

GIRL, STOP DRYING YOUR OWN PEN

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Guided by the words of Octavia E. Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, Pearl Cleage, and Nikki Giovanni, I utilize Pinar's (1975) autobiographical method of *currere* to reflect on the formative elements in the development of my writing. It has also given me the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate challenges, dilemmas, and growth. In the ongoing process of the development of my writing, my focus has shifted beyond obtaining sophistication. There is a growing intentionality in my work—not only in refining technical aspects, but in developing a heightened awareness of the audience each piece aims to engage. This understanding of audience has become central to my growth as a writer, shaping how I approach the act of writing itself, as I strive to connect, communicate, and serve with purpose.

REGRESSIVE

“You don’t start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That’s why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.”

— Octavia E. Butler

“LACKS SOPHISTICATION”

I went to undergrad at a private liberal-arts school. The school was small enough that the academic grounds could be covered in a mile, which we affectionately called the Bulldog mile. At this small school, everyone quite literally knew everyone—including faculty. As I nearly completed the distribution requirements (i.e., arts or humanities, philosophy or religion, social science, natural sciences and lab, cross cultural) and foundational skill proficiencies (i.e., college writing, writing and inquiry, public speaking, fitness) and sank deeper into my major coursework, the relationships developed with my departmental faculty intensified. In the spring semester of my junior year, I took a course rooted in sociological theories. In this course, the final assignment was to write a literature review. This was my first time writing a literature review, but because I had successfully passed my foundational skill proficiency courses, I felt confident in my ability to produce a quality paper. Eventually, I received my grade and was devastated to read, “lacks sophistication,” in the feedback. This devastation was not only the result of the feedback but was also intertwined with the relationship I held with the faculty member and my future goals.

As I sat grappling with this piece of feedback, I became fixated on the word “sophistication.” I understood that the word “lacks” in front of sophistication indicated that it was something they thought the paper did not have but should. What is sophistication in the context of writing? How do I get my writing to be sophisticated? This had been written by a professor who was (and still is) one of whom I thought highly and, quite honestly, wanted to impress. I knew that I would have them again during my senior year and did not want to have “the girl whose writing

lacks sophistication” association. I emailed the professor in a panicked state seeking further clarity while exclaiming a commitment to my studies and future goal of being admitted into graduate school.

Me: “Do you have any tips on how I can achieve greater sophistication?”

Professor: “The best way to improve sophistication of your writing is to read, read, read! Read all sorts of things—fiction, non-fiction, news stories, science articles, and anything you can get your hands on!”

I was confused. After all, the feedback made no mention of my ability to comprehend and synthesize literature, indicative of reading. So, just how was reading going to improve the sophistication of my writing? Nonetheless, the summer semester was approaching, which I found to be the perfect time to increase my reading intake. This was not exactly how I pictured spending my time off, but I was determined to get my writing in the best shape possible, even if that meant reading instead of actually writing.

“SAY MORE”

Since entering my doctoral program, there has been a lot of reading and writing. Early on, it was shared that feedback on our ideas and writing was to be expected and is the hallmark of a doctoral program that seeks to challenge while nurturing its students. There are some professors who are concrete in their approach—sharing their exact thoughts, while others are open-ended and curious—tending to provide alternative perspectives and to lean into questioning. My experience has been more of the latter. There is one professor who performs a beautiful combination of them both, and in doing so, often calls for me to “say more.” Initially, I dreaded this feedback mainly because I often felt that I had said all there was to say. I did not feel as though I was withholding any information.

I got this feedback a lot (and still do), but I was genuinely curious to know what it was they wanted to know or ways I could further expand my ideas. I have found that in conversation with them I have always had more to say. Through this I have recognized that I was prematurely drying my own pen. These professors helped me realize that my thoughts were never as limited as I initially believed. By prompting me to elaborate, they encouraged me to dig deeper, employ a critical lens, and express my ideas with greater clarity and confidence.

PROGRESSIVE

Challenging power structures from the inside, working the cracks within the system, however, requires learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly.

— Patricia Hill Collins

Many often assume that, because I’m studying educational leadership, I am exclusively interested in further developing my academic writing. Certainly, the development of my academic writing is important in my studies. However, I have also been exposed to the opportunity of leveraging alternative genres and platforms to transcend the bounds of academia. As an educator, I do not

want my work to be exclusive to academics or those who have access to journal articles behind paywalls. I aspire for my work to be accessible both linguistically and physically.

This is especially true given the community my work seeks to serve. In this, I am reminded of my doctoral program's guiding principles that lead us to remain cognizant of our responsibility as educators to commit ourselves to community and strive to create humanizing spaces that are democratic and socially just (Miami University, 2024). My research agenda is rooted in the career development of current and formerly incarcerated individuals. According to Literacy Mid-South (2023), 70% of incarcerated adults read at a fourth grade reading level and below. This percentage can be further exacerbated by education received prior to incarceration, dis/abilities that impact reading comprehension, etc. Given this, the use of academic jargon and formats may not always be conducive to achieving my goals. This calls me to prioritize learning multiple languages as Collins suggests in her quote.

Through a qualitative research course, my knowledge of methodologies and ways research can be presented to audiences was expanded. For example, in this course I used a streamed series (non-traditional data source) to explain how media can serve as a site of learning. Additionally, I have published in a professional magazine. While I have thoroughly enjoyed both experiences, they still feel quite unnatural to my purely academic trained mind. I am hopeful to reach a point where this is no longer the case and such methods are not romanticized by academics but normalized by the academy without question.

ANALYTICAL

Many times what people call “writer’s block” is the confusion that happens when a writer has a great idea, but their writing skill is not up to the task of putting that idea down on paper. I think that learning the craft of writing is critical.

— Pearl Cleage

Now, I understand that my undergrad professor was right. The time that I have spent reading various genres has served me well as I continue to refine my own writing. The generation of sentence structure, varied word choice, communicating inflection linguistically, visually seeing how others have done so across disciplines—all have been cultivated in my own unique writing. But I am not so naïve as to say that I have figured it out quite yet. In addition to reading, writing beyond the requirements of coursework, seeking feedback from faculty and peers, and leveraging campus resources are strategies that I have implemented while on my quest to learn the craft of writing.

I recognize that writing beyond the requirements of coursework may sound unrealistic for some, especially for those who are taking multiple courses on top of all the other responsibilities associated with the complex lives we live. I thought this too until I met with a professor outside of my institution who challenged me to write at least 30 minutes a day unrelated to my coursework. At first, this challenge was difficult. I wasn't one who had a journal, and so the practice of writing “just because” was unfamiliar. I had no idea what to write. To get started I relied heavily on writing prompts that I found online. I noticed that, over time, my pauses became less frequent and my attention on sophistication began to dissipate. This was the start of learning to let the words flow without interruption.

As shared previously, feedback has been pivotal in the development of my writing. Overtime, I have become privy to the utility of actively seeking feedback rather than waiting for it to come (i.e., before a writing assignment is due). While at times this is not possible, this approach has on occasion saved me from receiving the dreaded “say more,” has given me additional perspectives to consider, has addressed identified gaps, and provided the opportunity to engage in dialogue. In addition to receiving feedback from faculty and peers, I have also found myself utilizing campus resources, specifically the writing center. I never had been big on going to the writing center, but this was certainly not because I thought I was too good for it. It was because I felt an increased vulnerability when it came to sharing my work with people with whom I didn’t have a relationship. Of course, that feeling was on top of assuming that these were the people who were pros, had all the answers, and would tear my writing to shreds. From the appointments that I’ve had, these assumptions were just that, assumptions, and were the furthest from the truth. These appointments have been filled with suggestions and possibilities. The aspect that I have come to appreciate the most is the diversification of departments and areas of focus the graduate writing consultants represent. This has been particularly helpful for understanding the connections, conversations, and diverse bodies of knowledge that my work may bring out and may be influenced by.

SYNTHETICAL

You must be unintimidated by your own thoughts because if you write with someone looking over your shoulder, you’ll never write.

— Nikki Giovanni

By engaging in the method of *curre*, the development of my writing reveals the evolving relationship between self-perception, feedback, and intentionality. Early remarks of my writing lacking sophistication led to moments of self-doubt and frustration but also served as the match igniting a pursuit of improvement. As I further develop my writing, I recognize that sophistication is not simply about sentence structure and vocabulary but is also about intentionality, clarity, and the ability to engage your audience effectively. Moreover, my doctoral studies have inspired me to integrate alternative (non-traditional) methodologies and presentations of research findings. In affirming a commitment to a research agenda that seeks to serve the incarcerated population, I acknowledge the limitations of academic jargon, which has further emphasized the necessity of balancing intellectual rigor and accessibility. I will no longer prematurely dry my own pen out of fear or perceived limitation. I embrace writing as an iterative dynamic process—one that is marked by persistence, self-awareness, and an openness to growth. I have come to understand that the craft of writing is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing negotiation between structure and fluidity, sophistication and accessibility, and academia and community.

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