, Fulwiler, Cobine). As Cobine has asserted, (lower-case) expressive writing (not to be confused with upper-case Expressive Writing, as discussed in chapter 3), shows up in the literature of great authors who are "obviously consummating, not beginning, their linguistic development." Thus, he argues, an informed approach to writing instruction offers the various modes of writing as "equally available to all writers at all ages rather than hierarchically arranged in tiers by age and talent" (Cobine, para. 2). Because of research like this, thankfully, the expressive function is alive and well in many of today's composition courses, including UTA's first-year writing sequence, in which most assignments invite students to blend the expressive voice with well-chosen rhetorical appeals to reach various audiences.

Ten years ago, with my pedagogy of Creative Rhetoric, the element I added to this blended, informed approach to writing instruction, was that writers should be allowed to even include creative writing in their college papers, if this mode serves their rhetorical purposes. In effect, I argued that composition teachers should invite students to write creatively to achieve rhetorical effects. Thus, when it came time to design a course in freshman composition, I knew I wanted to include assignments that blended expressive writing with rhetorical writing with, even,

creative writing, for those students who were so inclined. I wanted to create assignments that looked decidedly different from the ones I had been asked to write as an undergraduate student.

So, with my thesis I answered the question of what types of writing I wanted to teach and require of students. But the question still remained: what would I teach in freshman composition? And if I taught literature, what kind would it be?

The answer to this question takes its first cue from the trends in composition pedagogy I've just discussed. Based on what composition scholarship of recent decades has revealed, a course of study for freshman composition should include all types of reading models and modes of writing. If literature blends these modes, even better. If, indeed, "everything's an argument," then narratives as well as arguments should employ logos, ethos, and pathos appeals. If, indeed, personal experience has a place in argument (Spigelman), then any and all essays should reasonably allow "I." The ideal literature for freshman composition, then, will present a heteroglossia of voices that mix the modes of discourse.

This is the first reason that eighteenth century Black Atlantic Writing is a sound choice for freshman composition. Literature from this period showcases the different modes, and blending of modes, we teachers want our students to emulate—from narrative (John Marrant and Olaudah Equiano, among others) to argumentative (Ottobah Cugoano and Jupiter Hammon) to even poetic (Phillis Wheatley), for those who want to incorporate creative writing. Moreover, these writings, though at times decidedly personal, were written for a definite audience (for the Rhetorical teachers among us), and written to advance the public conversation about slavery—arguably the most pressing social issue in the history of the United States (for the critical/cultural teachers among us). Thus, many lessons can be drawn from these writings about how to use life

writing, specifically personal narratives, to achieve rhetorical ends and promote discussion of social issues, especially in the writings of Cugoano and Equiano. Below, I'll point out a few.

## Slave Narratives Can Support Best Practices in Rhetoric and Composition

My first best practice for teaching eighteenth century Black Atlantic Literature in a freshman composition class is to highlight these writers' use of their personal stories in developing ethos. In Cugoano's and Equiano's texts, the ultimate goal was abolition of slavery. As formerly enslaved people themselves, they had a huge personal stake in the issue. As an expressivist arguing for Creative Rhetoric, I appreciate the use of their personal stories to build their social arguments, and I would point this out to my students. I would bring up the same discussion I use when teaching Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*[21] in my Research Writing classes: Namely, *How would this argument be different if the writer left himself out*? *If he wrote in the third person and not the first*? *How does the inclusion of the personal experience enhance the credibility of the writer*? *How does the personal experience impact your understanding of and engagement with the social issues treated in the work*?

The obvious answer to these questions is that the argument is strengthened by personal experience. Readers are able to get closer to the issue through the first-person lens of the writer. Readers are also more likely to care about the issue through empathizing with the writer. Readers are moved emotionally by the argument, because they know the rhetor has intimate experience with the evils he decries.

[21] Victor Frankl was an Austrian psychologist and Jew who was imprisoned in concentration camps in World War II, and later wrote about his experiences in his book.

The recent literature in rhetoric and composition seems to paint these observations as givens. The textbook UTA uses in first-year-writing (which I have continued to use since returning to SWAU), *They Say, I Say,* argues that "academic writing does not necessarily mean setting aside your own voice" (Graff and Birkenstein). I want this attitude to be the standard in college composition classrooms, but judging by discussions I've had with my students, it's not. For many students, college writing means precisely setting aside their own voices. It seems that Current-Traditional practices still persist, so I have made it (one of) my mission(s) to encourage students to write using "I," to insert their voices into the conversations surrounding their chosen research topics. Along with Graff and Birkenstein, I want my students to believe that their arguments can live and breathe alongside the arguments of others; I want them to gain agency and confidence as writers, not simply be recorders of what others have said.

So my first assignment would be to simply to have students read some of these narratives—particularly Cugoano and Equiano—and note the blending of modes. These writers were two of the first formerly enslaved African Americans to write extended antislavery arguments, and, as undergraduate students can clearly see, both employ a forceful fusion of personal narrative with argumentation. In the words of Angelo Costanzo, Cugoano

> uses the example of his own victimization to lash out courageously at the institution of slavery. Cugoano broke the ground for this type of social protest and thus encouraged Equiano two years later to write his great personal narrative, in which he joined elements of spiritual autobiographical writing with the antislavery polemic from Cugoano's sermonic work. (36)

Having several class discussions about this discursive hybridity in Equiano's and Cugoano's works could do much, I think, to challenge students' erroneous ideas about what makes for acceptable argumentative writing—and by extension, what makes for acceptable academic and civic discourse. Indeed, who could argue that Cugoano's "own experience taught him about

slavery and gave him the credentials for speaking out against it" (Costanzo 39)? If students still doubt that their voices belong in academic arguments—particularly arguments they are allowed to choose, and arguments they have a stake in—my recommendation would be to simply ask them: Would you prefer to read Olaudah Equiano's or Ottobah Cugoano's arguments *with* or *without* their personal narratives? I doubt any students would think the deletion of life writing an improvement on these arguments. Hopefully, students would draw the parallel to their own writing.

My personal goal with including texts that employ life writing is, obviously, to lead students to do the same in their own writing, whatever topic they may be writing about. Students can learn to blend personal experience with argumentation by reading writers who have skillfully done just that. But this is not the only benefit of teaching expressive alongside argumentative discourse.

For critical/cultural teachers whose primary goal is to engage their students with social issues, I would stress that personal experience provides a powerful entry into social issues. Even if students have never cared about social topics, I believe students are more likely to gain an appreciation for studying social topics through reading personal stories than any other type of literature. For his part, African American composition scholar Keith Gilyard asserts that he finds a critical approach to composition pedagogy the "most attractive and persuasive," because he finds it "the thinking most consistent with the need to produce critical and astute African American students" (626). Humorously, Gilyard writes of Martin Luther King's college English class, in which King earned two C's, saying he believes King would have fared better if the teacher of that course would have taught from the cultural/critical studies model. To Gilyard's point: indeed, after "listening in" for several years to the African American experience in

America, I find myself in agreement. What I would say is that not all students can relate to racial (or other kinds of) discrimination.[22] Therefore, if a teacher wants to spotlight a social cause, and if their aim is to provide a truly "inclusive" curriculum, I suggest using life writing—both as a product *and* as a process—as an inroad to reach *all* students (because who can't appreciate a compelling personal story?), and then tying the target issue (racial or gender discrimination, for instance) to student experiences. I believe that when it comes to writing about social issues, students will have an easier entry point into those particular discourse communities if allowed to read personal narratives, and then discuss or write about them using natural, or expressive, language. Since expressive language is the language of learning (Britton, Mlynarczyk), it seems a no-brainer to include it in both the literature and writing assignments in freshman composition, not to mention in any other course where we care about student engagement.

Now to my next question: how can eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature further civic discourse without working against my values (religious or otherwise)?

## Slave Narratives Can Support Academic Inquiry and Civic Discourse

For all professors, religious or not, cultural critical teachers or not, literature should support not only best practices in rhetoric and composition, but also support, or at least not work against, the educator's values. If I were writing a second dissertation, it might be entitled *Literature and the Christian Teacher*, for I have strong feelings about what literature should be

[22] To be honest, this describes myself. I also admit, to my chagrin, that I have not always been aware of the extent of discrimination that has endured into the present day. This describes my younger, uninformed self, but I have since addressed this gap in my knowledge by tuning in to the news and, for my PhD work, reading many narratives of minority writers, notably, Richard Allen, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Maxine Hong Kingston, Zitkala Sa, and others.

taught at Christian institutions. For one, I believe literature in Christian classrooms should be used to illustrate Christian values in the positive, and departures from Christian values in the negative. But more on this in chapter 6. For now, this ideal is similar to a sentiment voiced by many of the eighteenth century writers I am writing about (Jupiter Hammon, Wheatley, Cugoano, Equiano, for instance). However, for these writers, the context was freedom: they stated that the ultimate freedom, the most important freedom, they could seek was that freedom from sin that would prepare them for eternal life. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this. Of course, my first point in this section is to argue for eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature, for Christian teachers, on the basis of its Christian principles. The easiest literature Christian teachers can choose is literature that preaches Christianity. I have to admit, an earlier teacher-version of myself, if given the freedom to teach whatever literature I wanted, might have chosen nothing *but* overtly Christian, or evangelical, literature.

To be sure, it is, and probably always will be, much more comfortable for me to teach Christian authors and explicitly religious texts. However, as I've been finding, religious rhetoric is not necessarily a slam dunk for my students. I must choose it, like I must choose secular literature, with care. As I'm learning, when teaching religious rhetoric, I must be sensitive to the fact that some students have been offended by, or are liable to take offense to, my faith.

The issue of slavery demonstrates how Christianity can be used for polar purposes: on the one hand to support a horrible act, on the other, to refute it. And this is my next argument supporting eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature in freshman composition: while these writers by and large present a Christian, evangelical agenda, the historical context of their writings presents a very complicated, hardly flattering, hardly one-dimensional view of Christianity. At the same time these enslaved writers are arguing for Christianity, the whole issue

of slavery surrounding them presents Christianity in a very bad light. There is no easy explanation here.

Any teacher who uses these writings in college English cannot avoid some very hard questions, to the tune of *What kind of religion is it that could support the African slave trade*? And *What are we (especially Christians) to make of the biblical passages that seem to support slavery*? I'm still grappling with these questions myself. I don't have great answers yet. It's an extremely complicated issue, and this is what makes it an ideal site for academic inquiry and civic discourse.

Such questions offer composition teachers and their students opportunities to "complicate reductive narratives about religious discourses and identities," a goal that could be attractive for nonreligious and religious teachers alike. The paradox of Christian-sanctioned slavery, moreover, "offers students occasions to construct alternative narratives" (DePalma 261), an activity that may or may not make some Christian teachers nervous. I'll admit to being a little nervous. I'm not sure, in fact, that the use of eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature in college classes wouldn't actually lead some students *away* from Christianity. My student Maggie, for instance, when we read our twenty pages of abolitionist literature in Romantic Lit, was really troubled by the misappropriation of Christian tenets for slavery and said so in her reading response paper. In her words, it was "sad so many slaves accepted Christianity, after they had been enslaved in the *name* of Christianity." Yikes. For her final paper, Maggie wrote about the slave trade and worked to reconcile her religious beliefs with the horrific facts of history. This is an activity I have been doing, too. But I don't regret engaging these questions in class; in any class, I think bringing up these hard questions is worth the risks, especially since students are likely to encounter similar questions in the world. Better to preempt some proactive, honest

academic inquiry, and practice engaging in *civil* civic discourse, in the classroom before students have to face similar hard questions reactively in the world.

Thankfully, for those scholars who want to continue the conversation, it's a great time to be investigating religious questions in higher education. In the past decade, there has been a flurry of scholarship treating religious rhetoric in college composition. Scholars in the field have recognized that religious discourse, although it has been seen as incommensurate with academic discourse in the past, and although there has been, until recently, a lacuna in college composition regarding religious topics, religious discourse cannot, and should not, be ignored. College students care about their faith, and whether or not writing instructors invite students to write about it, they will. Happily for those students, and teachers like myself, the field is starting to take religious discourse—or religious rhetoric—seriously. Scholars such as Michael-John DePalma, Jeffrey Ringer, TJ Geiger, Maxine Hairston, and others are inquiring into how to engage religious rhetoric for academic and civic ends in the composition classroom, and coming up with good answers.

As Chris S. Earle observes, religious rhetoric is being read and written in composition courses for at least two overarching aims: one, to help students "consider their values and commitments in relation to multiple voices" (135), and two, to help students express their beliefs to multiple audiences, audiences with a range of religious, or irreligious, beliefs. A number of scholars argue that these types of courses are positively needed, because the academy at large has an underdeveloped vocabulary for religious discourse; instructors continually misread and misunderstand student religious writers; and religious student writers lack agency, or the rhetorical resources, to frame their beliefs in a democratic way. As Anne Ruggles Gere puts it, there is "paucity of academic language about religion" (15). In DePalma's words, there is a need

to "cultivate rhetorical resources with which writers might thoughtfully engage with religion in academic contexts" (265). There is also a need, as is clear in the literature, for teachers to learn better vocabularies for responding to religious student writing. Heather-Thomson Bunn's work, for one, points out an unfortunate trend in the literature about religion and composition, in which writing teachers often perceive religious discourses negatively. Pieces such as Juanita Smart's "Frankenstein or Jesus Christ: When the Voice of Faith Creates a Monster for the Composition Teacher" and Jeffrey Ringer's "Working With(in) the Logic of the Jeremiad: Responding to the Writing of Evangelical Christian Students" illustrate this ongoing conversation. Thankfully, the writing of these scholars reflects a good-willed and honest inquiry into how to help religious students (not to mention religious teachers) write and speak responsibly and productively about their faith in public forums. DePalma, in his article "Reimagining Rhetorical Education: Fostering Writers' Civic Capacities through Engagement with Religious Rhetorics," sums up the important work that can be done through employing religious rhetorics in composition classes: "Along with giving writers exposure to models of religious rhetorics employed for civic ends, courses on religious rhetorics could be a space to help students develop rhetorical resources with which to convey their core beliefs and values across religious and worldview differences—an essential civic capacity" (266).

I am indebted to these scholars for articulating the various uses of religious rhetoric[23] for academic and civic means. These scholars point out that the composition classroom is an ideal space for students to encounter varying belief systems; develop a listening and tolerant ear for

[23] From my standpoint as a Christian composition teacher, the term "religious rhetoric" suggests many exciting possibilities—sacred writings, sermons, testimonies, denominational publications, or spiritual memoirs, to name a few.

views that may not suit their own; and construct or reconstruct their own beliefs. This work provides a solid academic frame upon which instructors can build courses involving religious discourse. As a relatively new college instructor who is doing just that (see chapter 5), I am relieved. This scholarship helps with the second question I posed at this essay's beginning—*What literature can I teach that supports academic inquiry and civic discourse and doesn't work against my values (religious or otherwise)*? With this body of scholarship, religious teachers could justify courses focused on religious rhetoric almost as easily for public institutions as they could for religious institutions. Put another way, religious rhetoric is now recognized as a viable choice for college composition, no matter where one teaches. And for those who still worry that religious discourse, more specifically, Christian rhetoric, will foreclose academic inquiry and limit Christian students within their own worldview, eighteenth century Black Atlantic literature easily escapes that criticism: the paradox of Christianity and slavery. That's my one teaching suggestion in this section: ask the class to grapple with that paradox.

However, question three still remains. Within the umbrella of "religious rhetoric," *What literature will be most impactful/helpful for my students personally—that is, to their development as well-functioning human beings, whatever their personal values may be?* Before I address this final question, allow me to pause and simply talk about the freshman experience as I experienced it.

## Autobiographical Fragment: My Own Freshman Experience

My spiritual memoir, *Ending the Pain,* begins with a scene from 2003, my freshman year of college. The scene is a weekend religious retreat to which some upperclassmen had invited me. I walk into a church on a Friday afternoon desperate for answers and hoping to find a will to

live, but I walk out the following Sunday morning bereft of hope and determined to commit suicide. This chapter begins the story in medias res and raises some of the most pivotal issues for the protagonist, and some of the most troubling questions of the narrative. Nineteen-year-old Lindsey, who was diagnosed with depression at age 15 (which diagnosis concurred with the very dysfunctional breakup of her Christian family), has left home. Separated from family. She wonders, *Where is home, anyway? Who's my family anymore, anyway? Where is God? Is there a God? Is my future secure? What other horrible things lurk around the corner?* Sensing that there are no easy answers, she decides death is the only way to end the pain. The chapter ends with Lindsey making arrangements to withdraw from college and commit suicide. I want to point out here that a key factor in these self-destructive decisions was Lindsey's difficulty to reconcile the claims of the faith she had grown up with her lived experience.

"Desperate" is the title of that chapter, and it raises the key question of my manuscript: *How is God going to save her?* It's a two-fold question. Literally, *How is God going to save Lindsey from suicide*? And also, *How is God going to save Lindsey from her religious disillusionment*? I believe that incorporating this question into the book's new opening was the hook that ultimately sold the book on its second submission, because it is so pertinent for twenty-first century Christians, particularly "emerging adults," a term that refers to people in the age range of roughly eighteen to twenty-five (Arnett). In other words, many young people are working to reconcile the claims of Christianity with the historical failures of the Institution to deliver on its promises, not to mention the continued failures of individual Christians to live up to their name. This is where teachers have another opportunity in teaching slave narratives.

Slave Narratives Can Support Freshmen in their Personal Development

Thankfully, today institutions and individuals that oppress others are not excused with that deceptively simple argument used by many eighteenth century Black writers: "Well, if we get our freedom in the next life, that's all that really matters." Similarly, young adults today (I'll use "emerging adults" and "young adults" interchangeably from here), don't necessarily "go with the flow" of religion if they don't feel like it's helping them personally. Rather, today emerging adults are able to discriminate, in a good way, among competing belief systems, much more than minority groups of the past; young adults today don't have to settle for religious rhetoric that doesn't sit right. At age nineteen, I didn't practically, personally understand the Christian rhetoric that was presented to *me* at that fateful religious retreat—"Just believe and you'll be a new creation." So, after being let down by "the same thing those Christians always say," I promptly jumped on the suicide train.

At first glance, all this freedom of choice in young adulthood may seem like a good thing. But research shows that too much freedom can, in fact, be detrimental to mental health. Emerging adults are really living through what Jeffrey Jensen Arnett calls an "extended adolescence." This age group is working through identity issues that youth from fifty years ago worked out in their early to middle teenage years. This highly ambiguous time of life is a "distinct period of the life course, different in important ways from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it" (4). Specifically, five features characterize this age: The age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. Notice the good and bad connotations of this age.

Schulenberg and Zarrett point out that while emerging adulthood is a happy time for some—a time of new starts and new opportunities—for others, it can bring about crisis: "For

others, even some who appeared to be doing well during adolescence, the (often immediate) decline in structure and support that typically accompanies post-high-school life is debilitating, setting the stage for emerging or increased psychopathology" (161). For myself, before I entered my freshman year of college, my imagination brimmed with exciting new possibilities. But when I got to college, I experienced the negative side of the college transition. That decline in structure and support indeed proved debilitating; previously unprocessed emotions suddenly submerged me, not to mention deep philosophical questions about the worldview that was supposed to ground and give meaning to my existence. In short, I soon found myself in the midst of that spiritual and existential crisis I described in chapter 1 of *Ending the Pain*.

Now, I know my personal experience may not represent the general experience of college freshmen. However, in my time as a college professor, I have seen a concerning amount of first-year students fall behind and eventually drop out of or fail my classes because of personal, emotional, or seemingly existential problems.[24] They couldn't turn in their annotated bibliography because they were too busy dealing with depression, anxiety, or overwhelming stress. They couldn't engage in our discussion about *Man's Search for Meaning* because they were too busy searching for their own meaning at college. They couldn't decide on a topic for their research paper because they hadn't even decided if they were going to stay in school or not.

The point is, traditional college freshmen (part of Arnett's group of "emerging adults") are at a difficult stage in life. Most have just left home, family, and, really, all that's familiar.

[24] In the fall 2018 semester, four out of twenty-five students failed my Research Writing class, none due to lack of writing ability, but simply failure to come to class and turn in work. Based on conversations/emails with them, I know stress, emotions, and college transition issues played major factors in these cases. In the spring semester, still in progress, three students out of twelve have simply stopped showing up or turning in work; they will fail unless they get to class and turn in their work.

Many are questioning what they believe, what they want to do with their lives, and what's the meaning of it all. At a time when they most desire material familiarity and support (i.e., *real* people around them to support them), they lack it. The psychology literature increasingly reflects the fact that the college transition is tough, not only because life for emerging adults has simply gotten tougher in the twenty-first century, but also because college life has gotten hairier. In the words of psychologists Isaac R. Galatzer-Levy et al.,

> Aside from common stressors which in themselves appear to have an impact on the mental health of students, there is growing recognition of the high rates of exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTEs) among college students. There is evidence that college student are at an increased risk for exposure to PTEs such as sexual assault as well as community violence. (543)

These all-too-common traumas, along with all-too-common emotional and existential struggles in college, lead me to my final argument for using slave narratives in freshman composition.

While incoming college students will never know what it is like to be enslaved, thank God, many in this population can, unfortunately, relate to trauma, religious disillusionment, and/or other emotional or existential struggles. At the very least, college students are really stressed out. Because of all these factors, college students face the continuous temptation to forget the world around them, forget history, and retreat inside themselves, focusing on themselves and *their* problems: the result is often depression and anxiety, not to mention low engagement with academic or social topics.

In this project, I am arguing that one remedy for emotional distress is to write about it, to write about one's life: however, this practice can be taken too far. At the point when a person cannot see beyond their own situation, new perspectives can prove extremely effective medicine. Thus, I want to also argue for *reading* the life writing of *others* on the grounds that life writing admits our students (and ourselves) to new perspectives that can help assist with crucial steps to

personal development. While I'm no psychologist, I *do* have a long history of battling (and intermittently beating) depression and anxiety; one of the best antidotes I have found to these common issues is seeing the world through a new, sometimes radically different, lens. As any literature teacher would agree, literature is an ideal tool for introducing students to new perspectives. I contend that life writing in particular can be extremely helpful for shaking readers out of stubborn, fixed, or myopic mindsets, whether they be mindsets of "woe-is-me," "my life sucks," or mindsets of unconscious privilege. In my many years as an English student *and* English teacher, I have found myself sitting, or standing, comfortably in both mindsets; fortunately, through my encounters with life writing, I have also found myself shaken, time and again, into more informed and healthier perspectives, both regarding myself and my quite comfortable place in the world, and others and their less privileged places in the world.

While life stories of any writer can provide new perspectives to any reader, slave narratives may be a particularly fruitful genre for shaking twenty-first century college students out of their self-focused stupor. How so? Below are a few points of comparison and contrast between eighteenth century enslaved African Americans and modern college students. I'm thinking about engaging some thought-provoking questions in a writing (or literature) classroom, to help students come to more informed, and healthier, perspectives about their place–perhaps their unconscious privileges, and their unconscious blessings–in the world. My hope is that in suggesting outrageous comparisons between enslaved African Americans of yesteryear and college students of today, modern college students can realize that their lives are *not that bad*. Maybe they will even realize, *Holy cow*, I'm really privileged; I'm really blessed. I have no reason to complain! Perhaps they could further realize, *Hey, maybe there is something (some social cause) as important, or more important, to talk and write and rant about than just myself.*

Teaching Suggestion: Make Outrageous Comparisons to Draw Fruitful Contrasts

Imagine with me, for a moment, asking students to compare their lives to the lives of those they are reading about, if those lives are enslaved African Americans. Following are some comparisons I made in going through this mental exercise early in my PhD program.[25] First, both constitute groups grappling with their faith. Freshman year is, like the eighteenth century was, a time of questioning faith and trying to understand religious discourse alongside sometimes dissonant realities. Additionally, college students may feel like outsiders to their own "religious discourse"—or those fundamental beliefs they were raised with, but may never have personalized. In my memoir, I described feeling like an outsider to my own religion's discourse, but I have also witnessed this in numerous of my students' writings. Equiano describes a similar agony in chapter 10 of his *Interesting Narrative*, as he strives to personally understand the Christian rhetoric with which he has associated himself.

Second, both groups faced or face instable, in-between physical surroundings. Enslaved people were initially uprooted from their homeland and relocated to the colonies; following, they were often further displaced and relocated via the auction block. In comparison, but certainly this is much more of a contrast, college freshmen leave home (usually by choice) and relocate to a dorm room or an apartment, which is usually the first location change of many to follow. Says

[25] Disclaimer: when I first encountered this literature, I was also encountering, for the first time, research on Expressive Writing as a mental health intervention. At that time, I was still very self-focused, and mainly thinking about how to treat my own personal psychoses, not how to remedy social ills. If social injustice was on my radar, it was incredibly dim. Thus, in my reading of literature by enslaved writers, I was making the error of placing myself too close to the subject matter. I couldn't fully appreciate what I was reading. To illustrate, as I've been revising this chapter (and this entire dissertation), I've been thinking, Wow, I've been way too self-focused. I should get over myself and thank God for the life I've lived (if too much of my story survives, please blame it on time constraints).

Arnett, the rate of residential change peaks during the ages of twenty to twenty-four, due to emerging adults "changing their plans regarding love, work, and education" (7), making this period highly unstable. Admittedly, this analogy is weak, because twenty-first century adults ostensibly have the freedom to settle where they like and choose their work, whereas eighteenth century enslaved people did not. As Equiano's and Venture Smith's narratives show, a free black was often not really "free." They were not enslaved anymore, but they were not free in the same sense that white people were free. On the other hand, it may or may not be worth pointing out that college freshmen, a class of Arnett's emerging adults, find themselves in a liminal space where they are not adolescents living at home under the rules of their parents, yet they are not quite fully adults, granted all the privileges of adulthood. When asked, "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" sixty percent of 18-25-year-olds answer, "in some ways yes, in some ways no." Says Arnett, this ambiguity about their status as adults persists into the thirties, and does not fade until after age thirty-five, at which point "the feeling of being adult is well established" (12). Again, there is some overlap here, but it becomes ridiculous the further we take it.

Perhaps engaging this little comparison/contrast exercise in undergraduate classrooms could help students realize that the instabilities, unknowns, and existential questions they are facing might be rough, but they are no reason to give up, shut down, or shut up. On the contrary, no-name writers throughout history have recorded their traumas and existential questions and, in so doing, have forged new identities and found new meaning in their lives. If there is a last way we could compare modern-day college students to writers of slave narratives, it is this: everyone has a unique story to tell, and no one can tell it quite as accurately as the person who lived it. In my classroom, I tell students they all have the right to speak up, but I also stress that it's crucial

that we also *listen*. Now that I've started talking about social justice issues in my classroom, I often find myself fumbling for the right words…only to realize that I don't often *know* the right words. So I qualify my statements a lot, I ask for forgiveness and understanding sometimes, and I ask for volunteers to chime in on important topics where I don't have firsthand experience, but where they *do*.

One question I have put to my American Literature students this semester (spring 2022), after having them read several slave narratives and after playing audio versions of several African American spirituals in class, along with a study of spiritual autobiographies by both Black and White writers, is this: "What is my story?" Another way I asked this question is this: "Do you have a story that is just dying to be told? I know some of you do." And a second question: "If you were to take time to write down an extended message to share with an audience, what would it be?" I asked these questions around mid-semester, at which point I was preparing them to write their PWP, or Personal Writing Project. This assignment asks students to name an audience and write whatever kind of project they would like to write (personal narrative, public argument, or anything in between), in the amount of 5-10 pages. As I had hoped, this assignment invited a variety of responses, ranging from stories of conversion experiences, to family secrets, to a catalogue of life lessons destined for posterity. One student, a White male, admitted the following: "After reading all this literature, I'm not sure what my story is. It doesn't seem very important." I have assured him that he *does* have a story and it *is* important–but I am also glad to see he's gone through an awakening similar to what I've gone through: he's realized that he's actually lived a relatively easy life. Hopefully he's learned to listen a bit more before he speaks. Indeed, personal growth–which includes getting educated about the wider world around us–can be uncomfortable. But if discomfort means waking up to

injustice, then making students uncomfortable is nothing to avoid. Perhaps making students uncomfortable should even be a goal, as long as we also remain sensitive to the fact that each student is on their own journey, and some journeys may take longer than others, depending on what life experiences, what traumas or existential questions, might be slowing our students down. In the next chapter, I leave the freshman composition classroom to consider how we can leverage life writing, along with the rhetorical stance and some creativity, in general education literature classes to further provide authentic and crucial learning experiences for our students

# Chapter 5

## Life Writing in the Literature Classroom: A Rhetorical Approach

The longer I read, teach, and think through the uses of life writing in higher education, the more I am convinced it is an all-purpose tool, equaled by no other genre, which can be used by any teacher of almost any background, to promote almost any learning objective in the English classroom. As I've been telling my students in my American Literature I class (spring 2022), no matter what background you come from–no matter your culture, class, race, religion, or gender–life writing studied *as literature* has something for you, because writers of all backgrounds have written about their experiences. What's more, life writing has something of interest for any scholar in English studies. Already for many decades, scholars have turned to life writing in order to include historically marginalized voices. As James Olney notes, African American writers entered the canon through the door of autobiography, and Kenneth Roemer points out that until the 1970s and 80s, Native American literature was not even on the map; now, however, using the frame of "life writing," scholars and teachers can include in the canon many works ascribed to Native Americans, such as the autobiography of Black Hawk, the narrative of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, and the spiritual autobiography of William Apess, among others. Feminist scholars make similar observations about women's writing. For instance, Jennifer Sinor observes that women's diaries have moved from not being considered autobiography to being considered, among many diary scholars, the "most authentic form of autobiography" (48). Indeed, one reason life writing has become popular in the academy is because life writing is inclusive: it has admitted those groups that were traditionally excluded from privileges such as education, literacy, leisure time, and literary training. For scholars concerned about equality, equity, and inclusion, this is cause for celebration.

I am one such scholar, and I welcome this move to inclusion. Including authors that more completely represent the world we live in is a rhetorically effective move, as well as an ethical move, and likely to appeal to many students. However, ethical teaching is not accomplished simply by including more authors, and more types of writing, on the syllabus. In order for teachers to truly and ethically serve their students, I argue they must both present inclusive/representative literature–which we have said is accomplished by teaching life writing–while they *also* teach rhetorical tools for becoming responsible, respectful, relevant, and skillful communicators. In this dissertation I am arguing that the best tool for meeting these goals, along with life writing, is teaching the rhetorical triangle, sometimes called the rhetorical stance. In this chapter, I employ both tools to model how we teachers can examine our own rhetorical situations in order to design effective (life writing) curricula.

Specifically, panning out from the freshman class, I will use rhetorical theory and the first woman's autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, to think through how teachers can rhetorically analyze their teaching situation in order to teach life writing more effectively. First, I will define what I mean by the rhetorical stance. Here, I invite readers to see the rhetorical triangle as a useful heuristic that can be used in limitless ways, some of which I will employ in this chapter. Namely, I will use this framework not only to analyze two approaches taken in two medieval literature classrooms, but also to delineate some best practices for the effective teaching of life writing, considering the three points of the triangle. Later in the chapter, I pan out from the medieval literature classroom to share how I am applying these concepts to my own experimental course in American Literature I.

## A Framework for Literature Teachers: The Rhetorical Stance

My approach to teaching literature stems from my training in rhetoric, and my belief that an effective literature class will share the same elements of effective rhetoric. That is, the class content will give due attention to three points: the speaker (teacher), the topic (a period, genre, or theme of literature), and the audience (students). This concept, called the rhetorical triangle in contemporary circles, goes back as far as Aristotle's classical discussion of logos, ethos, and pathos. In 1963, Wayne Booth recast these ancient concepts for college English teachers as "The Rhetorical Stance." Booth was writing from his perspective as a college English teacher reading ineffective student essays; but it wasn't the students he criticized for the bad writing; it was the teachers. Booth's main point was that the essays "failed" (not literally failed, but failed to catch his interest) because the teachers had failed to give good—rhetorically authentic—writing assignments. That is, as far as students could see, the only *purpose* for the writing was to be evaluated for the course. In like manner, as far as students could see, there was no conceivable *audience* for this type of writing, except the teacher, again, for the sole purpose of assigning a grade for the course. The writing assignments, we might say, lived and died within the course.

In lieu of this failed current-traditional teaching model, Booth proposed the rhetorical stance—the idea that the "common ingredient" in good writing was a "proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker" (141). He went so far as to say that this balance, or rhetorical stance, was the "main goal" of teachers of rhetoric and composition. I would like to suggest that this balance should be a main goal of literature teachers, too. Though Booth was writing primarily as a writing teacher, he wrote in an age when it was common to teach writing through teaching

literature; thus, many of the examples he gives of poor student writing consist of essays on literature, including a bone-dry student essay on Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. Indeed, Booth's ideas are relevant for both writing *and* literature teachers, and we can read his essay as a call to all teachers to engage the rhetorical stance in order to promote better student performance. Likewise, given the ubiquitous wariness toward literature from college students (and administrators, I might add), I am calling for better, more thoughtful, teacher engagement in literature classrooms, hypothesizing that more thoughtful engagement from teachers will lead to more thoughtful engagement from students.

Booth found that many teachers' writing assignments suffered from almost-exclusive attention to *topic*. In literature classes that fail to grab students' attention, I believe the same criticism could be leveled: teachers have given the bulk of their attention to the topics of their courses (and perhaps themselves, insofar as they have allowed their personal, political, or scholarly biases to shape their syllabi), with comparatively little attention to their student audiences. Following, I compare and contrast two teaching methods in two courses involving medieval literature to demonstrate Booth's, and my own, assertion that effective instructors will consider their rhetorical situation, and develop courses that balance all three points: the topic of the class, their own interests as educators, and the needs and interests of their students.

## A Tale of Two Pedagogies

In 1993, Medievalists Karen Mura and Linda McMillin (professors of literature and history, respectively) teamed up to expand interest in medieval studies and feminism. In their article "Not a Damsel in Distress: Feminist Medieval Studies at a Small Liberal Arts University," they explain that such a course was made possible by their department's "completely [revising]"

the curricula for the English major and minor; the department moved away from a traditional chronological model of study in favor of "newly revised rubrics of topic, genre, author, and theme" (2). With this latitude in the curriculum, Mura and McMillin explain that they were able to "imagine" new possibilities, such as their "greatest success," an interdisciplinary course entitled "Medieval People and Culture" that focused on medieval women (2-3). Ultimately, their approach succeeded in drawing a "cadre of students pursuing feminist studies of the Middle Ages" (2). At roughly the same time, in 1992, Jane Chance, another medievalist and feminist working on women writers, tried a pedagogical experiment similar to Mura and McMillan's; however, Chance's results were markedly less successful, as can be seen from the choice of an expletive in her article's title: "The F-Word as 'Fashion': Gendering the Sophomore Survey." A rhetorical reading of the two approaches will consider the emphases the instructors place (or don't place) at the three points of the rhetorical triangle—topic, speaker, and audience; in turn, this rhetorical analysis will explain the success of Mura and McMillan's project, and the failure of Chance's.

In the opening paragraphs of their article, Mura and McMillan give a brief sketch of their topic, medieval studies, and their personal stake in it as feminist medieval scholars. But really, most of their article is student-focused, constantly asking how they could reach their audience, and reflecting on how they successfully did so. In their words, they "consciously attempted to wed theory and practice by cultivating a student-centered course environment in the spirit of feminist pedagogy" (2). Note Mura and McMillan's three broad pedagogical objectives:

- to present texts that would help students bridge the distance between their own lives and the lives of medieval people

- to create a classroom environment in which individuals would engage in creative discussion and where responsibility for the structure and liveliness of the conversation would be shared among students and professors
- to give students the opportunity to pursue a research project, the results of which would be shared with the larger scholarly community. (3)

With this list of objectives, Mura and McMillan pay noteworthy attention to all the points of the rhetorical stance: they balance student-centered pedagogy with their own interests in feminism and medieval studies, while at the same time paying homage to the larger community of scholars. To read their glowing conclusions on the semester, their students very much appreciated this balanced attention to topic, teacher, and students. As I will show at the end of this analysis, both Mura and McMillin *and* their students derived satisfaction, as well as some real-world skills, from the course.

By contrast, Chance begins her article, and her class experiment, primarily topic- and teacher-centered. Here is how Chance introduces her project: "In 1992, in an attempt to redefine the 'canon,' I attempted to gender the sophomore survey at Rice, 'Major British Writers,' or 'Chaucer to 1800,' by including on the syllabus women writers who had been influential in their own time but little anthologized by modern editors, a change to which the students reacted indignantly" (71). (Notice, in this sentence, that she only mentions her student audience in a reactionary way, or as an afterthought to the creation of her curriculum.) After introducing the content of her syllabus and her theoretical rationale, which takes about two pages, Chance spends the rest of the article, about five pages, interpreting her students' course evaluations, citing numerous student surveys that complain about her choice to downplay well-known male writers in favor of lesser-known female writers. As Chance interprets the comments, about half of her

students associated her choice to include female writers on the syllabus as an extension of Chance's own feminism (which, for these students, is a pejorative term, an F-word). Notice the bitterness in Chance's "voice" as she describes this dynamic: "Thereafter, the instructor herself as agent of the feminist-female—specifically, what was interpreted by the students as a biased-militant-subjective agenda, as projected through her personal syllabus—became reduced to a text, as if, next to a male-canonical-objective-great-superior-normal professor, she were herself inferior, marked by female difference" (75). Chance ends her article extremely bitterly, citing the following as her last, and "best" student comment: "The sad but true fact is that her clothes were more interesting than her lectures" (75-76). Ultimately, Chance blames the students' negative reception of her course on a "deeply grounded misogyny within the academy," and forecasts that "women's studies courses will continue to be ridiculed as alien and stigmatized as 'feminine' or 'radical'" (76).

Was the failure of her course grounded in misogyny? Not having been present in her class, and not knowing her students personally, there's no way for me to judge. However, based on what I know of the situation, I would offer a different explanation. Reading Chance's account through a rhetorical studies lens, it seems that Chance's concern for her students was eclipsed by concern for her topic, which clearly concerns herself personally.[26] If she were not so close to the topic, perhaps she would have "read" the failures of her course differently, which, I would argue, could be explained by a failure to pay attention to the rhetorical situation.

I want to acknowledge that Chance's aim to gender the sophomore survey is a noble one, and her rationale—that a gendered class more accurately represents literary history—is solid.

[26] As a fellow teacher who also tends to let her personal and scholarly biases determine her course content, I can sympathize.

Furthermore, most literary scholars reading her article would probably appreciate her apparent fervor for her topic. But reaching an audience of undergraduate students is entirely different than reaching scholars in one's academic field. Unlike fellow scholars in English, undergrad students in English cannot be expected to care about the conversations we teacher-scholars are having. First, we must do some bridgework; we must explain those conversations (topic) and then make them relevant to students' lives (audience), by showing how the past still informs the present. Perhaps as important is that we show why *we* care (teacher)—explain why the literature matters to *us*, and provide a justification for its study on the basis of how it has touched or informed our *own* lives. As writing theorist and English professor Thomas Newkirk has said, "all theory is rooted in autobiography."[27] Unfortunately, far too often, scholars, who have been trained to cultivate an appearance of objectivity, forget to tell their students just how excited they are about their topics—why they care so much, and why they believe it matters.

It is not clear from Chance's article how she talked to her students about her own involvement with women writers and feminism; she does say that some students understood the need to change the canon, so it appears that she at least introduced the scholarly conversation in which she partakes. It's likely she showed enthusiasm for her topic, because, as her writing shows, she cares about it very much. However, when it comes to considering her audience, Chance seems to have neglected this point. The only attention Chance gives students in her article is reactive; her article suggests little proactive thought toward how her students would

[27] I would say that much pedagogy is rooted in autobiography, too, although, sadly, it is also true that much pedagogy is simply a reproduction of how teachers themselves were taught. The story of Current Traditional writing instruction—a model that has been discounted as ineffective and outdated, and that persisted for a large part of the twentieth century–teaches us that instructors who may not care about the topic they are assigned to teach—or who are not trained in pedagogy—can fall into the trap of repeating the ineffective pedagogical practices of their predecessors.

receive the material.[28] Based on what we can read in the article, the first time Chance ostensibly considered her student audience was after she had pressed *play* on the semester. In other words, she did not appear to give thought to connecting her subject matter to her students' lives—or to answering the *so what, who cares* questions—like Mura and McMillan clearly did. Using examples from Mura and McMcillin's pedagogy, as well as that of medievalist Anne Harris, the next sections will explore how to bring far-distant literature home to the modern college student.

## Start with Discourse Communities

As Mura, McMillan, and others teach us, literature instructors can reach their student audiences using a variety of strategies, so that even a course in medieval literature can become relevant to modern-day undergraduates. But such a course takes careful planning, and keen attention to all points of the triangle: topic, students (audience), and even the teacher (speaker). It is likely that most teachers focus most on the "topics" of their courses. This is understandable, because courses are, ostensibly, developed around topics, not necessarily around students or teachers. But then again, as Mura, McMillin, and Chance, teach us, course formation often has *much* to do with professors' scholarly interests and discourse communities. To me, then, beginning with the concept of discourse communities is a logical place to start almost any college course.[29]

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[28] She does, however, concern herself with what *she* wanted to teach: "Because I had already developed a number of courses at Rice in which women authors provided the central focus, I was no longer content to abide the traditional canon we had always revered. So, I asked myself what would happen if I included more women on my syllabus for the required sophomore survey" (71).

[29] At UTA, where I was trained, the freshman English course starts with the concept of discourse communities. The first essay assigned is a personal essay on a discourse community students have already joined. The rationale for this assignment is to help students understand that they are already well aware of different "conversations" being had by different groups of people; in turn, students are invited to view academic conversations as discourse communities that they can also successfully join.

Regarding the concept of discourse communities, undergrads may not realize that whole communities of scholars care a whole lot about the literature on their syllabi, and it is our job to enlighten them. As instructors, we should show how we are engaged in the topic and in the literature, and how and why it matters to *us*. But as Chance's experience teaches us, an important topic and an engaged professor (engaged within her academic field and/or various social issues) is not enough. We must continuously consider and engage our student audience, as well. We must remember that our students are most likely outsiders to our specialized discourse communities, and it is our job to initiate them by providing necessary scaffolding.

Focus on the Teacher (Speaker): Disclose Your Own Interest in the Literature

To turn to our sample subject of Margery Kempe, here is how I would claim importance—or answer the "who cares" question. In one of our first classes, I would state my interest as a scholar in the field (or discourse community) of women's life writing, a tradition that Mary G. Mason has famously argued was set in motion by Margery Kempe's *Book* (Kolentsis). Very early on, I would spend some time working with the class to define and describe "life writing," asking them for examples of what they *think* constitutes "life writing." It would also be interesting, and hopefully instructive, to pose the question of why researchers might be interested in making a scholarly study of life writing, or texts like diaries, journals, recipe books, and other "ordinary writing" (Sinor, Henderson). Throughout this discussion, I would explain that life writing is, of course, a huge umbrella term—and that, under this huge umbrella, women and minority writers have recently, and forcefully, been ushered into the canon. Indeed, I would explain that, since the 1970s, many feminist scholars have excavated archives in order to bring light to women's

writing, and thereby women's history, and, happily, today this body of scholarship is thriving. Now, thanks to these scholars, Margery Kempe's *Book* is being read perhaps more than ever.

With this background, students could begin to understand the larger, scholarly, discourse community surrounding Margery Kempe. They could also begin to understand that school subjects are not monolithic, unbiased bodies of knowledge: they are handed down to us by the scholars that came before. Moreover, I would stress that, as entering participants in the discourse, *they* could potentially change the trajectory of future literature classrooms—and maybe society (at least, we would like to think so!). Most likely, this background would interest some students. Also likely, it might bore others. So, I would not stop there. Next, I would explain my personal interest in life writing, and thereby, my interest in Margery Kempe.

Of course I would want to share, like I do with most of my classes, that I have not only kept a personal journal for over twenty years, I have also maintained a blog (more or less) for seven years, and published a spiritual memoir. I could go on to describe what's been going on in the field of autobiography studies, and how Kempe's book fits into that scholarship. Namely, scholars such as Alysia Kolentsis, Corinne Saunders, and Anne E. Bailey demonstrate that the overall trend in Margery Kempe scholarship has been a move away from a socio-historical approach (reading Margery as taking part in and reflecting the larger customs of her day) to a more personal approach (reading Margery as a woman highly invested in exploring her inner life and individual spirituality).[30] I would also talk about how the feminist movement in the 1970s

[30] For example, in her article "The Problematic Pilgrim," Anne E. Bailey says that, despite being classed with other pilgrim narratives, Kempe's book was not primarily a travel narrative. Rather than focusing on the details of the places she visits, Margery focuses on her inner life. Bailey notes that the historical facts and places appear to be of "secondary importance to the protagonist's inner spiritual journey" (173). Thus, the book has a long tradition of being read as a mystical discourse, rather than a historical narrative (Bailey 173).

helped enable these kinds of readings, while celebrating the fact that, thanks to feminist literary scholars, we are able to read and study "ordinary" women and their writing in our classes at all (Jelinek, Henderson, Sinor, Smith and Watson). Attempting to cross over into my students' horizons of care, I would then share reasons why life writing has been important to many writers and readers across the ages. For instance, if at a religious school, like the one where I currently teach, I would speak of the longstanding tradition of spiritual autobiographies and other religious writing, such as religious diaries, in order for practitioners to record and reflect on their spiritual progress.

Focus on the Topic: Provide Background, Context, and a Working Vocabulary

When it comes to teaching medieval literature, which can feel especially distant to students, teachers should take care early on to provide contextual scaffolding for students. As Harris puts it, "Even students with Christian beliefs live in a modern, secular world and find thinking through the Otherworldliness of the Middle Ages a challenge" (895). And Mura and McMillan affirm, "It is important…that students have some basic understanding of the political, social, economic, religious, and artistic milieus of the works they read" (3). For their part, in their "Medieval People and Culture" course, Mura and McMillan set the stage by assigning works from two anthologies, *Women Defamed and Defended*, and Emilie Amt's anthology, to help students grasp ways in which gender was constructed in the medieval period, as well as the daily lives of medieval women of differing classes, religions, and ethnicities (3). Following these background readings, they assigned primary texts, including the works of Margery Kempe, Hildegard of Bingen, Marie de France, and Christine de Pisan. At the point when our students encounter primary texts like these—texts which, as noted, can seem inscrutable to modern

readers—we can refer our students back to the concept of discourse communities, in order to help them understand the rhetorical choices authors made. Again, let's look to *The Book of Margery Kempe* for an example.

True, Margery's *Book* is quite interesting from page one, even without a background knowledge of medieval times, or a working vocabulary to discuss it. The opening scene of the book, which has Margery going mad after the birth of her first child and then petitioning Jesus, is likely to grab student readers' attention, without the help of the teacher. The following scenes, which include Margery talking about her sex life (she talks about this with her husband, various priests, and Jesus) also may hold students' interest for a good while. Students likely will also relate to Margery's emotions (loneliness, fear of rejection, guilt). However, in order to make larger sense of most of the *Book*, students will need a working knowledge of other terms, such as "affective piety," "anchorite/anchoress," "pilgrimage," and "sainthood," to name a few.

The further students sojourn into the text, the more questions they are likely to have, and this is where we can scaffold learning by providing key terms used by scholars in the medieval discourse community. For one example, the term "affective piety" can help students answer one of their biggest questions: how can we understand Margery's extravagant bouts of weeping? (This is also a significant question for scholars.) The following scene from Margery's Jerusalem pilgrimage, as she visits the scenes of Christ's passion, is especially noteworthy:

> And the aforementioned creature wept and sobbed so plentifully as though she had seen our Lord with her physical eye, suffering His Passion at that time. . . . And when they came up on to the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but rather writhed and wrestled with her body, spreading out her arms widely, and crying

> with a loud voice as though her heart should burst apart, for in the city of her soul she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified . . .
>
> She had such great compassion and such great pain to see our Lord's pain that she could not keep herself from crying and roaring though she could have died from it. And this was the first cry that she ever cried in any contemplation. And this kind of crying endured for many years after this time, whatever anybody might do, and she suffered much spitefulness and rebuking for it. The crying was so loud and so wonderful that it astonished the people, unless they had heard it before or else if they knew the cause of her crying. And she had this crying so often that it made her really weak in her physical strength, especially if she heard about our Lord's Passion. (64)

According to Paul Murphy, in this scene and others, Margery is displaying "affective piety," which term refers to bodily gestures or shows of emotion—or, in other words, some kind of embodied performance—in the context of Christian devotion (Murphy 412). Murphy's analysis of Margery's use of affective piety is instructive: "[W]hile Margery] may be considered enigmatic or exaggerated—even by contemporaries who participate in her narrative—she ultimately uses orthodox forms of prayer and bodily worship extravagantly, but demonstrates clear control over her communicative body, knowing when to resist transgressive over-zealous piety" (418-19). Since I identify not as a scholar of medieval history or literature, but primarily as a writing instructor who might at some point teach medieval texts, it is not within the scope of this article to judge Margery's performance or her motivations. However, in the context of teaching Margery's *Book*, I think a great assignment would be to have students research affective piety, share their findings with one another, and then discuss (or debate) whether Margery's

rhetorical choices were orthodox, or standard, for her discourse community, or not. A follow-up question would be: If not, how should we understand her rhetorical choices?

## Focus on Audience: Connect the Past to the Present

Returning to our overall topic, in a medieval literature class, providing background, context, and a working vocabulary for understanding the literature *may* take care of the "so what, who cares?" questions, as long as students are interested in history, religion, literature at large, or the social issues addressed by the instructor(s). For instance, students who identify as feminists, or students interested in social justice, would likely appreciate a course focused on women or minorities (like Mura and McMillion's course, or like Chance's, for that matter), simply because they support similar causes. As another example, students who identify as Christian, or students shopping for a viable worldview, are likely to take a de facto interest in medieval literature because of its overt Christian themes. Finally, given the current, postmodern, culture that shies away from Christianity (Veith, *Post-Christian*), not to mention the dearth of courses that engage religious questions (DePalma), for students who practice Christianity, the de facto inclusion of Christian writers and biblical themes on the syllabus might be a refreshing change.

What about students, though, who find that the Jesus of the medieval period is not "their" Jesus? And what about any other student who is either turned off by or does not know what to make of the "violent," "weird," or "esoteric" images from this period (Harris 895)?

In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I think of one section in particular that may distress contemporary Christian readers. These are the scenes of Margery's "marriage" to Christ and subsequent bodily visions. In chapter thirty-five, she envisions her marriage to Christ within her soul, which occurs in the presence of various saints, including Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Subsequent to exchanging vows with Christ, in chapter thirty-six, Margery feels "many deep comforts, "including smells, sights, and sounds, as well as the "flame of the fire of love" (81), which Jesus explains to her is the Holy Ghost. Following these manifestations of the Holy Ghost, the text takes an unexpected (by modern readers) turn toward the erotic: Jesus tells Margery he is pleased with her and is not ashamed of her, and that if he were with her on earth, he would "take her by the hand amongst people" and "make much of her." Following, I quote at some length to give a sense of the eroticism in this section, and ask readers to imagine unsuspecting students encountering this "sexual" Jesus for the first time:

> For it is appropriate that the wife is intimate with her husband. Be he ever such an important lord and she just a poor woman when he married her, yet they must sleep together and rest together in joy and peace. Just so it must be between you and me, as I pay no attention to what you have been but rather to what you will be. I have often told you that I have wholly forgiven you for all your sins. Therefore I must be intimate with you and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you really desire to see me, and boldly you can: when you are in your bed take me to yourself as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, as your sweet son, for I wish to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and wish that you love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. And therefore you may boldly take me in your soul's arms and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you wish. And as often as you think of me or when you would do some good deed for my, you shall have the same reward in heaven as if you did it to my own precious body which is in heaven. For I ask no more of you but that your heart loves me who love you, for my love is always ready for you. (82-83)

While there may be a medieval literary precedent for this kind of imagery, modern students who are used to an asexual Jesus will likely be taken off guard by such intimate language. Harris has described such a reaction as a "That's Not My Jesus" moment, saying that medieval depictions of Christ and Mary are sometimes "unrecognizable to students" who are otherwise familiar with them in modern contexts (896). She continues: "Recognizability, often meaning what students hold to be true, or what they come to expect in learning about Christian figures, is a framework that is difficult to abandon. For some students, this can be a very painful and personal

experience" (896). Painful, yes, but also intriguing. Harris goes on to say that the work of the classroom, at this point, becomes larger than studying the medieval period; it becomes "studying belief as a social contract within the framework of a dominant ideology" (896). In other words, she asks her students to consider how belief comes to be:

> The classroom project then becomes to understand *what motivates different representations* of Christ and Mary: What values are embodied in images and their settings; how intimacy, for example, with the divine (or the secular) is achieved through image and text; and the terms on which images function as momentary manifestations rather than unchanging truths. (897)

In other words, Harris asks students to consider semiotics, which, she argues, breaks down the barrier between the modern and the medieval. As students inquire after why certain images and depictions of religion and religious figures were embraced back then, they are moved to ask why different images (along with beliefs) are embraced today. To facilitate these discussions, Harris often relies on medieval depictions in modern films and video games, where, she says, more and more students are likely to first encounter medieval literature.

In her conclusion Harris admits that, increasingly, she teaches medieval culture as a vehicle for examining contemporary issues: "I am not so much after the answers of the Middle Ages as the questions that the period can help us formulate about our own" (898). Finally, she concludes by justifying this pedagogy on the basis that it "personally [implicates]" students, whether they come from a Christian background or not, "in discussion of issues with pertinence to our times" (898). In short, she makes medieval content relevant by connecting it to questions students are already asking, or are likely to ask, about modern belief, culture, and semiotic representation, among others.

Another idea for moving distant literature closer to home comes from composition scholar Michael-John DePalma and his course on Rhetoric, Religion, and Spiritual Composition

at Baylor University. In his course, DePalma uses religious contemporary creative nonfiction alongside classical texts, including the work of St. Augustine, to prompt rhetorical analysis and provide students with discursive strategies they might also use as they write about *their* beliefs. One assignment that could be useful in a medieval course is DePalma's *This I Believe* audio essay, where students are tasked with explaining their beliefs in ways that are "meaningful and accessible to audiences who do not share those beliefs and values" (267). For DePalma, assigning a diverse set of religious texts from varying time periods not only calls on students to attend to and try to understand the beliefs of others, but also encourages students to better understand and articulate their own beliefs. DePalma argues that reading and writing assignments such as these equip students with "rhetorical resources" for communicating "their core beliefs and values across religious and worldview differences—an essential civic capacity" (266). In Harris's and DePalma's course objectives, then, we can begin to imagine new possibilities for engaging students beyond their capacity *as students*: that is, we can imagine how to engage students as *community members*.

## A Good Place to End: Launch Students into Public Discourse Communities

Like DePalma and Booth, I believe a crucial goal for writing and literature teachers is to help our students engage with audiences beyond the classroom. Mura and McMillan work toward this goal by having their students present their final research paper in a public forum. This could be a roundtable discussion at the annual Plymouth State Medieval forum, but, the authors suggest this experience can be simulated in other ways, such as by holding a small mini-conference at one's own school, or gathering with one or more nearby schools. A third possibility is a roundtable discussion open to the general public. Their comments on student

reception to the forum is instructive, and succinctly captures the benefits of employing the rhetorical stance in a medieval literature classroom:

> Student anticipation of presenting at the forum has a considerable effect on the research process. When students have a wider, public audience, their commitment and seriousness grow. Our relationship to the project changes as well. We are no longer the ultimate arbiter of the quality of the work. Rather, our roles become more that of coaches. Students begin to see our critiques of their work less as judgements than as constructive advice that they need in order to perform better in a public event. Students are no longer working for an "A" or a "B" but to produce a respectable and competent presentation. They also know that scholarly specialists and other strangers will be listening to their talks and asking questions. (5)

This description, which captures engaged, enthusiastic students writing for public audiences, provides a stark contrast to the disengaged and disenchanted students described by Booth and Chance. If Mura and McMillin's final assessment of their course is any indication, students appreciate teachers whose pedagogy strikes that balance between topic, teacher, and student, that I have been referring to as the "rhetorical stance." Thus, if we want to engage and interest our students, I argue it behooves us all to strive for that balance in our courses.

But there's more at stake than just student interest, enthusiasm, and engagement with course topics. As we leverage the rhetorical triangle in various ways–always a great place to start in course design–we should also mind practical considerations. That is, what kind of instruction do our students need from us, and what *don't* they need?

## Practical Considerations for Teaching Literature

While I would prefer to spend most of my class time reading, discussing, and assigning personal essays or life narratives, because that's what *I* like to read and write best, I am reminded by the WPA and my colleagues that we have an obligation to teach other skills. As noted in

chapters 1 and 2, the skills that the profession expects us to teach in writing classrooms include writing processes, rhetorical knowledge, and critical thinking. Some nuts and bolts that go along with these big ideas are writing with sources, including properly citing sources; skills in rhetorical analysis of various texts; and synthesizing various sources and ideas. But what skills and/or content are we obligated to teach in literature? And, as important, what skills and/or content might we *not* need to teach?

In my career as a student taking literature classes, both at SWAU, a religious institution, and UTA, a public institution, I've observed that there are many paths to teaching literature. Let me compare the two approaches that I know best: UTA's and SWAU's approaches.

First, UTA's sophomore literature curriculum is much less standardized than its first-year writing curriculum. UTA English's preamble in its Sophomore Literature guidelines states: "Sophomore literature is not a survey of national or international literatures." Following appears this justification: "National and international surveys and introductions are the goals of specific 3000-level courses (3340, 3351, 3352, 3361, 3362) designed primarily for English majors. The sophomore literature courses (with the exception of 2350) are designed primarily for non-English majors. They make no pretense of extensive 'coverage.'" What I appreciate in this preamble is the attention given to audience in course design. Below, I quote at length UTA English's first goal, justification, and suggested implementation, which goal pertains especially to my discussion that follows: Goals [of sophomore English]

> 1. To encourage students to see that literary studies matter and to foster enjoyment of literature, as students engage with ideas and beliefs in ways that extend beyond the English classroom.
>
> > Justification: Sophomore literature serves a different population than many other English courses. Because most students taking sophomore literature are not English majors, and may not take another English course at UTA, these courses

provide students with what may be their only exposure to literary studies. One positive outcome might be to get interested students to reconsider the options of majoring or minoring in English. But equally important, sophomore literature is an opportunity to make students pursuing other majors aware that literary studies are relevant to personal, social, and political life.

Suggested Implementation:

- Select engaging readings that raise significant aesthetic, cultural, and/or social issues.
- Organize the course around a significant theme or question designed to engage the students.
- Assign note-card, journal, commonplace book, or response-paper writing assignments that ask students to relate relevant sections of the reading to their beliefs and experiences.

The document continues with some additional goals, pertaining to gaining some skills in critical thinking which seem to me common sense and likely agreeable to most literature teachers, including many at religious institutions like SWAU.

To move on to SWAU, there are no standardized guidelines, beyond the individual course descriptions that appear in the academic bulletin. However, Southwestern Adventist University has traditionally been strong in teaching the traditional literary canon. Prior to 2009, when the University added a Writing emphasis, along with a campus writing center, the English curriculum comprised mainly literature courses. All literature courses, lower- as well as upper-division, were taught as surveys, unflinching marches through the most commonly canonized works in each literary period. For my part, as an English major between 2006-2008, I took survey courses in English literature, American Literature I and II, World Literature, Renaissance Literature, Eighteenth Century Literature, and Victorian Literature. I still have the syllabi from these courses, and I can't help but notice that the courses were taught very similarly, in that they all focused on the most famous works of literature (meaning, most often, literary texts), and all

but one of them required scholarly writing–or traditional literary analysis–about the texts, as opposed to creative writing or personal response. Looking back now, it seems courses were taught with almost exclusive focus on the top point of the triangle–both the topics of the course, and the current trends of literary criticism. Each class period covered a new author or new text, on which we were almost always quizzed. The teachers did most of the talking. And when students responded through writing, we were instructed to write like formalist literary critics: "don't use I," "stay close to the text."

Looking at this curriculum now from a teaching standpoint, I would do things differently (and I am). Granted, survey courses have their place. Formal literary analysis has its place. Namely, I think survey courses and critical literary analysis belong in upper division courses geared for English majors. But for non-English majors, the focus should be different. I concur with UTA English's preamble in its Sophomore Literature guidelines, in that it does not aim to comprehensively cover a period, and in that it recognizes that general ed students have different needs than English majors. I applaud the flexibility with writing assignments: I support the suggested implementation to "[a]ssign note-card, journal, commonplace book, or response-paper writing assignments that ask students to relate relevant sections of the reading to their beliefs and experiences." And I want this approach to become the standard at SWAU. In the literature courses I teach, I am working toward this end. I think my colleagues and I can do a better job of foregrounding students in course design, like Mura and McMillan did in their Medieval literature course, and like UTA English does.

Furthermore, I hold to the criteria I set forth in chapter 4 for choosing literature in an English class–which criteria, at this point in time, for my own intents and purposes, I find

equally useful for both composition and literature courses.[31] Namely, the literature I include on my syllabus must

1. Support the development of my students as scholars and writers. In other words, the literature must promote critical thinking and support best practices in rhetoric and composition, which I have shown includes a blending of writing styles.
2. Support academic inquiry and civic discourse without contradicting the values of the instructor or the institution. It's ideal if the literature *promotes*, or even *foregrounds*, the values of the institution.
3. Support my students in their personal development—that is, literature should guide students in how to become well-functioning human beings.

Below, I will show how I am working to implement a number of these aims in my American Lit I course at SWAU.

## Religious Life Writing as a Framework in American Literature

I went into the course design of American Literature I at SWAU keenly aware that "most students taking sophomore lit are not English majors, and may not take another course at [SWAU]." (UTA's sophomore literature guidelines). To be precise, only two out of twenty-four students in this course are English majors. Since there was not a common thread of all my students being English majors who needed broad knowledge of American Literature, I sought another common thread. I have observed that literature teachers at UTA do an admirable job of "[organizing their courses] around a theme or question designed to engage the students." Some

[31] Since other instructors may feel differently, I encourage them to develop their own criteria.

common threads my UTA colleagues have chosen are issues of race, class, or gender, which issues necessarily affect all of society. No doubt my approach to teaching my own American lit course was informed by my having taken graduate courses in Early African American Evangelical Literature and Early Native American Literature at UTA. These two courses helped me see the possibilities for teaching an American lit course from a thematic standpoint, in contrast to teaching it from a comprehensive standpoint.

But what theme? For my spring 2022 course, deciding what theme was actually quite easy. My current rhetorical situation is teaching students at a religious institution. So why not religious writing? In the previous chapter, I noted that I have learned not to assume that all students at SWAU are Adventists, or even religious. Over five semesters spent teaching at this University, I have taught Catholics, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, non-denominational Christians, and agnostics, among others. By and large, however, the largest portion of my audience *are* Adventist Christians; I know this because I routinely ask my students for their faith background in introduction assignments at semester beginnings. In my current American literature class, twenty out of twenty-four students, or four-fifths of the class, reported they were Adventist. It seemed good to me, then, to organize my class around religious texts.

Fortunately, in my Early African American Evangelical Literature and Early Native American Literature courses at UTA, I discovered that religious writing abounds in early American literature. In truth, I actually spent more time reading religious texts in these courses at UTA than I did when I took American Lit I at SWAU. In the previous chapter, I discussed how fruitful I imagined eighteenth century Black literature to be for teaching composition. Here, I want to talk more about how fruitful such literature, and other life writing of the time period, is for teaching critical thinking to general education students at my particular institution. Below is

the course description I have included in my American Literature I syllabus, as well as my course objectives, which contain my guiding, thematic questions for the semester.

> **Course Description**
> This class presents selections from the earliest known American literature through roughly 1860. We will give special focus to those voices who narrated their Christian experiences in America, including various African Americans, preachers/evangelists, and the Seventh-day Adventist pioneer Ellen White. We will study these authors from the standpoint of life writing scholarship, meaning we will primarily examine their texts as "ordinary," not literary, documents. This approach follows recent trends in literary studies to excavate and study various non-literary authors, many of whom were, until recently, excluded from the traditional literary canon. Such an approach has enabled and popularized the study of minority writers, including people of color; women; and, for our purposes here, religious writers. Throughout the course we will also study various traditional American literature, or more canonical authors.
>
> **Course Objectives**
> To develop our critical thinking skills, develop as people of faith, and develop as writers through probing the following questions:
> - Who (or which writers) should comprise the canon of American literature? Why? On what criteria should selections be based?
> - How is it that a Christian nation could support slavery and other cruel practices related to indigenous or other minority populations?
> - How do Adventist and other Christian writers fit into American literature?
> - What in early American Literature inspires *me* as a person (of faith) and as a writer?
> - What message do I have to share as a writer? What is the best approach for my message–literary, ordinary, or a mix of both?

As described above, under the umbrella of life writing studies, there is a well established precedent for studying religious writers. To be sure, religious teachers and scholars may have different reasons for studying religious authors than secular scholars and teachers, but it's delightful to me that scholars from both backgrounds can find common ground, common reading material and inherent value, in many of the same authors in this time period. Within the umbrella of life writing, teachers of whatever background can include writers of various faith backgrounds and religious denominations.

For my part, my first filter in choosing my life writers was Christianity and Christian ties, since this was the common thread I chose to organize my class. Since religious writers abounded during this time period, and that religion itself was a major reason so many settlers came to North America in the first place, and/or religion was the motivating force for many writers of the day to pick up a pen, I felt this theme could prove not only meaningful to a population of mostly Christian students, but also could foster a legitimate, rich, and meaningful, study of history. The writers I have chosen that I would characterize as overtly religious (meaning their Christian beliefs make up a salient aspect of their writing) are William Bradford, Mary Rowlandson, Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Ashbridge, Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, William Apess, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Ellen White. Along with these religious-Christian writers, I have included some more canonical authors, including Christopher Columbus, Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass (most of these writers subscribe to or reference Christian beliefs as well, but these are not as overt, not as foundational to their rhetorical stance, as the other writers).

But even choosing these authors took careful sifting through a mass of options. How does one come up with a canon of life writers, anyway? I will admit that, in part, my choices were pragmatic; because time is always limited, I had to start by examining those authors I myself had read and studied, plus which writers I felt prepared to teach. Another consideration was what literature was available and easily accessible. Of course, personal preference also played a part, as did concern for literary and/or rhetorical merit, mixed with compelling subject matter. The net result of these considerations, in my case, was that I relied heavily on African American writers, whom I had recently studied for my PhD; moreover, to facilitate this focus, I chose for our textbook the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which includes both the

traditionally canonized African American writers like Frederick Douglass, as well as lesser known, lesser anthologized, writers whom I had recently studied, such as Jupiter Hammon, Venture Smith, David Walker, and Maria Stewart, to name a few.[32] In particular, I was excited to teach those writers in the anthology who demonstrate particular rhetorical and/or literary skill in writing their personal narratives and/or in writing against slavery and oppression–compelling topics in light of our nation's current and renewed focus on racism. I'm thinking of writers like Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and Harriet Jacobs. I also knew I definitely wanted to teach the Native American writer William Apess for his masterful, Rogerian-style argument against discrimination, "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man."[33] When I first perused the *African American Anthology*, I was excited to see that it also includes a generous selection of African American spirituals, which music I have always found incredibly moving[34] yet I had never studied this (oral) tradition in a literature class. Admittedly, the spirituals were a big draw for me to this anthology. To solidify my textbook choice, I also looked at excerpt length of selections: namely, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is more completely reproduced in the *African American Anthology* than in the general *Norton Anthology*, and this also influenced my choice. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was not only one of my

[32] Since there is a free online anthology of American Literature that includes the traditionally studied White authors, I consoled myself that I was not canceling any traditionally canonized authors who still deserve to be read (or at least thumbed through), but rather expanding my students' exposure to a wider variety of authors who also deserve to be read.

[33] I will discuss Apess at some length in chapter 5. "An Indian's Looking Glass" *is* anthologized in the general *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, as well as in the online textbook I chose, so access to that essay is not a problem; however, his spiritual autobiography, *A Son of the Forest,* does not appear in either of these places, which is a loss to teachers who are also studying spiritual autobiographies.

[34] I still remember playing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" for a juvenile piano recital; my dad still likes to hear me play that song. And my husband has played acapella spirituals in our home on Sabbath mornings since we've been married. This is because he went to college with an all-Black singing group called *In Unity* and has recordings of their masterful music. Their rendition of "Wade in the Water" is heavenly; I have now shared this recording with my class, and it was one of the best moments of the semester.

favorite reads in grad school, but it is also one of the most moving pieces of literature I've read in recent memory, for its blend of literary and rhetorical effects: Jacobs not only employs skillful narration (although she ironically apologizes for her lack of writing skills), but she also builds and weaves a forceful antislavery argument throughout. Jacob's slave narrative, like Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, exemplifies that ideal blending of writing styles discussed in the previous chapter, making it an ideal piece of literature for writing instructors to teach.

If it sounds like these choices came easily, let me assure my readers, they did not. I labored over my syllabus, trying to guess which writers would be the most useful to my students. Somewhat of an impossible task. Because this author-sifting was so difficult, I did not actually finalize my syllabus until week 2, because I wanted to hear from my students first as to whether they had any strong preferences one way or another. What I did in week 1 was to make a list of diverse authors I was at least somewhat familiar with, both the canonical, literary authors I studied as an undergrad, and the lesser-known life writers I studied as a PhD student. I handed out this list to my students and asked everyone to mark their top three choices for whom they would like to present on (one of their assignments is to give a presentation on one author during the semester). I then built my syllabus around those authors they had selected from my list. I felt this approach also helped safeguard against a total class takeover on the part of the instructor. (see the appendix for my course schedule).

One especially unique, or experimental, choice I made was to include Ellen White on my syllabus. I made this choice because White is the foremother of the Adventist Church, *and* she was a prodigious writer; certainly using the criteria I listed above, White belongs on the syllabi

of Adventist English teachers.[35] Non-Adventists likely won't recognize that name, but almost every Adventist–if they have been Adventist for awhile–should certainly recognize that name. Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is noted for founding the Seventh-day Adventist Church after the Great Disappointment in 1844, being a prophet, and writing more than 100,000 manuscript pages in her lifetime. Her book *Steps to Christ*, published in 1892, has been circulated to the tune of 100,000,000 copies in more than 165 languages (Wacker xi). One amazing factoid is that White would have had to write about three pages a day for seventy years to produce the many pages that have been ascribed to her. This is an astonishing literary feat that has garnered little scholarly attention; however, I may not have considered including White on my syllabus at SWAU had I not studied similar writers of her time at UTA. In compiling reading lists for my PhD comprehensive exams, I was introduced to other religious writers of or near White's time period, such as Elizabeth Ashbridge, Maria Stewart, and Richard Allen. I noted, with excitement, that many scholars were giving renewed attention to Christian writers of all denominations–and I determined to do the same, with a spotlight on Ellen White, arguably the most important historical figure in Adventism. I determined to explore how reading/studying Ellen White in a literature course could add value to Adventist, *and* non-Adventist, students at SWAU.

As I write about how I decided to include Ellen White in my class, however, I want to also nod to how two other scholars have included early American religious authors in order to spotlight other (not necessarily religious) concerns or themes. The first scholar is Elizabeth Elkin Grammar. In her book *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in*

[35] I wonder why, then, I never studied her in any of the Adventist literature courses I took as an undergrad student. I suspect it's because my instructors were trained to curate selections using traditional literary criteria, which would exclude White, along with numerous other writers I am now including on my syllabus.

*Nineteenth Century America*, Grammar reviews seven female preachers whose careers spanned 1832 to 1893: Nancy Towle, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Lydia Sexton, Laura Haviland, Julia Foote, and Amanda Smith. The lives of these ladies, like the life of Ellen White, coincides with the Second Great Awakening, which is generally dated between 1790 and 1840. In Grammar's introduction, she points out that historians have typically deemed religious meetings and revivals female affairs, with two-thirds of women accounting for those joining the New Jersey Presbyterian, New England Congregationalist, and Southern Evangelical churches during the Second Great Awakening:

> "[It] has often been argued that Christianity was the opiate by which women were comforted and encouraged to accept their subordinate position in society. Christianity was an outlet, a retreat from the inequalities of this world, which prepared women to cope with subordination; it was an escape valve for their discontent, a tool in the service of the dominant culture, for while Christianity may have altered women's interior lives within their own sphere, it did not affect their exterior lives" (5).

Grammar takes a different view than the one she sums up here: that religion was an opiate.[36] Rather, in her view, and in the cases of these seven preachers, religion was a source of empowerment "to explore life beyond prevailing gender, class, and race hierarchies" (6). Grammar draws a contrast between these women and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, their "more radical, feminist sister," saying that unlike Stanton, who subordinates her political career to her domestic life in her autobiography, these women slight their domestic lives in favor of their evangelical careers in the pages of their autobiographies. A pattern for these women, Grammar says, reflects similarities to the typical spiritual autobiography outline, as well as biblical prophetic calling narratives: woman feels God's call on her life to preach, but she finds it

[36] She is responding to Estelle Jelinek, who, she says, dismissed religious women life writers in her famous literature review of women autobiographers.

alarming and at first resists. One reason she resists is that the call seems to go against society's roles for her. However, she is able to overcome these proscriptions to her calling by

> invoking the biblical stories of Jonah and Jeremiah. Indeed, the beginning of these stories—the call and refusal to obey—has been described by Joseph Campbell as the archetypal structure with which all monomythic heroic tales begin. Often these women are afflicted with serious illnesses, which they interpret as chastening reminders from God of their unfulfilled obligations; they recover from these illnesses determined to resist no longer. (7)

Grammar goes on to note that this commitment is often aided by the convenient death of a husband. Having never studied period writers similar to White prior to my PhD studies, these observations were very interesting to me. I further noted that these patterns, indeed, fit what the female religious writers on my list, Elizabeth Ashbridge, Maria Stewart, and Ellen White, described. For instance, in her *Life Sketches*, White describes being alarmed at and resistant to her call to ministry; she chronicles battles with illness and the eventual giving in to her call; furthermore, her husband, James White, dies long before she does (however, unlike the other female evangelists who characterize their husbands as barriers to ministry, White characterizes James as a helper in her ministry rather than a barrier to it).

Grammar's research is helpful background for me in teaching Ellen White. As stated, until my PhD studies, I had never encountered the idea that White fit within a literary tradition of her time period; now, I am happy to be able to present a more humanized, contextualized, Ellen White to my students, who have likely only encountered her as that archaic voice of Adventism who is still so often quoted in our churches. For my non-Adventist students, being able to present White as one of many religious voices in early American literature also makes pedagogical sense; I can justify reading her in this general education literature course not only because she represents Adventist teachings and Adventist history, but also because her book *Life Sketches*

exemplifies a popular literary tradition of her time: the spiritual autobiography. Further, many of her other books exemplify the cult of domesticity, with hundreds of her many pages addressing homemaking, childrearing, marriage, and other family matters. Again, it was the umbrella term *life writing* that enabled me to find and make these connections in my research, which I can now present to my students as we study our refreshed canon.

Another scholar who has taken religious authors as a subject of study, and who has done so primarily through studying life writing, is Cedrick May. Hailing from a Black studies paradigm, May has done his research on writers such as Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, Maria Stewart, John Marrant, Richard Allen, and David Walker. Like Grammar, May is not primarily interested in these writers because they write about religious topics; rather, their religious ties are incidental to another aspect of their identity–in Grammar's case, the salient factor is the writers' female gender; in May's case, the salient quality is the writers' status as enslaved African Americans seeking liberation. However, both scholars overlap their studies with religion, to explore how such populations seek relief from oppression via their religious faith. In his book *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760-1835*, May contends that for Blacks in early America, Christianity became the common language with which to exchange ideas, organize as a community, and ultimately resist slavery. The two themes of the book are 1) the organizing of the black community around religious (Christian) discourse, specifically, the Black community's transformation of Christian discourse for their own purposes, and 2) "the political nature of black institution building" (6); that is, religious gatherings were concerned not only with life in heaven (religion), but life on earth (politics). May says that Black Christianity helped lead to a "liberal shift in mainstream Christianity and secular politics" (6). However, May adds, many scholars have not paid due attention to Christian

discourse in the study of Black poetry and prose. One goal of his book is to remedy this gap: "to clarify the impact and importance of African American literature on publishing and on the public consciousness of the time (8). May reminds that religious texts from black writers in the period of 1760—1835 were "hot commodities." Where scholars don't find resistance in these writings, May says they have missed the subtleties of what these writers were doing: "Even when resistance to British-American oppression is present, it is often overlooked because it is articulated in a religious idiom or theological principle that is all too easily dismissed simply as acquiescence to white hegemony" (9). May locates the beginnings of blacks' wide acceptance of Christianity in the Second Great Awakening, and he notes the Baptist and Methodist movements as powerful attractions for blacks, because these denominations actively proselytized Blacks and whites, and allowed Blacks to take on preaching and leadership roles. According to May, as well as likeminded scholars Hubbard Dolan and Albert Raboteau, Christianity was the starting point that allowed Blacks to organize in a systematic way, paving the way to find not only spiritual, but also temporal, liberation. In May's words,

> Christianity gave these enslaved African-descended peoples something that masters wanted to deny: a sense of common identity and purpose that created the conditions for organization and collective action….No institution has enjoyed more widespread success among African Americans than what has become known as the 'black church." (3-4)

While I am writing and teaching from an "Adventist Church" paradigm, or more broadly, a Christian paradigm–while I am not a member of a Black Church and am not Black–I have found the literature of early Black Americans to be deeply inspiring, both as a person of faith, and simply as human living in an unjust (or, if you like, sinful) world. The qualities of early African American literature that inspire me have to do with enduring and universal themes such as the perseverance of the human spirit, the capacity to respond creatively to hellish circumstances, and

the palpably felt need for a Savior and a better land. In including early African American religious literature on my syllabus, I hope to highlight the huge contribution this literature still affords to the African American population; however, not being part of this population, I can in no way articulate this contribution as well as scholars like May, Dolan, and Raboteau have. What I *can* do, in addition to quoting such scholars, is point out the value that early African American and other religious writing still holds for Christians of all backgrounds. While the authors on my syllabus and my students and I may not share the same cultural or ethnic heritage, we all have a common spiritual heritage, and in this way, the religious writings of all early Americans can be instructive to all Christians.

In my particular rhetorical situation, teaching religious-Christian literature helps fulfill SWAU's mission to "Inspire knowledge, faith, and service through Christ-centered education." I'm not sure how education can be "Christ-centered" if we don't read and talk about literature centered around Christ or Christian themes. Therefore, I feel on solid pedagogical ground, at least at this University, in choosing literature written by or about Christians in my course, especially since literature written by Christians dominates much of what was written and published in this historical time period in North America.

## Conclusion

Like in my freshman composition course, I am still on my journey to finding that "better way" in teaching literature, but my time in graduate school has provided the needed tools: rhetorical theory supplying the theoretical framework, and the genre of life writing supplying the content. As I noted earlier, the idea of "teaching the canon" is outdated; moreover, numerous scholars have deemed the traditional canon patriarchal, oppressive, racist, sexist, and/or elitist

(among other charges). However, no matter whether we make these divisive claims (I'd rather not), I think we should reconsider the old program, the old canonical syllabus, on the grounds that it patently fails to speak to students as meaningfully as a newer, refreshed syllabus, might. Rather than serving an archaic *literary tradition*, I am arguing that English teachers should primarily strive to serve their general education *students*. That is, they should teach those works of literature that will be most helpful, instructive, and meaningful for their unique student populations. In the next chapter I will continue the discussion on "what to teach," but this time I will consider the question from the vantage point of Christian teachers of literature. First, I will explain the ongoing debate on fiction among this population, specifically Seventh-day Adventist Christians, then I will recap some of the common responses to the charge that fiction is a waste of time. Finally, I will suggest a remedy for Christian teachers who remain concerned with teaching fiction. Spoiler alert: once again, life writing comes to the rescue.

# Chapter 6

## Life Writing as an Alternative to Fiction in Christian Classrooms[37]

If you are an Adventist English teacher interviewing for jobs, you can almost bet on the following question, or some variation of it, coming up in the interview: "How do you handle the issue of fiction in your classroom?" For outsiders to this discourse community, here's a translation: "What would you do if a student said they were uncomfortable–had religious objections–to reading something on your syllabus?" In the words of SDA English professor Scott Moncrief at Andrews University–with whom, in fact, I recently interviewed for a job (and yes, the panel asked me the above question)–"Historically, most Seventh-day Adventists have been averse to literary fiction" ("Adventists and Fiction: Another Look" 363). The stated aversion to fiction stems, undoubtedly, from what I believe is an oversimplified reading of Ellen White's[38] comments on fiction in the nineteenth century. What were her comments? Briefly, in *The Ministry of Healing*, in a chapter entitled "The False and the True in Education," White posited that literature written by "infidel authors" (or non-Christians) should have no place in true education (299), citing at least three genres that fell under this category. Referring to the study of what she called "the classics"—she cited Greek tragedies in this category—White said that this kind of education, in requiring time to study dead languages, neglected preparation for "life's practical duties," such as parenthood and becoming Christlike examples in home and public spheres (302). Referring to fiction at large, especially romance novels or "frivolous, exciting tales," White said such reading "encourages the habit of hasty and superficial reading merely for

[37] In this chapter I am writing from a Seventh-day Adventist Christian perspective, which I realize differs in key respects from other traditions in Christianity.

[38] Ellen G. White, the foremost founder of the Adventist Church, was introduced in chapter 5.

the story"; "creates a distaste for life's practical duties"; and ultimately "destroys interest in the Bible," which, for the Christian, should be the ultimate text of study (303). Finally, White targeted myths and fairy tales, saying that the ideas presented therein "impart false views of life and beget and foster a desire for the unreal," thus "[diverting] the minds of old and young from the great work of character building" and "[preventing] them from obtaining a knowledge of those [biblical] truths that would be their safeguard" (304). A careful reading of these comments reveals that White did not claim that fiction in and of itself was wrong; rather, her foremost criticism of fiction was that it distracted Christians from what they should be doing instead, which is to say, reading imaginary stories takes time away from other activities more crucial to living the Christian life.

Before I go any further, I want to state that this topic probably deserves its own dissertation. For the purposes of this chapter, then, I will briefly sketch out some common responses to the common objections to fiction, answer with my own response to this ongoing debate in the Adventist Church, and discuss how inviting life writing into course design can help alleviate some of these tensions in Adventist classrooms. At least, I will show how relying more and more on life writing has greatly alleviated *my* conscience as an Adventist English professional. Finally, I will use the writings of one religious life writer from Ellen White's time period, the Methodist writer and Native American William Apess, to demonstrate some ways Christian literature teachers can teach and talk about life writing to meet both academic standards as well as engage enduring Christian questions.

## Adventist English Professionals Respond to the Fiction Question

In his 1996 article "Adventists and Fiction: Another Look," Moncrief responds to "numerous Adventists who consider fiction to be harmful, trivial, and a waste of time" (9), ultimately to argue that this view is naïve and uninformed. As Moncrief shows, despite White's numerous negative comments on fiction (she had many more than I've included here), we cannot take them at face value; rather, we need to consider the context in which she wrote them, and we also need to consider White's own reading practices. For one, Moncrief points out, White's comments were appropriately directed at the popular fiction of her day, which John Wood showed deserved critique in his article "The Trashy Novel Revisited: Popular Fiction in the Age of Ellen White." For another reason, as Moncrief and other Adventist scholars have pointed out, Ellen White herself *read* fiction: notably, White praised *Pilgrim's Progress* for having "heavenly" qualities. What's more, "White clipped many stories from religious periodicals of her day, assembled them in scrapbooks, and eventually compiled selections from these scrapbooks into *Sabbath Readings* (Moncrief 10). Scholars like Waller have concluded that many of these stories were, in fact, fictional; thus, White must not have been "indiscriminately" condemning "all stories that do not happen to be true-to-fact" (Waller as qtd. in Moncrief 11). Moncrief's conclusion on the matter is this: "While it is clear that [White] makes many statements against the novel and fiction, a wholesale condemnation of the genre would be contradictory to her own practice, and not necessarily according to the reasons for which she condemns fiction" (11). In other words, Moncrief shows that the issue, for White, was not so much *fiction* as it was *undesirable qualities* of the fiction–qualities that could apply to many forms of media today–such as the qualities of being "addictive," "sentimental, sensational, erotic, profane, or trashy," "escapist," or the fact that literature exhibiting these qualities "unfits the mind for serious study

and devotional life" ("Adventists and Fiction" 11). In addition, as noted above, the foremost problem for White appeared to be the "time-consuming" nature of fiction, which necessarily took time away from life's practical duties. Moncrief's view, that we need to reconsider Ellen White's comments and not throw out all fiction altogether, seems quite reasonable. White did not have the vocabulary that we have today to talk about literature and media at large.[39] In any case, if she were writing today, I think she might choose different terms for framing her arguments. Given White's own use of fiction, I think we should stick closely to the terms in the previous sentence (i.e., "addictive, escapist literature") instead of simply condemning "fiction." However, this still does not resolve the issue of what to do about fiction in the classroom.

Moncrief, joined by Vanessa Correderra in an article in 2015 entitled "Fiction and Film: Thoughts on Teaching Potentially Controversial Narratives," continues the discussion, showing its enduring relevance to Adventist English teachers. They open the article with three hypothetical scenarios which represent likely occurrences in SDA classrooms:

> Most Seventh-day Adventist English teachers who use literature in the classroom—and possibly narrative film—have faced variations of the following scenarios:
>
> • Sarah, after the first day of class, says, "In my family, we don't read fiction. Mrs. White said you shouldn't read fiction, so I can't read the Nathaniel Hawthorne story you assigned us."
>
> • The principal says that Jason's mother read the story assigned for English and is concerned about what's going on in the classroom.
>
> • A seminary student decides that some films selected for class use are inappropriate for student access in the library and writes a note of concern to the university president with a copy to the union president.

[39] In fact, Adventists like to point out that, due to a childhood injury, White only achieved a third-grade education, making her prolific writing career extremely impressive.

Following these hypothetical scenarios, Moncrief and Correderra state that, as practicing SDA teachers in 2015, they "take such concerns seriously." They state that "English professionals must think through the pedagogical value of teaching fictional narratives in the classroom, anticipate some of the most common objections to such use, and beyond that, consider the appropriate use of material that may be somewhat challenging, controversial, or mature, in addition to its fictional nature" (23). To their credit, they take up their own challenge: they enumerate commonplace arguments many other non-Adventist Christian literary scholars (such as TeSelle, Veith, Myer, and Knight) have made in favor of teaching fiction. Namely, they say that fiction forms a significant part of the traditional literary canon and thus has "lasting cultural impact"; fiction is interesting and likely to capture the interest of students; fiction allows us to enter the perspectives of others, whom we as Christians are called to help; fiction allows us to encounter and think through difficult scenarios in a safe environment; and fiction allows us to develop critical thinking skills, among others. In other words, they make a strong case that fiction can add value to literature courses.

One of the main ways these professors say fiction can add value to the course is by inviting students to think through alternate viewpoints/encounter difficult topics and experiences, and I completely agree; fictional literature can be a great way to encounter ideas, experiences, people, and places not available in everyday life. I, for one, have traveled little in my life, but I grew up on fiction, probably because my mom was an English major. (In case you're wondering, she was not raised in an Adventist home; she and my dad became Adventist only after they completed college, when I was a baby.) Today, some of my fondest memories from childhood revolve around the many books in our home, the many trips we took to the library, and the many hours my parents spent reading to me, mostly fictional books. However, as an adult, and as an

Adventist English professional, I find myself continuing to grapple with whether and how to use fiction in my literature classes.

Unlike some of my Adventist colleagues, I must admit I am not convinced that I should teach fiction. And it's not that I don't agree with the arguments stating that fiction can add educative value to the classroom. It's because I find Ellen White's pragmatic arguments about the best use of time to be more convincing. Along with White, I believe Adventist schools should have unique aims–our classes should have a different primary focus than secular schools. While Adventist educators share the common goals of virtually all educators to prepare students to be critical thinkers, and to expose students to many and varied perspectives, we differ in that we (supposedly) place the Christian worldview at the center of our classes; we also differ in that we, if we agree with Ellen White and the tenets of the Church, believe that we are not just preparing students for "service in this world" but also for "wider service in the world to come" (White *Education* 13).

## Context for Understanding Ellen White's Approach to Education

At this point, some context is helpful. To understand White's insistent emphasis on the proper use of time and her focus on a "world to come," one must understand her involvement with the nineteenth century Advent movement, which spurred the beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. White was raised Methodist, but when she and her family heard the no-name preacher William Miller speak on the second coming (or the second advent) of Christ, circa the 1830s, she and many other Christians of various denominations became "Millerites." That is, White expected Christ to come on Miller's predicted date of October 22, 1844.

For a brief history lesson on this event, see the below ballad, which details the Millerite experience.[40]

**The Great Disappointment**
by Lindsey Gendke

William Miller was a farmer,
Lived a simple life,
Fought in the war of 1812
Then went home to his wife.

To be a preacher of the Book
Never crossed his mind,
But as he studied, verse by verse,
He felt a mighty hand.

It pointed out a secret code
Of days and years foretold.
Prophecies from Daniel's book
Electrified his soul.

"Jesus Christ—my Lord and King—!"
That lowly farmer yowled,
"He's coming back, and I know when!
I must tell the world!"

In Baptist pulpits preached that man,
Preached, "God is at your door!
Get ready, all you waiting ones,
For eighteen-forty-four."

A young girl by the name of Ellen
Heard this word and, shaken,
Prayed, "Lord, forgive me, save my soul!
That I, too, might be taken!"

Many others joined this chorus,
Jumped on Miller's band,

[40] To learn more about this historical event, I recommend watching the movie *Go Tell the World,* available via a Google search, which tells the story of the Great Disappointment and depicts the key players and other key events in the development of the Adventist Church.

Surrendered all their worldly goods
Some even sold their land.

And finally, that great day dawned,
The Advent hope so near!
October twenty-two the day
That Jesus would appear!

As the sun climbed up the sky
So rose their hopeful voice:
"Look to the clouds, for, lo, He comes!
O Christian friends, rejoice!"

But as they watched the sky grow dark,
So hushed that happy sound.
And then the midnight clang rang out,
Their feet still on the ground.

Even after such a letdown, Ellen White maintained that Christ was coming soon. Not long after the "Great Disappointment," the Seventh-day Adventist Church was formed.[41] Thus, from its beginnings, the proper use of time has always been crucial to the (Adventist) Christian life. In other words, White believes Christians should spend their time on earth preparing themselves for the second advent of Christ, and preparing to take others with them. Broadly, that involves developing, and "sanctifying," one's character, according to White. In her words, the "object of education," indeed, the "object of life," is "to promote the development of body, mind, and soul" (*Education* 16). In some of her last recorded advice regarding literature before her death in 1915, White is reported to have said this:

> We should advise the youth to take hold of such reading matter as recommends itself for the upbuilding of the Christian character. The most essential points of our faith should be stamped upon the memory of the young….Our youth should read that which will have a

[41]"Seventh-day" refers to the practice of observing Saturday, not Sunday, as God's holy day, based on the fourth commandment, which instructs believers to "keep the seventh-day holy" (Exodus 20:8-10). "Adventist" refers to the fact that Church members still believe in and are waiting for Christ's second coming.

> healthful, sanctifying effect upon the mind. This they need in order to be able to discern what is true religion. There is much good reading that is not sanctifying.
>
> Now is our time and opportunity to labor for the young people. Tell them that we are now in a perilous crisis, and we want to know how to discern true godliness. Our young people need to be helped, uplifted, and encouraged, but in the right manner, not, perhaps, as they would desire it, but in a way that will help them to have sanctified minds. They need good, sanctifying religion more than anything else. (*Life Sketches* 448)

In this passage, White concedes that "there is much good reading that is not sanctifying." She does not define "good reading" here, but I imagine she might include at least some fiction in this category. I also imagine she could agree with Moncrief and Correderra's criteria for what makes certain fiction "good," or at least somewhat educative, particularly the points that fiction can admit us to perspectives outside our own, and fiction can help readers develop critical thinking skills, among others. This is simply common sense. However, from the above passage and others, White's main criteria for choosing literature is its ability, or inability, to "uplift," "encourage," and "sanctify" students. In her view, it seems, teachers and parents shouldn't waste time on activities or academic subjects that don't prepare readers to this end.

## My Response to the Fiction Question

In my own still-developing view, I must agree with White. Regarding the fiction question, my own answer, at present, is this: I don't say no to reading or teaching fiction outright; however, I haven't yet been able to shake my reluctance at teaching it. So, for the time being, I am making it my practice to choose, whenever possible, nonfiction in the classroom. Now perhaps more than ever before in English, this is easy to do, especially since non-fiction has become an increasingly popular genre and has become increasingly literary over the centuries. Today's memoirs and autobiographies often exhibit all the same literary qualities of novels, or fictional "narratives," as Moncrief and Correderra call them (thus can be as delightful as literary

fiction to read), and they are also (purportedly) true stories, or based on true stories–thus, studying non-fiction can be a win-win for all: those who want a good story get one, and those who are concerned about the fiction issue are relieved. In the next section, then, I give some principles for choosing literature in Christian classrooms.

## Practical Ideas for Choosing and Teaching Literature in Christian Classrooms

In addition to my list of general objectives for all literature teachers I introduced in chapter 4 and revisited in chapter 5, here are two specific goals that seem to me the most expedient for the Christian classroom: 1) to incorporate in some way the literature of the Bible and/or Christian writers, and, if teachers share the specific religion of the university, the teachings of that religion, and 2) to teach students how to live a Christian life in and relate to a secular world. It should be understood that these goals are accomplished both *in addition to* and *through* the teaching of a set of critical thinking, critical reading, and content specific skills, such as those delineated in Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature.* These objectives include learning "how to read figurative language and distinguish between literal and metaphorical meaning; how to think creatively about problems by using literature as a broadening of one's own experience and practical knowledge; and how to read closely, with attention to detailed use of diction, syntax, metaphor, and style" (26-27).

From studying the philosophies of various Christian literature teachers, I have found two approaches that such teachers can use to meet the above goals while, at the same time, preserving academic rigor. The first is that they must incorporate into their syllabi as much as possible Christian authors that further the goals of the course. For instance, in my American literature course, it made sense to include many Christian writers, some literary and others "ordinary"

(Sinor), because such writers accurately represent the cultural climate, and their writings, the literature of the period. As long as teachers can accomplish with a Christian author the same objectives they could accomplish with a non-Christian author, they should do so. For example, there is no object in the excellent list of goals for literature classrooms by Elaine Showalter that could not be attained just as well by reading Christian authors as by reading non-Christian ones. Veith, for his part, adduces another reason for featuring Christian authors: that is, he says numerous Christians are unaware that "they are heirs to a great literary tradition. From the beginnings of the church to the present day, Christian writers have explored their faith in books, and in doing so have nourished their fellow believers….To their loss, many contemporary Christians are unaware of Christian writers—both those from past generations and those writing today" (*Reading Between the Lines* xiv). In this quote, Veith is talking, ironically, mostly about Christians who wrote fiction, as most of his book *Reading Between the Lines* covers fictional genres and Christians who wrote in those genres. No problem. I am happy for Veith and others to make these arguments. And I am happy for Christian teachers to teach authors such as C.S. Lewis, John Milton, Jonathan Swift, and others who wrote fictional literary classics. However, for myself, I have recently been made aware of the rich tradition of spiritual autobiography–and it is by this literary tradition that I have been most nourished as a Christian and as a reader, and which I find to be the best use of time for general education students in my Christian classroom. In the previous chapter, I noted how I was unaware of the long legacy of this tradition until I studied at a secular university in the name of embracing diversity. Ironic. I'd like to see Christian teachers reclaim this rich nonfiction tradition in the name of nourishing our spiritual lives and building our characters, which was the original intent of spiritual autobiographies.

In addition to basing syllabi around Christian authors as much as possible, I think it entirely appropriate and fitting for Christian literature teachers to regularly incorporate into their courses sacred reading, or works written by exemplary Christian writers and scholars, which could correspond to the faith traditions of their institutions. A few good choices might be C.S. Lewis (who provides both fiction *and* nonfiction options), Martin Luther, or (in Adventist classrooms) Ellen White. In so doing, teachers would still be teaching critical reading skills. Further, they would also be promoting that which, in Christian thought, is "true," "honest," "just," "pure," "lovely," "of good report," "[virtuous]," and "[praiseworthy]" (*Holy Bible*, Phil. 4:8). By presenting authors that uplift biblical principles, Adventist literature teachers can follow scriptural counsel that exhorts Christians to be not conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2); to recognize that the wisdom of the world is "foolishness" in light of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18-31); and to take pride only in the knowledge and understanding they have of God (Jer. 9:24). Overall, by upholding true-life material (especially that written by Christians) in the literature classroom, and especially through assigning sacred reading as part of the course content, teachers can follow scriptural counsel through in through: "Thou shalt teach [God's Words] diligently unto thy children [or "students"], and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:7). As the college classroom plays an inestimable role in shaping the beliefs and worldviews of students, it is a serious oversight of "Christian" teachers in "Christian" institutions to gloss over, muddle, or skip the teaching and modeling of Christian beliefs. Christian literature teachers, in fact, have a unique opportunity to make a difference in preparing students for the Christian life, for they can directly incorporate Christian teachings into the course content without sacrificing or diminishing institutional or course goals.

## Life Writing in Christian Classrooms

For Adventist teachers (or other Christian, or non-Christian, teachers, for that matter) who would like some alternatives to teaching fiction, recent scholarship in English studies offers new alternatives. As noted in previous chapters, for decades scholars and teachers in English studies have been working to expand the canon and their syllabi to include the faces and voices of historically marginalized minorities, including women, as well as well as various ethnic groups. This development is a positive for many students, scholars, and teachers, on many counts. However, whereas many scholars are arguing for an expanded canon in the name of race or gender equality, I argue for an expanded canon on behalf of religious students, teachers, and scholars. The term "life writing" is a gift for religious teachers of writing and literature, because it opens the door to the legitimate academic study of non-fiction religious texts such as religious records, spiritual memoirs, and other forms of writing done by and for religious people. The concept of life writing is also a gift for religious scholars and teachers who base their pedagogy in rhetorical theory, because it allows us to teach (religious) texts that will speak to our audiences (mostly religious students) in ways that the traditional canon cannot.

In the next section, speaking from my own subject position as an Adventist Christian, I illustrate my points through discussing how a Christian teacher might use William Apess's *A Son of the Forest and Other Writings* to create a rhetorically effective class, either in writing or literature, that equips students to think critically about and respond intelligently to difficult topics. I argue that the range of writing styles collected in this work by editor Barry O'Connell, from spiritual autobiography to political polemic, coupled with Apess's subject matter and

rhetorical efficacy, make this collection a sound choice for Christian literature teachers seeking morally sound, academically rigorous, and rhetorically appropriate literature.

## William Apess and Possibilities for Christian English Teachers

The writings of William Apess, uncovered by historians and literary critics in just the last thirty years (O'Connell, "On our Own Ground"), are a windfall for college English teachers everywhere. Not only does Apess blend the various styles of writing that many of us teach—narration, description, exposition, argumentation—but he also writes a powerful critique of the dominant culture of his time, that culture being white and Christian, the time being racist America in the 1830s. Apess himself is brown-skinned. He is Native. He is Pequot. In other words, he is the *other*, and he has suffered unconscionable oppression, racism, and injustice at the hands of his white brothers and sisters. In twenty-first century English classrooms, where such themes are often explored, Apess is an ideal figure to include on one's syllabus. Indeed, Barry O'Connell, the first scholar to edit and publish Apess's works in book form (in 1992 and 1997), declares that Apess's writings "belong to and in the history of American literature for their polemical mastery and for Apess's inventive use of the autobiographical form" (*Son of the Forest* xxii). In a C-SPAN book talk in 2000, O'Connell went so far as to say Apess ranked among the top rhetoricians of his time. As a teacher and scholar of life writing and rhetoric, I heartily concur that his work shines—particularly his polemical writing—and that it belongs to and in the study of American literature. Likewise, as a teacher and scholar of composition, I believe his work could easily support the goals of any well-rounded composition course. However, as a *Christian* teacher of English, I find perhaps even more reasons than my secular counterparts for teaching the writings of William Apess. Namely, in addition to sparking

meaningful discussions about civil rights and social justice, and in addition to providing skillful models of blended writing (autobiography with argument), Apess's work can serve as a powerful entry for Christian teachers and students to deeply investigate their religious beliefs, and how well, or how poorly, they may be living up to them. In the next section, then, I will discuss some practical entry points for *any* instructor desiring to teach Apess's writings, but I will especially focus on lessons Christian educators might draw from his work.

## A Framework for All: The Rhetorical Triangle

To begin, William Apess is an attractive choice for all teachers who hope to prompt critical thinking, because of his complicated, nuanced rhetorical stance. As explained in chapter 4, "rhetorical stance" refers to the rhetorical positioning created by the intersection of the speaker (or the writer), the topic (what is being written about), and the audience (who is being written or spoken to). As Booth says, and as good rhetoricians know, writers and speakers must pay adequate attention to all three points of the triangle in crafting a written or spoken address, or else the rhetorical act (the writing or the oratory) becomes unbalanced and inauthentic, thus, ineffective. As I will delineate below, William Apess is an effective writer and helpful writing model precisely because he pays extensive attention to all three points of the triangle: speaker, topic, and audience.

Before delving further into William Apess's rhetorical stance, however, I would first reiterate that the concept of the rhetorical triangle itself is a great starting place for any composition or literature class. This is because the rhetorical triangle allows students to enter any piece of writing (or literature) with a practical interpretive framework. With this framework in mind, I suggest that teachers begin discussions of literature by asking three questions, each of

which directly corresponds to one point in the rhetorical triangle: 1) *Who is the author*? 2) *Why are they writing*? And 3) *To whom are they writing*? Once we have adequately explained the framework of the rhetorical triangle, and once we have asked these questions, our next job is to fill in the various points. Though it may seem logical to start with the writer/speaker (often through giving an author bio), I suggest tackling the audience first, because audience awareness is a threshold concept for students trying to gain academic writing skills. In addition, audience awareness is fundamental for readers of historical literature to understand the contexts in which writers were writing.[42]

## William Apess's Audience

If we decide to teach the writings of William Apess, we can start the discussion by first surveying the landscape in which he was writing (giving some historical background)—and with it, the people to whom he was writing. I've mentioned already that Apess wrote and spoke in 1830s racist America, but it's also important to note that this was a crucial time of national identity formation. Ethan Goodnight explains, on the one hand, that America in the 1830s was undergoing the second Great Awakening, and working to achieve unity through developing "Christian nationalism," or defining itself as a Christian nation.[43] But on the other hand,

[42] As a general rule, I recommend beginning all English courses with a discussion about audience and audience awareness, because these are threshold concepts for both high school and college students. Not only do novice writers need to gain audience awareness in order to write within the appropriate conventions of their discourse community, but novice readers also need the concept of audience awareness to understand the socially constructed nature of texts. Whether or not instructors agree that texts are actually *constructed* by the society that surrounds a writer, we can probably all agree that a writer's texts are directly *influenced* by the society that surrounds them. In other words, an upfront discussion about audience can lead to more effective writing in composition classes, as well as better comprehension of historical context in literature classes.

[43] Says Goodnight: "On a general level, the propagated idea of America as a Christian nation simply means that the majority population, Protestant evangelicals, defined it as such….On a deeper level, early American Christian

Goodnight says, "While most states did have a declared Christian affiliation, the nation at large possessed no unifying idea of how religion should function in the United States in the early Republic. Protestant evangelicals were bitterly divided over the role of religion in America, with Christian nationalism forming only one movement" (4). In other words, new denominations were springing up and splitting off from one another everywhere. Given this background of America's politics and religion in the 1830s, students can begin to gain important clues about what kinds of things were being written at the time, even before they read anything from the era. As discussion leaders, we can point out that conversion to Christianity was often an incitement to writing. For instance, Apess would eventually cast his lot with the Methodist movement, even becoming a Methodist preacher; and it was his conversion that first animated his desire to write.

Here I would briefly add that, since Apess writes for a predominantly Christian audience, teachers and students in Christian classrooms are particularly well positioned to receive him: both his content, which creates a shared religious discourse between writer and audience, and his (at times confrontational) style. However, this is not to say that a general audience cannot appreciate his writings. Indeed, while his intended audience remains the same throughout his writing career (because the nation was predominately Christian at the time), his purposes for writing change—thereby, his writings change—and these shifts in purpose and style could prove instructive to many students on many levels. For instance, Apess's earlier, autobiographical writings partake in the longstanding Protestant tradition of sharing oral or written conversion stories, or testimonies (O'Connell in Apess 1), whereas his later, polemical, writings enter a

nationalists were convinced that God had been and was still working in unique ways throughout America; only Divine Providence could adequately explain the awesome success of the Founding Fathers" (3).

more public forum to argue for Native rights. From my standpoint as a scholar in both composition and literature (life writing), this range of purposes for writing, along with the corresponding writing styles, could provide any English teacher a wealth of possibilities, in both composition and literature classes.

## Apess as Writer/Speaker

When it comes to filling out the writer/speaker point of the triangle, teachers can let Apess introduce himself through his autobiography; however, in class discussions, teachers will want to point out the complex and multi-layered rhetorical stance(s) Apess eventually takes. As previous scholars have pointed out, much of what is known of Apess's personal life comes from what he himself penned in his spiritual autobiography, *A Son of the Forest,* which has been called the first autobiography by a Native American.[44] William Apess was born in 1798 in Colrain, Massachusetts, to a mixed blood father and an Indian mother who may have been part African American. His parents separated shortly after his birth, and Apess went to live with his grandparents. However, at the age of four, Apess was severely beaten by his grandmother and went to live with his childless, and white, neighbors, the Furmans. In *A Son of the Forest*, Apess states that in these early years, he had little conception of racially differing from the family that was raising him. That changed at age eleven, however, when Apess was sold to the wealthy Hillhouse family: Karim Tiro says that at this point, "Apess could no longer remain naïve to the fact that whites defined him by his race" (657). As he narrates his coming of age, Apess also narrates his coming to awareness of his own rhetorical, historical situation—that is, the racism,

[44] As Barry O'Connell points out, Apess wrote several versions of his autobiography; however, *Son of the Forest* is the longest, most complete versions.

oppression, and injustice done to himself and his people, and done by white *Christians*, nonetheless. He picks up this theme fervently in his subsequent writings, including the short essay "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man" and his longer, more famous speech, "Eulogy on King Philip." If students read Apess's writing chronologically, they will not only come to know him as a person, they will also notice that, as a writer, he increasingly engages political topics and writes for polemical purposes. Again, we can see that his writing lends itself to a variety of interpretations, and, for the English teacher, a variety of lessons that could range from construction of autobiography to construction of one's identity.

Regarding questions of identity, we can discuss Apess's unique positionality as a Native American in predominantly white New England, and his growing awareness that he was different from the world around him. If we want to personalize the discussion, which I believe is a best practice for engaging students, we can ask (or have students journal about) questions like these: *How do you relate to Apess here*? *Do you notice that you are different from those around you, either from an ideological standpoint, or from a cultural/racial/ethnic standpoint*? *Have you grown up in homogenous surroundings (racially or religiously)*? *When did you become aware of big divides in the world—what do those dividing lines look like for you*? *For instance, has racism been an issue for you*? *Religious Discrimination*? *Tribalism of any kind*? This is just one way teachers might connect learning about William Apess to students' prior knowledge.

## Apess's Purpose

As I've said, Apess's focus on racism and injustice is what makes him so attractive to teachers intent on promoting social justice. Indeed, as any reader of Apess can quickly note, he is brilliant at turning Christian rhetoric—such as "love your neighbor as yourself" and "God is no

respecter of persons"—back on hypocritical Christians, or calling out Christians by using the very Bible verses with which they profess to order their lives. According to literary critics like O'Connell and Rochelle Raineri Zuck, Apess's scathing rhetoric against white Christians is his most interesting trait. For her part, Zuck says that whereas some whites used Christian rhetoric to erase the history and cultural features of Natives, Apess used the same to assert their presence, thus enacting a form of survivance. For his part, O'Connell uses his platform as a literary scholar of Apess to critique contemporary American society for its racism and oppression of minority groups (see his C-SPAN talk). Indeed, in any English class, much could be said about Apess's apt critiques of 1830s "Christian" culture; and much could be said about racism, then and now. From my standpoint as a scholar and teacher of rhetoric and composition, I would love to spend multiple class periods dissecting Apess's rhetoric; specifically, I appreciate his firm grasp on how to appeal to his Christian audience's values and principles in order to sway their minds; I also appreciate his powerful use of warrants, or assumptions that his audience holds, in order to make his case. For now, though, I will turn the discussion to how *we* might support some additional goals in our classroom through teaching the writings of William Apess.

## Special Considerations for Christian Classrooms

I will start by simply sharing my own reaction to Apess's writing, because I believe this approach, sometimes called "personal criticism" (Miller), is an important practice that can enrich and enliven the study of literature. Frankly, Apess's damning charges against Christians of his day deeply trouble me; moreover, they convince me that, as a self-professed Christian, I need to practice what I preach. In addition, his spiritual autobiography leads me to meditate on my own Christian walk. As O'Connell puts it, Apess tells two parallel stories in his autobiography: his

story of increasing alienation from his Pequot tribe, along with his story of coming to Methodism (C-SPAN). In America's current, postmodern, or even "post-Christian" moment (Veith *Post-Christian)*, Apess's first storyline is likely to be the more popular one. However, Apess announces *both* his sinfulness *and* his spiritual neediness, *both* in the public square (tent meetings) *and* in published writing, and here is where Christian teachers can take class discussions further than their secular counterparts. For those of us truly committed to providing "Christian" education, I argue that we should continually push our students to think about their personal understanding of Christianity and the Christian walk. Beyond that, we should engage discussions of where we as Christians fit into culture, how we are speaking and behaving in the public square, and how we are being perceived, or misperceived, in the world around us. As Apess's work and historical context show us, Christians, or Christ-followers, have not always lived up to that name.

That is why, in a Christian classroom featuring writings by William Apess, one of my goals would be to facilitate *personal introspection* and the *taking of personal responsibility* for how we, as self-professed Christians, are fulfilling, or failing to fulfill, the values we claim to hold. It is my belief that taking social responsibility starts with examining our personal stories; conveniently, Apess provides us useful tools for doing so. Indeed, only a few pages into his autobiography, Apess narrates being introduced to Christianity via Mrs. Furman and Baptist church services, and he records that "The conversation and pious admonitions of this good lady made a lasting impression upon my mind" (9). Remarking that all children have the capacity to be impressed with religion early on, Apess not only comments on his own spirituality, but also begins an argument about the entire human race. Chapter two begins thus:

> I believe that it is assumed as a fact among divines that the Spirit of Divine Truth, in the boundless diversity of its operations, visits the mind of every intelligent being born into the world…. It is also conceded on all hands that the Spirit of Truth operates on different minds in a variety of ways—but always with the design of convincing man of sin and of a judgment to come. And, oh, that men would regard their real interests and yield to the illuminating influences of the Spirit of God—then wretchedness and misery would abound no longer, but everything of the kind give place to the pure principles of peace, godliness, brotherly kindness, meekness, charity, and love. (8)

The point to note here is the individual responsibility Apess clearly places on his readers—and himself. First, he calls everyone "with an intelligent mind" to yield to the Holy Spirit's influence; second, he calls those who have adopted the name of "Christian" to a higher standard.[45] Throughout the remainder of his autobiography, Apess writes quite candidly about his own struggles to accept his calling in Christ and to leave behind his sinful vices, which include drinking and carousing with the wrong crowd. For instance, after his initial exposure to Christianity, Apess writes, "After a while I became very fond of attending on the word of God—then again I would meet the enemy of my soul [Satan], who would strive to lead me away, and in many instances he was but too successful" (10). This is but one of many passages where Apess takes personal responsibility for his bad decisions. I focus on this point because, while O'Connell and other scholars, such as Karim Tiro, do mention Apess's religious storyline, they tend to

[45] Continuing, Apess calls Christian parents to train their children right. He says that if parents are diligent in impressing "truth, virtue, morality, and religion" upon the minds of their children, then those children will grow to act on those principles. Apess also takes the opportunity to point fingers at "Christians" who have abdicated their duties: "It may not be improper to remark, in this place, that a vast proportion of the misconduct of young people in church is chargeable to their parents and guardians" (8-9).

downplay the *individual* aspect of Apess's conversion, and rather emphasize the *social* element of his coming to Christianity. That is, instead of focusing on the inward sin that led Apess to feel his need for Christ, scholars like these focus on the outward characteristics of Apess's situation and subject position that led him to identify with the Methodist church, as well as take hold of Jesus "as a person of color" (O'Connell, C-SPAN). [46] But for Christian readers, the individual aspect is instructive, and it raises important questions that Christian teachers can leverage in Christian classrooms. For instance, using Apess's conversion story, we can open up fruitful discussions about how we understand our own relationship with God, and our own relationship with Christianity at large. We can ask the question: *If we call ourselves Christians, are we prepared to take personal responsibility for living up to, or failing to live up to, biblical principles and Christlike behavior?* We can put ourselves in the place of Apess's audience and ask: *Does this criticism still apply to us, either collectively or personally, in the twenty-first century?*

Beyond considering our personal walk of faith, we can also discuss how we fit, or do not fit, into the dominant culture. College students are at a formative time in life, and while they have had a lifetime of ideological programming from parents, as well as, perhaps, religious traditions and institutions, it is likely they are just beginning to discover and/or articulate their own beliefs. Thus, examining a writer like William Apess, who grapples with his own faith from

[46] In Tiro's words, Methodism was "crucial to [Apess's] self-conception as a Pequot….Defining itself as a religion of outsiders pitted against a reprobate elite, early Methodism's delegitmation of the hierarchies that structured New England life validated Apess's class and racial identities simultaneously" (654). Tiro adds that Methodism, along with Baptism and other " 'enthusiastic' varieties of Christianity" appealed to disaffected Natives, whites, and blacks because it "articulated grievances they all shared against the classes responsible for their situation and promoted understanding across racial lines" (654-55). I don't disagree with O'Connell and Tiro that Apess was attracted to Methodism for its outward similarities to his personal situation, but I do believe these *social* factors were of secondary significance in Apess's *personal* conversion.

many dimensions over the course of time, can be not only enlightening in terms of social injustice, but also personally meaningful in terms of students figuring out what they believe in.

## Autobiographical Fragment

In short, I am arguing that we, as Christian English teachers, expand the discussions being had in our classrooms. While it is fine to engage social issues in class discussions, we should not neglect to engage spiritual discussions that relate to our students as individuals, as Christians striving to live up to their name. For my part, during a recent semester in grad school, as I read Apess and discussed how he fit into, and didn't fit into, the boundaries of Native American Literature, I related to Apess in multiple ways. I was also pushed to reflect deeply on my faith, as well as my rhetorical practices. For one, my faith is and has long been an important feature of my identity. However, in a public graduate program, I have found myself in a situation where many people around me do not believe the way I do—however, unlike Apess's audience, many of my colleagues do not call themselves Christians (which, for them, is something to be proud of). Hailing from a fairly homogenous, evangelical (and white, if you want to know the truth) upbringing, and now trying to swim in a politically liberal PhD program, I continue to grow my awareness that I do not "fit" well into the profession of English studies–and the culture at large–precisely because of my Christian beliefs. At the same time, after reading and considering the larger context of Apess's writings, I certainly understand why Christianity on the whole deserves critique; moreover, I am deeply saddened and disturbed at the stories history tells about "us."

But as I listen to current conversations where the Christian worldview is sidelined or dismissed, and Christians sometimes outright bashed, I am also angered. I am angered because

some of the voices calling for tolerance and inclusion are committing the very same crimes they say religious people commit, or have historically committed. I am also angered because *I* didn't commit these crimes in history–but I am doing my best now to understand the current cries of intolerance and oppression, and I am trying to revise my thinking, and my behavior, when the arguments hold up, or when I see that I was wrong, or, perhaps, simply ignorant. I am angered because I *agree* with many of the arguments being made in the secular world–that people should not be mistreated based on identity markers like race, religion, gender, etc.–yet I've sat in graduate seminars where people who don't know me personally have condemned and, effectively, canceled "those Christians."[47] I am also angered that I feel scared to speak up sometimes because of my religious beliefs; I am angered when I read that other Christians and/or conservatives get shut out from speaking at college campuses, some being literally booed off stage or prevented from even getting *on* stage.[48] This is not right. For these reasons and more, Apess reminds me that sometimes we "privileged" ones have our own battles to fight. He also reminds me that groups who seem to be on opposing sides may actually have much more in common than we realize or acknowledge.

So, how can we Christians regain respect, and how can we *all* do better at communicating with one another and achieving that harmony and equality we all say we want? I believe it starts with pushing ourselves beyond groupthink and taking personal responsibility—both for our behavior and for our words. As Christian teachers, we can also start by helping our students

[47] One of those classmates later apologized to me, after learning I was a Christian. In her words, "You're not like the other ones I've met."

[48] See, for instance, English professor Janice Fiamengo's interview with Dave Rubin from 2018, in which she discusses receiving such treatment, as well as discussing the larger trend in higher education to silence certain viewpoints. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upBP2UYyRZU.

examine their own beliefs and behaviors. Toward this end, Apess can help Christian teachers *and* students interrogate how well, or how poorly, we are living up to our name. As we move from discussing Apess's time into discussing our own, I hope we will find that the state of Christian rhetoric and behavior has improved. If it hasn't, then it is up to each one of us to take stock of our own rhetorical situation, and then do something about it.

As for myself, now that I've realized how misperceived Christians sometimes are, and how *we* have also grossly misperceived and *mistreated* others, I am trying to address these topics head-on in my classroom by making them sites of academic inquiry.

## Conclusion

In *Education*, Ellen White says that education should help students "deal with the problems of life," which is a variation of my own argument in this dissertation. Many scholars have pointed out that fiction can help us deal with the problems of life, even deal with the Christian concerns of reaching "lost humanity." However, I'm still reluctant to teach fiction in my own classes. Admittedly, my reluctance probably stems from my own difficulty as an undergrad (and even grad) student to see the relevance of much of the fictional literature I studied to the problems I was facing in real life. As noted in the previous chapter, much of the literature I studied came from the traditional canon: Shakespeare, Pope, Poe, and others. Maybe if the fiction on the syllabus had resembled my life more, I would have felt differently. And perhaps my depressed brain was too clouded with my own problems to grasp the greatness of these works–so maybe some journaling, or writing to learn, alongside the reading would have opened up the possibilities. I really don't know. What I do know is that, while I agree that plenty of fiction *can* prompt critical thinking and expose us to culturally important ideas, and even

prepare us to better understand the world we hope to witness to, I think we can achieve the exact same goals through studying non-fiction: life writing is ideal because it represents real people dealing with the real problems of life.[49]

Now, if I am an English major or professional in the field, I can agree with Moncrief and Correderra, and other scholars making similar arguments, that it is important for me to grasp literary history, and this probably should involve reading at least some of the works that have been most culturally important over the ages, including fictional works. In "Fiction and Film," Moncrief and Correderra also say that English majors tend to be more mature readers who can handle more difficult material. I agree. However, for the general ed student who does not plan to teach literature, write literature, or write or publish on the subject, I don't think grasping the major trends in literary history is a sufficient argument for reading fictional works simply because they have "lasting cultural impact" ("Fiction and Film" 23), which works may or may not have other desirable qualities from the Christian worldview. In a general ed literature class, then, I believe it is sufficient for the teacher to point out the literary trends and culturally important authors, but not necessarily important for them to *teach* all of that literature in class.

A better use of the limited time we have, I think, is to stick with what will be most beneficial to the greatest number of students, and I believe that is true life stories. Therefore, in my own classes, I choose to downplay fiction and rely mostly on nonfiction, at least where there are good non-fiction alternatives available. Thankfully, now that life writing has become a popular field, more and more non-fiction alternatives are becoming more available, and more widely anthologized, all the time.

[49] I want to say that I welcome including life writing by both Christian *and* non-Christian writers on the syllabus, if the writing supports course aims.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusion: Making Selves as We Make Scholars

So, to return to where this dissertation started, *What should we teach in college English*? I'll admit it: I came back to graduate school in 2019 already knowing *what* and *how* I wanted to teach. Namely, I had decided to teach autobiographical writing using a rhetorical approach. But now, after these additional years of reading and thinking, as well as doing lots of life writing, I can articulate, in ways I could not before, *why* the approach I argue for is so important. That is, writing in the personal voice–for *private* as well as *public* purposes—has provided me much healing and personal growth, which has led to healthy changes in my interpersonal relationships as well as increased confidence and growth in my public and professional life.

This project really started ten years ago, with my master's thesis in rhetoric and composition. Back then, I was looking for more ways to include personal and creative writing in college writing curriculum, because that's how I like to write, yet I hardly got to do any of that writing as a college student. After writing my master's thesis on that topic in 2012, I took seven years away from academia to do that creative and personal writing I never got to do in school. Notably, it was Dr. Jim Warren's assignment to write to a real audience in my last master's class with him that encouraged me to start a *public* blog, which I did in 2013. Concurrent with that, I was also taking part in a prayer ministry called Straight 2 the Heart that was bringing a lot of healing in my *private* life.

After completing training in the prayer ministry, I was hired by Coneff to write the life stories of numerous people who had benefited from his approach. His approach, by the way, involves reviewing and honoring traumas in one's life–or "honoring our losses," in Coneff's words–and then expressing them in various ways, to group members, in writing, and in prayer. I

also shared my testimony of healing from depression for Coneff's book.[50] After this, blending what I had learned about communicating in private as well as public contexts, my next project became writing my own book for a larger audience. So during those seven years, both on my blog and also in writing my book, I was using life writing as healing. I didn't know that there were whole fields of research behind both writing as healing and also life writing–but that's what I would discover during my doctoral studies, beginning in 2019.

Shortly after I started the doctoral program, I discovered that Expressive Writing (EW) was a term not just in composition, but also in psychology. However, in psychology, Expressive Writing denotes writing about trauma, and it's a common intervention in mental health treatments. This opened up interesting new directions for my research. When I saw that UTA had added the topic cluster of mental health to its 1301 curriculum, which I was now teaching, that was yet another nudge for me to think about additional ways to teach, or at least talk about, personal writing in the classroom. During the fall semester of 2019, I regularly used freewriting as part of the learning and writing process at large (old hat for me), but I also began to talk to my students about EW as a method for treating mental health issues (see chapter 3).

The next fateful semester, spring 2020, I took an independent study with Desirée Henderson on Life Writing, which opened me up to thinking about studying life writing as literature. During this semester, in fact, my interest in studying and teaching literature revived, because of the new focus on life writing in this and other literature classes I was taking, including Cedrick May's Early African American Evangelical Literature and Paul Conrad's

[50] *The Hidden Half of the Gospel: How His Suffering Can Heal Yours,* Two Harbors Press, 2014.

Native American literature. As I took these classes, I continued to ponder my key question: "What should we, what should *I*, teach in college English?

In this dissertation, I have offered life writing as my main tool for designing rhetorically effective composition and literature courses. I have suggested a variety of ways in which we might have students take part in this literary tradition, including ideas for both writing and reading–and I have suggested numerous potential benefits. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, research in cognition shows that personal writing leads to learning, as well as more advanced forms of writing. But the benefits don't stop there. As also discussed in chapters 2 and 3, life writing is also therapeutic. Because college coincides, for many, with chaotic times in the lifespan–for both undergrad and grad students–life writing is an ideal choice our classrooms, because it can help students process and honor the upheavals in their lives, while also teaching them about the key concepts of the writing process and rhetorical theory. For students who need new or better perspectives, or for students who need waking up to important social conversations, as discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, life writing studied as literature also opens the portals of experience. Through reading the lives of others, we gain access to new perspectives, and we also get out of our own bubbles, not in an escapist way, but in a responsible way, in which we become aware of diverse struggles we have not had. For example, I talk in chapter 4 about how I became more aware of systemic oppression by reading and discussing 18th century Black Atlantic Literature. Indeed, life writing read as literature is powerful for its ability to shake readers out of their own limited perspectives, as well as, perhaps, their positions of unconscious privilege. To return to concerns about mental health, reading life writing of others who have surmounted oppression or other obstacles can also help students realize that significant life challenges *can* be overcome, and *have been overcome* by many who came before. For teachers

open to teaching life writing as literature, I suggest choosing authors that can serve as role models to inspire our students to speak up for worthwhile social causes, to stand up for what they believe in, and to overcome whatever personal challenges they may be facing.

If I could get personal for a moment, as a PhD student, I encountered some surprising mental health challenges. These were surprising because, at age 35, I thought I had conquered my depression and anxiety of former times. However, during my PhD program, strange symptoms popped up, interestingly, always on my breaks from school. Until I did research on *Expressive Writing, trauma,* and *writing as healing*, I didn't know what to call my problem.[51] All I knew was that inexplicable symptoms happened when I was at home.[52] So I made small escapes, in the small ways that I could–to UTA, to coffee shops, and to other public venues. But then the pandemic hit, and my former public haunts closed. As a result, I felt trapped, both mentally and temporally.

I am happy to report that taking periodic breaks from academics to journal, write semi-autobiographical magazine articles, and even pen some poetry[53] helped me cope; these forms of life writing also allowed me to clarify and re-focus my overarching goal for my doctoral work. What is that goal? Using the tools of my trade, my number one goal is to help students become their best selves as I also assist them in becoming scholars.

As I conclude, I want to reiterate this: life writing has become a shelter for many students, scholars, and teachers like Jane Tompkins and myself–individuals who need a responsible escape, a safe place to reflect, and a fresh perspective on life. Based on my research

[51] I've since called my problem *complex PTSD* on my blog.
[52] For instance, hyperventilating, hyperarousal (always on alert), the inability to relax, startling easily, panic attacks, and excessive bouts of crying.
[53] Thanks to Dr. Nathaniel O'Reilly's graduate poetry class.

and experience with life writing, *as well as* feedback from my students, I believe that composition classrooms that involve life writing can be those safe spaces. As we allow students to express their thoughts and feelings on the personal page, we will help them manage their mental and emotional challenges and assist them in personal development. Based on my journey as a graduate student, I also believe that literature classrooms featuring the life writing of others can become transformative spaces, spaces where students can get outside their limited perspectives, gain awareness, and develop greater understanding and compassion for the lives of others. In other words, as we allow students to explore their thoughts and feelings in our classes, and then express their thoughts and opinions to various audiences—and as we invite them to hear the voices of others through reading life writing—we will help them toward more productive interpersonal communication, and more responsible, respectful civic discourse. Ultimately, enhancing students' private lives will enhance their public lives. However, if we ignore students' private lives in the classroom, we miss a huge opportunity to provide help where many greatly need it. We also risk losing students' trust and respect.

Writing twenty-five years after Jane Tompkins wrote her confessions on how the profession of English had failed her (*A Life in School*), I am grateful to be teaching in a moment when many other scholars and teachers are also talking about how to make selves as we make scholars. In a world filled with private pain, social injustice, and current global trauma, telling our stories, and helping our students listen to the stories of others, is perhaps more important than ever.

Appendix A

Mental Health Survey

University of Texas at Arlington

Spring 2022

ENGL 1301 Mental Health Survey

Help provide data your classmates can use as they write about mental health. This survey is completely anonymous. Please be honest.

1. Have you ever (in the past) struggled with your mental health in such a way that it has interfered with your ability to do your schoolwork, interact with friends, or complete otherwise normal tasks?

   Yes___ No _____

2. Are you currently struggling with your mental health in a major way--in such a way that it is interfering with your ability to do your schoolwork, interact with friends, or complete otherwise normal tasks?

   Yes___ No _____

3. If you answered yes, do you have a name for your particular struggle(s)? (for example, stress, depression, anxiety, eating disorder, etc.)
   _____

4. In general, how do you take care of your mental health? If you have struggled or are struggling, what have you done or what are you doing to help fix it?

5. Are you struggling with any of the following in college (circle all that apply):
   A. Getting schoolwork done
   B. Balancing schoolwork with everything else
   C. Making new friends or developing new friendships
   D. Getting enough sleep
   E. Eating well
   F. Your major (Are you struggling to pick one? Are you happy with it? Is it not what you expected?) Please explain:
      _____

6. Are you genuinely happy?

   Yes___ No _____

7. Does anyone feel like the only reason you go to college and try hard is to make others happy? Does anyone feel empty inside? Please explain.

Appendix B

American Literature I Course Schedule

Southwestern Adventist University

Spring 2022

**Course Schedule**

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Week 1 (Jan. 5, 7):

W–Introductions; Discuss alternative arrangements in event that we move online.

F– Discuss essential questions of the course, especially #1: What writers should comprise the canon of American literature? Look at online textbook; overview of authors. Discuss difference between "literary/poetic," "ordinary/expressive," and "rhetorical/transactional" writing.
**Get textbooks this week! Write introduction letter and email to me. Before you write, skim the online anthology, choose 2-3 authors/works you'd like to possibly research/read and present on**. **(Further guidelines on Canvas)**

Week 2 (Jan. 10, 12, 14):

M–Sign up for author presentations. **In class begin reading "Adventists and Fiction" and "Fiction and Film" in class (provided).** Discuss literary and rhetorical terminology; apply to week's reading.

W–Discuss "Adventists and Fiction" and "Fiction and Film."

F–Model how to write a reading response. **First response due Monday anytime.**

Week 3 (Jan. 19, 21)

**No class Monday, MLK Day. First reading response due anytime today.**

- W**–Read selections from online anthology Literature of Exploration and Discovery section:**
    - **"Intro to Native American Accounts,"**
    - **skim Native American accounts**
    - **"Intro to European Exploration Accounts"**

F– Read **"Intro to Christopher Columbus"** and his **"Letter of Discovery"**
Author Presentation(s): Christopher Columbus: Josue.

Week 4 (Jan. 24, 26, 28):

M–Read "An Intro to Lit of Colonial America" **(#21 online anthology)**
Author Presentation: William Bradford: Isaac

Second reading response assigned.

W–Read Mary Rowlandson intro and "Narrative of Captivity" **(#38-39 online)**

F– Read Ben Franklin intro and selections from his *Autobiography* **(#73-76 online)**
Author presentation: Ben Franklin
**Second Reading Response due Sunday anytime.**

Week 5 (Jan. 31., Feb. 2, 4):

M–In class read poems by Anne Bradstreet **(#28-38, online anthology**)
Third reading response assigned

W– Read Elizabeth Ashbridge intro and *Some Account…* **(#64-65, online anthology**)

F– Read "Intro to the Vernacular Tradition," "Spirituals," and "Secular Rhymes and Work Songs" **(Norton pp. 3-25).**
**Third Reading Response due Sunday anytime.**

Week 6 (Feb. 7, 9, 11):

M–Read Intro to "The Literature of Slavery and Freedom" **(Norton pp. 75-87)**
In class read Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley poems
Fourth Reading Response Assigned

W–Read Venture Smith's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures…* **(Norton 94-109)**

F–Read Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* **(Norton 112-136)**;
Author presentation: Olaudah Equiano _____
**Fourth Reading Response due Sunday anytime.**

Week 7 (Feb. 14, 16, 18):

M–Review for mid-term

W–**Mid-term exam, Wed. Feb. 16**

F–Movie, *This is Our Story*

Week 8 (Feb. 21, 23, 25):

M–Intro Personal Writing Project; brainstorm and drafting: What is my story?

W–Read David Walker **(Norton pp. 159-171);** Read William Apess **(#105-106, online)**
Author Presentations: David Walker and William Apess
Fifth reading response assigned.

F–Read "Intro: Women and the Cult of Domesticity" (**online #121)**; Read Sojourner Truth and
Maria Stewart intros and selections **(Norton 176-186)**
Author Presentations: Maria Steward and Sojourner Truth
**Fifth reading response due anytime Sunday.**

Week 9 (Feb. 28, Mar. 2, 4):

M–PWP Brainstorm: What is my message? **This week begin reading Ellen White, *Life Sketches* pp. 17-166.**

W–watch *Tell the World*

F–watch *Tell the World;*

Week 10 (Mar. 7, 9, 11):

M–Finish *Tell the World* in class; PCP one-page proposal assigned. Sign up for conferences.
**This week continue reading Ellen White, *Life Sketches*** pp. 17-166

W–Conferences; no class. **PWP one-page proposal due at time of conference.**

F–Conferences; no class. **PWP one-page proposal due at time of conference.**

# Week 11 (Mar. 14, 16, 18): **Spring Break–no class all week**

Week 12 (Mar. 21, 23, 25):

M– Read intro to "Literature of a New Nation," and "Lit of the Romantic Era" **(#81 and #110, online).** In class discuss Ellen White, her message, and how she compares to other American authors and fits into American Literature (or doesn't). Sixth reading response assigned: How does Christianity compare with Transcendentalism/ Romanticism?

W–Read Emerson's Intro and "Self-Reliance" **(online, #111 and #113)**
Author Presentation: Emerson: Indy

F–Read Thoreau's Intro and excerpt from *Walden*
Author Presentation: Thoreau: Josiah, Ephraim, Jorge
**Sixth reading response due Sunday anytime.**

Week 13 (Mar. 28, 30, Apr. 1):

M–No class meeting: On your own, begin reading/listening to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* (**Norton pp. 330-393);** you may listen at librivox.org to Jesse Zuba's recording. Also, work on your PWP.

W–Finish reading Douglass by class (**Norton pp. 330-393)** Discuss the *Narrative* in class.
Author Presentation: Frederick Douglass Hunter and Justin

F– **First draft of PWP due (5 pages), bring a hard or electronic copy and email to me**

Week 14 (Apr. 4, 6, 8):

M– No class meeting: On your own, begin reading/listening to Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* **(Norton pp. 224-261);** you may listen at librivox.org to Elizabeth Klett's recording.

W–Finish Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* **(Norton pp. 224-261)**
Author Presentation: Harriet Jacobs: Evelyn and Dennise

F– Author Presentation: Edgar Allen Poe: Reese and Vivian
**Readings by Poe: Presenters choose**

Week 15 (Apr. 11, 13, 15):

M– PWP editing workshop. This week work on revising your PWP.

W– In class read Emily Dickinson poetry (presenters choose poems)
Author Presentation: Emily Dickinson: Grace and Brittney

F–Emily Dickinson poetry.

Week 16 (Apr.18, 20, 22): Dead week–

M–**PWP Final Draft Due anytime today**. Begin final exam review in class.

W– Final Exam Review: revisit essential questions for semester.

F– Final Exam Review: revisit essential questions for semester.

**Final Exams**

The final will be a series of short essay questions having to do with our essential questions this semester, as well as author recognition. This will be a handwritten test with no electronics, unless you require another format for testing.

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## Biographical Information

Lindsey Gendke is a writer, wife, teacher, and mom whose passion is writing, teaching, and telling true stories. Lindsey earned her BA in English Literature at Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) in 2008, after which she taught high school for three years. In 2012, she earned her MA in English at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), and in 2013 she began writing publicly about mental health after being assigned to write to a real audience in Jim Warren's Argumentation class. In the years following, Lindsey published *Ending the Pain*: *A True Story of Overcoming Depression* and coauthored two other books, as well as sharing her story at women's retreats, on TV, and with Adventist Radio London. In 2018, Lindsey resumed teaching and became the Writing Center Director at Southwestern Adventist University. Following, from 2019-2022, Lindsey worked alternately as a GTA, adjunct professor, Writing Center Consultant, and/or Writing Center Assistant Director, while pursuing doctoral studies at UTA. Lindsey completed her PhD in May 2022 and will return to Southwestern Adventist University as a full-time professor and Writing Center Director as of July 2022.