

Another Day, Another Rhetorical Device

I am in a unique position as a First-year Composition student in his mid-thirties: I have a vast amount I would like to say about myself and the world, yet I lack the technical and rhetorical prowess to express myself efficiently. So, while I may have a lot to say, I don't have the skills necessary to say much of anything. At least, this was my position in August of this year, at the start of the semester and at my introduction to college-level writing.

For as long as I can remember, I have always been a big proponent of the written word. I have been a lover of books and writing for my entire life, and learned the "Dos" and "Don'ts" of writing through my exposure to books. Which is to say, I might be a damn good reader, but good readers don't necessarily make the best writers, at least not in the sense of proficiency. I find it interesting, then, that my first aspirations for gainful employment came at a young age and were geared immediately towards writing as a profession. At around the age of twelve, I forewent the traditional soldier/policeman/fireman/doctor route and boldly professed my intention to be an editor. Not a writer, but a technician in rhetoric all the same. Throughout my public schooling I took to writing naturally, but did not invest very much in improving my abilities. I instead relied upon the experiences I gathered as a reader in order to direct my writing, and as a result, I believe I had (and perhaps still have) an unnecessarily elevated opinion of my writing skill.

My continued love for literature post-high school still pushed me towards writing as a career, but at the time I thought I knew everything I needed to know about the subject. Already having a good sense of English grammar and sentence structure meant I was able to form complete, coherent thoughts on paper. That's all there is to it, right? For my chosen career path as a technical writer and training course developer, it was almost enough. I am technical-savvy, and can understand advanced computer networking concepts. I have the skills needed to translate

this information into technical literature about a specific topic. But I was still by no means an “expert” in rhetoric. Ten years later, despite a decade of professional, full-time employment as a technical writer, I am still severely lacking in any real rhetorical or literary expertise. At the start of this semester, I could not differentiate between simple and complex sentences, nor explain a transitive vs. intransitive verb, nor did I understand any but the most simplistic rhetorical devices. In other words, I lacked the *rhetoric* of rhetoric.

Consider this: you bring your vehicle to an auto mechanic to resolve an issue, and you are attempting to explain in mutually-understood terms where the problem lies. The mechanic may have the most advanced knowledge possible in his or her field. He or she will be able to diagnose your issue using expensive, specialized equipment, and be able to draw upon years of experience to do so. Yet, as the owner of the vehicle, and someone with no technical knowledge in this field, it is still up to you to attempt to explain to the mechanic where to start looking for the problem.

"It makes a noise when I turn left," you might say.

"What kind of noise?" the mechanic asks, "Like a grinding noise? A bumping or knocking sound?"

You're at a loss, but stammer out, "It kind of goes, 'Whirl-whirl-whirl-whiiiiirl,' and makes a grinding sound, then goes away once I straighten out the steering wheel."

Without skipping a beat, the mechanic replies: "It sounds like a bad wheel bearing to me, shouldn't take but an afternoon to fix."

In this example, the mechanic uses a combination of technical and practical experience to diagnose your problem, even though you have only provided a very elementary list of symptoms. In other words, only basic language and a fundamental knowledge are required to describe the problem, but finding the solution requires real experience and expertise. I started this semester

feeling very much like the customer in this example: I knew my writing had problems, and could perhaps go so far as to point out the problem to an expert in the field, but could not explain in technical or specific terms why my writing didn't "sound right."

It is a curious situation, though, because I adore writing (both the process and the results, but mostly the results). Especially creative writing. Not my own writing very often, but the entire concept of literature: I loved the idea put forth to us this semester which likened writers to time travelers, able to affect the past and the future through their words. This level of writing is not something that comes to me naturally, despite what I thought at age fifteen (and, perhaps, still think at age thirty-five). Nowadays, the more I read great prose, the more I feel akin to Ta-Nehisi Coates in his series of articles from *The Atlantic*:

Every time he brought me before a great poem I was injured, because I knew that I would never say anything that beautiful. . . I was injured because this was one less beautiful thing in the world waiting to be written, and even though I knew there were many others, I would never get to write them. (Coates 4)

This is how I feel everyone should look at writing. I am the type that cannot stop revising what I write, even at a detriment to overall quality. I just can't resist going back to try and make my finished work the slightest bit better. To start this semester, we first focused on concision, something I struggled with from the very beginning as a result of my love for over-editing. Our assignment, to expound upon silence as a precursor to action or inaction, was at the time both the most personal and the most difficult thing I had ever written. It required that I throw out the majority of the "good" writing I had learned in my life and instead focus on my own writing and on

the writer I am, while my final draft reads like the writer I want to become. It is my first attempt at taking a writing assignment 100% at face value, and I was very pleased with end result.

This semester also marked my first real attempt at understanding complex grammatical structures. I have always been decent at grammar, but I never knew much about it from a technical standpoint. For example, at the start of the year I understood that an adverb here and not there might make a certain sentence easier to read, but couldn't explain why a split infinitive can lead to trouble for a reader. Our second assignment dealt with exactly this type of shortcoming, calling upon us to organize and analyze a sample from a famous author and a sample from our own writing. This assignment required intimate knowledge of sentence types, verb types, sentence structure, common syntax issues, and the parts of speech. We were tasked with breaking down our writing into its most basic form, and analyzing what makes up our own personal writing style. This assignment was also very eye-opening for me, giving me first an idea of how far lacking I was in this type of literary knowledge, and second, an avenue to get caught up with my studies. I learned more about the English language in this three-week span than I did throughout all of my prior schooling, and I think this shows when comparing my early and later analysis.

Towards the end of the semester we moved into more complex writing and analysis, something I enjoyed quite a bit. Our final essay asked us to provide an analytical response to one of three technical essays, using cited work and standard MLA format. At the time, I was completely unfamiliar with MLA format and the intricacies of formatting essays. My first exposure to MLA format was in this class, actually, and I look at this third essay assignment as the litmus test for my ability to move forward in college-level writing. This assignment required very specific formatting, a bibliography of works cited, and footnoting of sources, all of which

were new to me a few months ago. Additionally, the assignment itself was a difficult one: “respond to an expert’s analysis with your own analysis, and don’t look like an idiot in the process.” In retrospect, I see this essay as my first attempt at writing a traditional college paper and have included it in my portfolio to show my progress towards that goal.

Over the last few months, I have found that I need to work at writing in order to become a better writer. I need to study grammar, rhetoric, sentence structure, and other related concepts, even though I already have a passing familiarity with them. A technician in any specialized field must have the ability to communicate to other specialists, and the field of specialized writing is no different. I realized this semester that a passing familiarity with "good" writing will not by itself lead to my becoming a better writer. I am now finding myself feeling more and more like a rhetorical mechanic, and no longer the ignorant customer.

Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Preface to a 30-Volume Love Note." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 12 Aug. 2013. Web. 02 Oct. 2015.