
Expanding Constraints

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Produced in Nate Holic's Fall 2012 ENC1101

It's difficult to remember if I wrote my essay about Lewis and Clark's expedition in 5th grade or 6th grade, and ultimately it doesn't really matter. It was the Christmas season, I was young, and I didn't really care about writing one way or another. I didn't follow many writing rules when it came to writing at that age except for the ones that the teacher would give me, which at that time was mainly that essays should have five paragraphs and that paragraphs should have so many sentences in them. I would do some research early on in the assignment if I had to, then wait until the day before the assignment was due to write out my essay. This is something I learned to stop doing pretty fast, as it just builds up stress and would keep me from writing efficiently. I also decided that writing essays with just five paragraphs was pointless, but that wasn't until much later.

I consider winter in Florida to be a bit of a miracle. When the season comes around, going outside becomes a recreational event in itself. I remember the first day the cold front came the year I wrote this paper. I walked outside to put in some mail before my grandma woke up to drive me to school. Being the energetic approximately-ten-year-old that I was, I rarely ever paid attention to the news or weather, so here I was in an undershirt and underwear going out into forty degree weather. Needless to say I was incredibly inspired to go back inside. That day, I was given a very special assignment that would change my views on writing and what it means to me. Everyone in the class moaned as we were assigned a two-page research project about the expedition Lewis and Clark took. It was to be written in five paragraphs with an intro, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion, which is the format that would follow me for a while. What made it special, and what made us moan, was that it had to be written in the perspective of one of the travelers who went with Lewis and Clark on their journey. I decided it would be funny to do the report from the perspective of their dog, Seaman. I laughed all the way to the library where I came to the shocking realization that not a lot of historians really considered dogs to play a huge role in American history. I rationalized that if there was no information on Seaman, then there was no report to be had. I asked my teacher kindly if she would let me change who I wrote the paper on. Seeing this as an opportunity to turn me into an experiment, she said no and told me to write the essay the best I could. So that was it; there was nothing else to do. I couldn't get the research I needed and I couldn't change my subject matter, so where could I go? It was getting close to Christmas Break, the time where hot cocoa comes in large quantities and all anyone can ever think about it was television specials they're going to watch for 24 hours. The last thing I had on my mind was getting around this problem, but it had to be addressed soon otherwise my academic career, and most likely my life, would cease to exist. Finally, with the due date staring me in the face and my mom making hot cocoa in my peripheral vision, I decided I needed to write something. I sat there wrapped up in my blanket, determined to write something cohesive for some sort of grade.

That's when it all hit me. I could make an argument that this was the first time I did any real critical thinking. In reality it definitely wasn't, but it was the first time in my life I felt that I did something I thought was intuitive. "If this is from Seaman's perspective, why do I need to know about Seaman? He's a dog. I just need to write about Lewis and Clark's expedition and how it affects Seaman as a dog." I had no idea that by choosing to write from Seaman's perspective that I had

created the best constraint ever, and that this would be the start of many great constraints to come. It allowed me to creatively address the research I had obtained about Lewis and Clark's journey while adding new information into the mix. Of course, being the first essay in which I actually tried to add new information, the new information addresses things such as "What did Seaman think about traveling?" and "What do dogs do when they face troubles on a journey of that caliber?" It's nothing mind-blowing, but it's special to me because of what it did. I started to realize what writing could do. Writing not only answered certain questions, but also asked new ones. Writing didn't have to be this set in stone, grocery list of a medium. I could talk.

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It started to go downhill after that though. Once all the hot cocoa was gone and it came time to go back to school, I was greeted with the worst thing a private school student with a strict mother could ever imagine: a C. I still remember my face getting as red as a lobster when I saw it. It was actually kind of nice considering how cold it was outside, but that didn't really help the situation much. It wasn't really the fact that my mom was probably going to destroy me that made me sad, it was the fact that I thought I wrote this paper well. The grammar was fine, I thought it was interesting, and it followed the assignment guidelines. What went wrong? Well, it turns out that my teacher just wanted me to state facts about Lewis and Clark and nothing more. I thought about it too hard. I started to question my revelation, and from then on I was average.

From that year until 11th grade, I became efficient with many of the rules that would end up hindering my writing. Five paragraphs only, paragraphs should be a certain amount of sentences, thesis statements should have three ideas present in them, and essays must have at least three sources cited in them. I think the best way for me to summarize my writing from 7th grade to the end of 11th grade is as follows:

"One time I read a book. It was a lot different from the movie because this reviewer said so (source of review). The book talks about idea 1, 2, and 3. Let me talk about these ideas in further detail and quote where they come from occasionally."

If I said that there was anything more to them I would be lying. I never really got to write anything memorable. Well, I did get to write a really cool paper on Shel Silverstein's influence on my life, but go ahead and guess what I got on that. C most likely stands for creative. And you know what they (meaning my teachers) say: ideas can take you anywhere, but good grades get you into college. Because of this mindset, my love for writing died out as quickly as it came. I would become so good at writing five paragraphs and expressing three ideas in a thesis statement for my body paragraphs that writing became an algorithm. It became a set equation that I could do on the fly, and writing became just another chore that I did.

It wasn't until I started to write for scholarships—the money that would get me into the aforementioned college—that things got exciting. I specifically remember the scholarship essay where I talked about how the arts influenced my life. The prompt for the essay was simply to describe a moment in time where art changed the way I viewed things. I wanted to be unique this time around, mainly because I knew a lot of people would apply for the scholarship, but also because I wasn't in school right then and there, so grades and time weren't a factor. I would write how I wanted, when I wanted. I started to write about the first time I cooked eggs. To sum up a four-page paper, the fact that I cooked the eggs myself made them taste better than any other eggs I had before in my life. I came to the conclusion that making your own art makes it that much more special, and if I never made those eggs, I would've never realized that. It got me to start writing personally, and it was fantastic. The writing I did in school was still stiff and uninteresting because,

if I didn't write in the formulaic way I did, I wouldn't feel confident that I could get a good grade. At least now I had a way to express myself in my writing.

The biggest change, however, came this past year. Well, maybe not change, but more confirmation. See, I always thought my first year of college would simply be reconciliation. I would walk in, tell the teacher my sins, the teacher would tell me to do X amount of prayers, I'd go on my way, and that was it. I realize now that isn't the case. Sometimes teachers care, and sometimes they like to give closure to doubts you've had since you were 10. I was told that it was okay to write the way I do when I'm not being graded. That with a little practice I could turn my voice, this thing I thought may have been a flaw in my writing for all these years, into scholarly inquiry that others could come to respect. I wrote my first essay in the class, sitting in front of my laptop as I am now. I had done the research, now all I had to do was turn on the jazz music and put my heart and soul into what I wanted to say about the discoveries I made during my work on the project. I didn't have to write big five paragraph essays anymore, nor did I have to follow any of the other strict rules that I've faced while I was growing up with writing. Because I'm in college, I was also given more freedom as to when I could write, too. I could write whenever I felt the most creative, which turned out to be during the morning. It didn't matter how personal I got or how many ideas I expressed either. I was actually encouraged to get specific. As long as I elaborated on everything, I was golden. I could essentially say anything I wanted about my subject and it would be seen as work. I was able to analyze and discuss a magazine that talked about my dream job, and it was fun. And it made me fall in love with writing the same way I did when I was writing about a dog's opinion on New World exploration or when I wrote about artful eggs. And I think in the end that's all I ever really wanted: confirmation. Knowing that it's okay to write the way I do through scholarly inquiry made me forget all about the rules that constrained me when I was younger. I could make my own rules that enhanced my writing instead of hindering it.

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For me, improving my writing came from the constraints that I encountered during my younger years. I saw the highs and lows of where my writing could go, and this in turn gave me a new appreciation for the medium, and gives me hope for the future. I've had the right ideas about writing since I was in 5th grade, but it took a college professor to tell me that those ideas were right in order for me to start reaching for my full potential. I think, now that I know sharing my thoughts is something smart people do, I can start to really explore the world for what it really is, and express the way I feel about something in a way where someone else might get something out of it. And now that I know what rules work for me, I can start to get more in-depth with my writing. All I ever hope is that I can leave a mark on someone. Make a difference for somebody that will make their day a little better or make them think just a little more than they already do. I hope that, with this newfound confidence in my voice, I can do that in my writing.

Michael Rodgers



Michael Rodgers is a freshman at the University of Central Florida. Currently studying animation, Michael hopes to one day have the opportunity to entertain large groups of people with his stories and drawings (possibly simultaneously). Growing up in Ocala, Florida, Michael is fairly familiar with the economy of horses, and finds Orlando quite the contrast from his hometown. While still getting used to college, Michael has come to really like UCF, and thinks that the people there are really great.