

Interviewing our Professors about How to Write Good Essays

By Brystal Geu

So, last semester (in December 2011) one of our meetings we were essentially interviewing our professors, Carlton, Leanne, and Rocco (also at the end we had guest speaker Jenna), about how they write/what they look for in essays/general advice on the matter. During that meeting I happened to scribble down like mad what they had said and have finally taken the time to get it up here, right on schedule for starting to plan out the final research papers and such.

A few notes first:

- 1- If you know me/have had to read something of mine before you might possibly remember that I am terrible with commas. I don't get them and that will probably be evident in this doc. Sorry.
- 2- If you don't understand a phrase like "vomit on the page" or "bird by bird" then ask, chances are that someone knows.
- 3- Feel free to comment or what not about the little things you do to help you write! Or about the little nuggets of gold you have heard your teachers say!

English Majors Meeting Fall '12 → Q and A with Carlton, Leanne, and Rocco (And Jenna)

How do you find a topic?

Leanne (L):

- Take notes while you read, something that you are interested in will pop up often.
- Start off with asking questions
- Don't start with a thesis, it will develop
- Write on what interests you (for example, a subject of women writers)

Carlton (C): Develop your own way to read

Rocco (R):

- Be an active reader
- Think about [what you're writing] early on
- Make an argument, not a book report
- Make notes, it should be a messy notebook

C:

- Be energized by an argument
- Have a paper that you feel NEEDS to be written
- What is bugging you? Write about it
- What do you think is interesting that needs to be shown? Needs to be argued? Needs to be talked over?

On putting reading and interests together with a critical thinking:

- Read through your perspectives
- What is your take/argument about this story?
- Back up your explanation, give examples
- Have people to bounce things off of
- What do you want to argue?

R: As you write your argue may change.

What is your literal process?

L:

- A lot of free-writing, notes, tracking themes about topics, characters
 - Write down page number and topic
- “Vomit on the page”
- Use colored highlighters to track topics, you'll visually see what interests you the most
- **AFTER** free-writing work on outlining
- Thesis might change after rough drafts
- Don't ignore non-fitting evidence, use it to evolve your thesis for a more complicated and complex essay
- READ the hard copy of your essay
- Write 2-3 drafts, do free-writing, just get things down
- Live in the chaos to figure out what you are going to say

C:

- You each have your own process, essays don't just come out as great essays
- Essays evolve, like an art process
- Mark it up, work on reading and re-reading EARLY ON

R:

- Do a lot of outlining, see how it develops
- Be more creative, jump in and move it around
- You can disappear in your own work but there will be a lot of wading through

C:

- Write about writers/literature that interests you
- Pay attention to yourself, what bugs you, what interests you?
- The peculiar stuff you notice might lead to an interesting paper

On student papers:

?:

- Don't be writing from beginning to end, write some body paragraphs then write the info, be flexible
- Don't be worried about showing it off, when you're ready, just show it off

C:

- You can't always be the reader, you're the writer too
- [For those mid-level courses]- if you want to make an argument be prepared to show it off with how many ever pages you need
- See where you need to step back because if you dig to deep you might not always have the room to fully explore it
- Have room for someone to disagree

R: Do your outlines, revisions can happen there too. Topic selection is essential.

C: Some papers will be great, some will just get done

What is your process for writing your book?

**If you don't see info. on the book they authored that is because I didn't catch it. My apologies.*

L: (PhD Dissertation written in 2007)

- Write on something you're interested in
- Link the beginning and end together like book ends on a shelf
- go outside the norm, ie women writers → gender identity
- it can be on anything → horses in Victorian literature

R:

- Writing that calls attention to itself, not necessarily playful but political
- Meta-fiction
- Light, not theoretical
- Get your interests/ideas from anything, even comic bookshelves
- Expand → Comics books in relation to different genres

C: (About Deborah Paes De Barros' book [?])

- Women road stories
- How is the road different for women when it is more of a masculine space?

About his

- The west is this idea, political conquest
- Idea of how writers who aren't European writers write about the west/western ideas
- Very theoretical

Prof. Ask the students: *What's the hardest part?*

Sean- I feel I have to have a thesis to start writing.

R: Don't do that.

C: You kind of rummage around

R:

- [Creative writing] isn't so different. It can/should still go through a metamorphosis → you are always in a position to write about what you're interested in
- Challenges about writing about 2 texts is making superficial connections
- Do your free-writing to see if you CAN make the connections

C:

- Be aware of context, think about it in different perspectives. Triangulate it.
- Have your grab-bag of theoretical perspectives to write from

On writing a paper to please a teacher

R: Don't do that, then you're just performing. It's hard getting my ideas thrown back at me

INTRODUCE: Jenna (J), alumni of Palomar (?), currently at Cal State (works in English tutoring)

Quick list of tips

- Start by brain storming
- Write on what interests you
- Contextualize into bigger realms
- Write on/think about what affected you while you were reading
- Have your own type of brain storming
 - I.e. cluster/brainstorming, outline, point system

C: Like mapping out your own ideas

J:

- *She's big on free writing
- Do more once you have your writing done. Do a reverse outline (topic tracking)
- It's a back and forth exploratory process

C: You'll discover things you didn't even know you knew

General advice

R: Keep reading, you develop filters → read a book when you're younger and your ideas have changed now that you're older- the book hasn't changed, you have.

(Is it good to point out your own flaws?)

J: If you're going to do that then do it to the fullest, not that you are lacking confidence in your ideas

C: Essay writing is almost a genre

- Deconstructing your own concepts is a big idea so you have to do it the whole way or not
- BUT that is something you can/should do more in your thought process

C:

- It's one thing to right about irrationality irrationally
- - Writing is hard but it's going to develop your literary critical thinking for the better
- You have to talk it out and talk to people → not just always your teachers
- Take heart, if you get a 'C' or an 'A' don't worry, it doesn't make you a bad writer
-Maybe you didn't connections

J: If you learn something each essay that's the main point

As an example of adding your own little tips on how you write: I find I write better with natural daylight

More nuggets of gold from Rocco (as recorded by Brystal):

- 1) [Writing the essay the night before] is crisis management, and not even very good crisis management.
- 2) [On rehashing your intro in your conclusion] Don't trek back through the same foot prints in the mud, make a new path, it's time to get creative. I'm a smart reader, I probably haven't forgotten what your essay was about.