
Learning to Loosen the Ties

AMBER STEWARD

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The productive smell of Clorox wipes and fresh linen circulates my room, mingling with the aroma of my freshly conditioned hair as the steam from my shower fades from the bedroom mirrors. Wet hair drips down my back from being washed a full three times now as I scan my perfectly cleaned room, desperate to find a book, a pillow—anything—out of place. Evidence of extensive snacking fills my trashcan, as it is apparent I have finished off about every snack stored in our apartment. As I pick absentmindedly at a stain on my desk, I review for the hundredth time in my head any homework assignments I might have left and remind myself for the hundredth time that I have sufficiently completed and turned in enough to cover me for the next month. I've painted my nails, meditated, solved the Rubik's cube, and memorized the alphabet backwards; I've even thrown in a phone call to my mom to see how her week has been going.

These are the flashy-yellow hazard signs foreboding one of two things: First: that I am an overweight homesick woman going through a mid-life crisis. Or second: I have an essay due by midnight, or even worse—by yesterday. And in the case of the latter, I had better wrap this up. Unfortunately, this is not a rare occurrence, and, reluctantly, I turn to acknowledge my patient guest sitting in the corner as he has so diligently waited for me in my frenzy. This is my friend, Procrastination, coming to pay a visit, and I greet him with a humble hug and weary smile. My writing process is far too often manipulated by Procrastination and though I have learned to work within his restrictions, he continues to be my ultimate demise.

Procrastination, like all clingy friends, likes to remind me of the reasons I keep him around: because, as we all believe at one point or another, writing is terrible; no, *assigned* writing is terrible, and we are willing to go to great lengths to avoid it. From elementary school to college we've been told exactly what and how to write by the people who are supposed to be our gateway to inventiveness. Then, after slamming the gate in our faces, we are encouraged to be "creative," "unique," and "true to ourselves." It's like when that bully in fifth grade tied your shoelaces together when you weren't looking and told you to run. It's restrictive and you fall on your face. But Procrastination knows. He picks you up when you fall down and reminds you that it doesn't have to happen again if you just buy time.

However, this paper isn't about how I've learned to avoid the bully, because one, that isn't written in this assignment description, and two, not all of the teachings woven into our shoelaces are necessarily bad; after all, we need something to keep the darn things on our feet. Over the years we have all learned how to walk with our shoelaces tangled. Moreover, while some of us continue to inch forward, allowing the rules and restrictions of our knotted shoelaces to hold us back, others have found ways to break the unnecessary bonds. I like to think that somewhere in the transition out of high school I found a nice pair of scissors to do the dirty work on mine. While writing has historically been a tortuous process for me, it's admittedly gotten better since my entering college. I give this credit to the freedoms we are granted by our gracious professors—or more accurately, their inability to micro-manage the hundreds of students they teach at once. By not having my every move scrutinized during my writing process, I have been able to experiment with my handiwork while going seemingly unnoticed as an anonymous face to my professors.

Before I dive into my exact methods, I must admit my writing process, though fairly consistent *within* its genres, is drastically different comparatively. I can tell you now that the way I go about writing personal analyses is far different from how I write rhetorical analyses, and even further from informative. A lot of the effort I put into my work is directly correlated with how motivated I am to respond to the prompt. This determines how long Procrastination is planning to stay and consequently the process with which I go about it.

So here's basically how I go about my simple "I-am-going-to-put-in-more-than-an-hour's-worth-of-work-into-this-paper" paper—also known as, "This Is Not a History Paper So I Care." For these I usually use the "shitty first draft" method as coined by novelist, Anne Lamott. This is where, after the climax of my procrastination, I throw everything that comes to my head down on paper without thinking twice about spelling, grammar, or, quite frankly, any form of sense. From this I am able to grasp a general idea of what my paper is going to be about, and with luck, a dash of its

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unhampered content will be usable. It's similar to throwing up all over the floor and seeing what chunks are worth keeping. It's embarrassing and quite the mess. In more technical terms: [I suppose] this would count as my planning or 'pre-writing' phase.

From said throw-up I begin to organize. I pull ideas with similar themes and concepts together, copying and pasting them into their respective categories. While this phase is normally dedicated to organizing, I normally spiff it up as much as I can in the process, rounding off thoughts, correcting spelling and grammatical errors, and doing my best to make it sound overall less "shitty." I never actually make deletions in this phase; rather I set the fragments deemed 'unnecessary' aside. (I think this is a nice easy way to break it to myself that those sentences truly were shit and once it's all happily pieced together without them, I'll realize their unimportance).

Once everything is organized into its respective categories, I begin to "rewrite." That is to say, I indent a bunch of lines to move all of my nicely organized sections aside and I attempt my opening paragraph, which I've so cunningly held off until this time. By this point I have a better idea of what my paper will look like, so the opening is slightly less painful, though still a nuisance. Seeing as it is my least favorite of the paragraphs, I will undoubtedly hit a block before producing anything substantial, and return appreciatively to my more favored future-paragraphs. Depending on how it flows, I'll move around sections in the order I would like them to appear. I bulk, I condense, I swap, I reorder, I infuse transitions. I suppose one would call this the revision process. I admittedly like this phase the best. In my mind the hardest part is done; the words are out there, and now I get to move around my thoughts in a way that stimulates the senses. This is the benefit of the "shitty first draft" method. It's like in the movies when the popular girl gives her "less visually appealing" friend a full-body makeover. It's a thrill I tell you.

Another great thing about this step is that I rarely hit writer's block while I'm in it. I continue to keep my sections separate from each other, with multiple indentations as barriers. Like city lines on a map, they are clearly defined but I can move in and around them seamlessly and without pattern. If I'm mid-sentence and a thought pops into my head that fits well with another of my sections, I have no problem stopping and riding that thought out before it gets away from me, then returning to what I was previously working on. Conversely, if I find myself riding on a thought train that's sputtering to an uncomfortable end, I use the opportunity to hop on another section's train that's still running, including my opening paragraph, which I'll pay polite visits to. I repeat this entire course over and over, hopping off one train and on to another.

However, while my knotted shoelaces have slackened with time, I still have ties I struggle to shake loose. Keeping my points clear and well organized is a persistent problem I have, as they tend to mock the scattered thoughts perpetually dancing around my head. Even worse, I am a rambler

with problem of run-on sentences. I think because I'm not entirely sure how to get my point across or how to make sense, I overcompensate with words. This is a problem Nancy Sommers' student writers similarly struggled with. It's as if by sending the audience on a roundabout way to reaching my point, they will mistake their confusion for ignorance and fail to realize I haven't the slightest idea of what I'm talking about. To my dismay, it never works. They see right through it, and furthermore, it makes my writing look sloppy and I lose meaning in the process. In all honesty, I am more often concerned with the rhythm of the words and the flow of the essay than I am with the actual content. In our fancy Rhetorical Situation Triangle this is the fine line that connects "subject" and "reader," also known as "purpose." I have come to notice that my papers lack purpose often. Further, I fail to notice this until I'm in my final stages of editing when my paper has about five different struggling thesis statements fighting to hold their own.

Despite the mess displayed on the page, I always have my audience in mind. Whether they're hovering behind the curtains or standing center stage, I try to keep them well-fed and wanting more. While my sentences run long, I am a proponent of rhythmic writing and I will do what I can to keep my sentence-types varied, and my transitions smooth to please their wearied ears. Another method I chase in hopes of keeping their attention is my infusion of voice. As far as that goes, I write like I speak, as Thomas Osbourne comparably acknowledged. Though I'm not a sardonic old man, I doubt I'm much better. Thanks to my shitty first draft, all my sarcastic and angered thoughts have already let loose on the paper by this point in my writing process, so finding my voice is less of a problem for me than attempting to tame it.

As I go through my rounds, weaving in and out of what have slowly become my body paragraphs, I delete the indentations separating them only as I believe they deserve to be a part of the finished project. Without fully realizing it, I have slowly but surely narrowed in on a finished essay. Like a vulture circling its prey before mealtime, I have run circles around my essay, innocently honing in on the kill. The railways connecting my written thoughts have been constructed and the trains have given their final chugs. If I were an experienced writer or if I had the appropriate time, this would be the point where I step away from my work, wiggle my fingers, stretch out my back, revel in a couple of deep breaths and plop right back down, because the simple fact is that my work is still unfinished. Now that the cinnamon roll has been shaped, baked, and pulled out, it's time to add the glaze.

But alas, I am not an experienced writer and I am a self-proclaimed peer of procrastination. Because of this I frequently skip more than a healthy amount of steps in the writing process and my lack of care shines through. However, that struggle is part of the process. We all struggle. The bully continues to tie and push, while simultaneously encouraging us to run. We will all spend our lives figuring out which ties are necessary to make this possible and which are essential to let go. I am still working on mine, and maybe having this self-reflection has helped me to see that.

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Amber Steward

Amber Steward is a junior at the university of Central Florida. She is currently majoring in interdisciplinary studies with a focus in communications and behavioral sciences with a minor in dance. She graduated from Leon High school in 2014 from her hometown of Tallahassee, Florida where she was active in the theater and dance community. She is currently a member of the Knight's and Damsels Elite Dance Company at UCF and hopes to pursue dance professionally one day.