

On Writing Essays

What I've come to understand about my own artwork, after years and years of practice, is that no matter how much I improve, I will always judge my artwork relative to some higher standard. It's not uncommon for me to create a piece of artwork, only to realize that I loathe its very existence. Yet even after the most brutal criticism from within, I still find myself picking up the brush. Essays are just as much a form of artwork as painting, merely with a different pallet of tools at your disposal. Like the strokes of a brush, essays require a series of calculated decisions, which take the form of critical thinking, audience awareness, and diction. I am a significantly better painter than I am a writer, and the difference between my skill and the critical lens I apply is not uniform across these skills. The biggest barrier that prevents me from improving as a writer is my own criticism, which recognizes my shortcomings with audience awareness and logical flow, but paralyzes me from practicing to overcome these deficiencies.

What I've learned in this class is that a good writer needs to be in tune with the mind of their audience. Good ideas lose their value if they do not come across in your essay. The writer must have an understanding of what needs explanation and what doesn't, and to inject these explanations into the paper in such a way that they fluidly lead the reader to the foreshadowed thesis. To accomplish this, the writer must make assumptions about the ideology, culture, and general knowledge of the reader in order to establish, a common understanding of the world on top of which the writer's argument is built on top of. This can be rather difficult, particularly in multicultural literature where the nuances of the writer's argument can hinge on some knowledge that may not be native to the reader's culture. I focus on W. E. B. Du Bois' "Double Consciousness" because it encapsulates beautifully this disparity between two cultures, exemplifying how different perceptions of a consciousness can come from the same reality simply because the perceivers do not share the same history and cultural information. However, it's ironic that early drafts of my paper on double consciousness struggle tremendously to explain the lens of sociological analysis in the early twentieth century

while simultaneously using that lens to analyze the poetry at hand. At some points I feel as if I'm wasting time spelling out simple concepts, but at others making wild assumptions about the knowledge of the reader. For example, when I write the sentence "This concept is in contrast with theories of genetic determinism" (A Macro-analysis of the Racialized World), I've name-dropped genetic determinism to the reader without any explanation of what it is or how it relates, forcing the reader to infer meaning. On the other hand, too much time explaining a small detail of the sociological dialog will distract from the larger, more important ideas within my paper. Upon reflection, it seems clear that I need to apply this kind of in-depth analysis selectively with premises that clearly build up to the conclusion of the thesis.

Another issue with my writing process is the development of the thesis and the logical flow which leads up to it. I typically avoid writing a thesis in the early drafts of my paper because I feel that doing so creates a confirmation bias that would narrow my thoughts about the topic towards ideas that support my thesis despite damning evidence against it. Delaying the thesis is useful because it allows me to continue to digest the material while I write on it, but also hurts my paper by facilitating unstructured and overly vague themes which try to square with many small, directionless conclusions about a work. For example, my essay on Du Bois' "On Being Crazy" examines themes of class, racism, and insanity within the short story, but ultimately wrestles with combining these ideas. I have written and rewritten that essay many times, and I still do not feel it is finished. This made peer reviews difficult because I may have twenty different notes of how to connect these observations, and the student who reads my drafts has no way of understanding what I have envisioned in the full work.

The fact that I can clearly express these problems creates a strong feeling of disappointment in my work. In painting, the ideas which I convey are aesthetic; disappointment is the result of the failure of my artwork to capture visually an idea in just the way I wanted. I perceive failure in writing to cut deeper because the ideas which I personally wish to convey in an essay are more intellectual, or less obscured by the medium and more open to criticism. My essays, especially ones that are graded by

another human being far more talented than myself, feel like a reflection of myself as a thinker. In contrast my critical lens for a painting is certainly thorough, but also more abstract in its critique. Despite these barriers, every moment of writing for this class has forced me to face these issues, and become a better writer.