A Case Study in Meaning-making in a University-level Expressive Writing Class

by

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Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
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Abstract

In this dissertation, I address this concern and extend the literature on writing-reading connections by examining literacy in an expressivist classroom. The study sought to answer three questions: 1) What is each student’s understanding of reading, writing, and editing before, during, and after taking Expressive Writing? 2) How does each student conceptualize the roles of reader, writer, and editor, and how do these concepts change over the life of the course? 3) What are the characteristics of each student’s writing at the beginning, middle, and end of the course? To answer these questions, I observed a section of Expressive Writing at the University of Toronto Mississauga, wrote a series of case studies detailing the experiences of three students, and analyzed writing students produced for the course. The study showed that Expressive Writing connects reading and writing through editing. The course taught students editorial technique and strategy, and by learning how to edit, students learned new ways of reading, writing, and discussing a text. My observations indicate that the course influenced the students’ writing by compelling them to write for an actual rather than imagined audience and to alter (or edit) their texts to appeal to their audience. By the end of the term, the students I observed
worked with editors to produce “clear” prose that “connected” readers to the writer. The students saw the editor as essential in helping them to relate to their readers. This dissertation provides support for the argument that reading and writing are inextricably connected, with editing and the role of the editor as the connective tissue. Educators must teach reading and writing together, as two parts of single communication circuit.
Acknowledgments

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Protocol
1 A Case Study of Meaning-making a University-level Expressive Writing Class

This dissertation research investigates how students in an expressive writing class understand their roles as readers, writers, and editors. Traditionaially, expressive writing classes have given more attention to composition practices than to reading practices with the belief that to comprehend a subject, students must first “work out their own thinking about it” by writing about it (Elbow, 2002, p. 289). This study contributes to our understanding about how editing and the role of the editor factor into the writing classroom, and how in-class editorial workshops teach communications.

1.1 Background to the Research

The pedagogy examined in this study is called “expressivism.” I explain this pedagogy in detail below. For now, readers should know that expressivism is a way of teaching writing that focuses on the writing process, rather than the writing product, and asks writers to express their thoughts freely, without the encumbrances of the reader’s judgement (Elbow, 1987).

Before I outline the problem this study addresses, I should begin by disclosing my history with expressivism. My experience with this pedagogy—as a student and a teacher—influences much of my thinking. My experience also gives me a unique perspective on how expressivist classrooms function.

I encountered expressivist pedagogy for the first time in grade school. My fifth-grade teacher Mr. Galipeau assigned us a memoir writing project. In Mrs. Clathworthy’s grade 10 and 12 English classes (I was lucky to have her twice), we learned freewriting, a classic expressivist exercise
that asks students to write early drafts without worrying about grammar, spelling or meaning, so that ideas are expressed more freely. In my final year of high school, Mrs. Vaughan encouraged me and the other students in Writer’s Craft, a high-school creative writing class, to write first person essays and memoir. Later, in university, I took Expressive Writing, a course at Erindale College (now the University of Toronto Mississauga, or UTM) taught by Guy Allen. This class changed my views on language and showed me how writers behave and how sentences work.

After working for a few years as a freelance journalist and advertising salesman, I completed a master’s degree in communications and taught writing at community colleges in and around Toronto. These courses emphasized grammar, writing plans, and proper essay form. Neither I nor my students liked this approach to learning how to write (e.g., at midterm, each instructor had to administer a multiple-choice exam to test each student’s ability to recall grammar rules. Ostensibly, this drill intended to teach students how to write.)

In 2008, Dr. Allen, my former teacher, hired me to teach Expressive Writing at UTM. I loved teaching the course then and still do today. I teach students about writing in a way that I believe is more sophisticated, meaningful, and efficacious than the formulaic instruction that I had to apply each at community colleges. The course teaches language from different points of view—from the point of view of the reader, the writer, and the editor. Students write about their lives. They must learn to think about their stories and how they present themselves. They learn about narrative structuring, narrative persuasion, and all the rules of style a writer needs to know. They learn how the writing process (and the writing industry) works. They receive training on how to be an editor. There are no multiple-choice tests at midterm.

My experiences as a teacher are worth mentioning because they give me insight into how the world of writing instruction operates. I have worked as a writing instructor in various capacities
since 2004. I have tutored in a writing centre, taught at community colleges, instructed privately
to corporations, lectured in a university writing program, assisted in teaching writing to MBA
students, and spent nights and weekends teaching business writing and remedial writing courses
in adult education schools at the university and college levels. I have taught writing online, in
classrooms, and one-on-one. I have taught writing and communications to students in a range of
disciplines, from nursing and early childhood education to media studies and engineering, and
importantly, I have had to teach curricula shaped by different pedagogical approaches. In
colleges, I encountered highly traditional approaches that sought to teach students the technical
writing skills they needed to survive their diploma programs. In engineering and business writing
classes, I taught courses designed to bestow “professional” skills and explain business forms,
like the inter-office memo and design documents. I have spent most of my teaching career in
writing classrooms designed around an expressivist pedagogy that relates the course content to
the experiences and lives of individual students.

1.2 The Problem

Why can’t students write?

This is a perennial question. Worry about the student literacy propels writing instruction into the
popular consciousness on a nearly annual basis. It is like watching a comet pass the earth. Here it
comes again.

In the last ten years, the issue has circled Earth several times, with media telling readers that
students cannot write (Gilmour, 2010), Americans cannot write (Wexler, 2015) and students do
not want to write (Skapinker, 2013). Across North America, reports, studies, and surveys point to
shortcomings in writing education, call for corrective action, and demand educators reorient
curricula so that writing is treated as a central focus of education rather than a skill appended to
other disciplines (Drain, 2008; The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

The concern is not new. Since the foundation of composition studies more than 140 years ago, teachers have worried about the quality of student writing (Graves, 2013). Pinker (2014) says concerns about writing go back to the dawn of the printing press. The constant worry about failure drives reform in composition curriculum in the U.S.A. and stimulates new pedagogical strategies, as writing instructors try to find more efficient pedagogies for transferring knowledge and skill (Linden & Whimbey, 1990). Parents and the media worry too. Every now and again a book like *Why Can’t Johnny Read?* (Flesch, 1966, 1981) taps into parental anxieties about literacy and generates press and book sales. Despite constant concern about student writing, hope remains that a writing revolution is coming and that students will finally learn how to write (Graff, 2015; Tyre, 2010). The work continues.

At the University of Toronto at Mississauga, where I teach and where I conducted the research for this dissertation, concern about student writing is a regular source of anxiety. Most recently, in 2012, the university administration investigated how to improve writing instruction on campus. The outcome of this investigation was a pilot project to test the efficacy of a Writing Across the Curriculum approach to writing instruction (Ho, 2013). This pilot and the debate it generated on campus followed earlier, division-specific investigations into how to improve writing skills among students. The psychology department at UTM, to give one example, had conducted a needs analysis of writing skills among its students with the intent of recommending an improved approach to writing instruction (Radhakrishnan, 2007).

UTM’s worry about student writing is not unique. Ryerson University commissioned a Senate committee to investigate the issue and has grappled for solutions since (“Senate Meeting
Agenda,” 2009). A few years earlier, a study at the University of Alberta concluded that the writing of its students was “not currently adequate to put us in the ranks of the great universities” (University of Alberta, 2006). That university is still experimenting with solutions.

Across the Western world, literacy rates remain low, even among university graduates (Statistics Canada, 2013). England earned the distinction of having the least literate students in the developing world, with twenty per cent of university students unable to “anything advanced, like reading instructions on an aspirin bottle” (Ross, 2016, para. 4). Canadian university graduates fare better, but a significant proportion still score low on literacy tests. In 2012, six per cent of Canadian graduates with bachelor’s degrees ranked at level 2 or below on an international scale used to measure literacy. Twenty-seven per cent ranked below level 3, considered the minimally required level of literacy to function in the workplace (Hango, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2013). A separate survey found that “[f]our out of ten Canadian adults have literacy skills too low to be fully competent in most jobs in our modern economy” (Conference Board of Canada, 2013, para. 2). If functioning in the workplace challenges graduates, deepening the relationship with one's cultural history becomes near impossible (Bauerlein, 2017). An inability to read and to write leads to cultural illiteracy. If we cannot read, we cannot write, and we will not see the beauty in either. We will not know where we came from or the full beauty of the world we have inherited.

We continue our search to answer the eternal question: Why can’t students write?

1.2.1 Divisions in the Academy

Asking why Johnny can’t write might be unfair to Johnny. Is it his fault if his school treats writing as an afterthought? The built-in prejudices universities have against writing instruction, and the complex language practices of characteristic of the academy, create a dead-end situation for students (Saul, 1995; Pinker, 2014). In many disciplines, learning to write well means
learning to write for the expert audience. Expert writing often leads to “bad prose” that leaves behind readers who “haven’t mastered the patois of the [writers’] guild, can’t divine the missing steps that seem too obvious [to the writer] to mention, [and] have no way to visualize a scene that [to the writer] is as clear as day” (Pinker, 2014, p. 61).

1.2.2 Binaries

In my view, one reason why bad writing and bad writing instruction thrives in the academy stems from the fact that writing and reading are taught separately. This separation eliminates the need for writers to speak to their audiences. As I explain in detail below, the academy has traditionally separated writing from reading, with compositionists teaching writing and English faculty teaching reading. Within this binary, writing is downgraded to a skill, while reading, which carries “the content” of a course, is elevated (Elbow, 1993b; Horning, 2007). This division of labour in the classroom parallels divisions in the research field: composition scholars often concentrate on understanding writing as a cognitive process and a social act, while reading scholars explore language acquisition. I have observed these days that English scholars are, generally, in another world, teaching neither writing nor reading, but theory.

1.2.3 Specialization

The other, more systemic problem relates to specialization within the university. Defenders of traditional liberal arts education (e.g., Saul, 1995; Deresiewicz, 2014; Edmundson, 2014) have criticized how specialization has warped language, degraded writing, and contributed to a disunity in intellectual endeavours that we might call a “segregation of the mind.” Universities have, since their beginning, sought to categorize knowledge, but the modern academy has parsed knowledge so finely, and specialists have developed languages so Babylonian, that scholars outside their fields cannot understand them. Subspecialties have become fields of their own, with
differences defined not by the type of knowledge under investigation, but by the language scholars use when they speak about what they claim to know (Saul, 1995).

In parallel to the hyper-specialization of language (what Saul identifies as a breakdown in language), critics note a shift in university students’ attention away from liberal arts (where writing instruction resides) towards science, technology, engineering and math—the STEM subjects (Deresiewicz, 2014; Edmundson, 2014; Jacobs, 2005). More and more, students are opting to study in these disciplines, and in business programs, with the hopes of obtaining careers and credentials (Hedges, 2010; Jacobs, 2005). Finances have shifted too, with the bulk of educational resources directed towards research and teaching in STEM and business disciplines (Delbanco, 2012). These shifts have happened at the same time we have seen the liberal arts tradition weaken. Enrolments in humanities courses have withered as has the funding.

In tandem with these shifts, scholarship in the humanities has tilted towards a loveless skepticism, with literary studies transforming into butcher shops that send the canon (what is left of it) through the “the lens” of post-modernism (Hedges, 2010). At UTM, the humanities have shrunk like mushrooms in the sun. When I was a student, the English department had consequential influence on campus affairs. Today, the department is smaller and less influential. To appear more relevant and increase enrolment, the department is reinventing itself by offering a minor in creative writing (Bhasker & Segovia, 2016).

As more aggressive critics like Deresiewicz (2014) and Hedges (2010) note, changing attitudes within the humanities have rendered many courses in the humanities moot if not useless to helping students develop an understanding of ideals that were once core values for previous generations—notions like love, courage, and wisdom that previous generations took as foundational to right living (Lewis, 1974). Today, universities preach a religion of success
(Deresiewicz, 2014), one that promises students accomplishment in careers and advertises health and happiness in life. This religion demands conformity from adherents. Conformity infiltrates curricula and schools abandon commitments to liberal learning that may compromise career training (Roth, 2014). Students absorb this call to conform and dream the same dream—a dream of safety and affluence rather than the risk and adventure found in literature students are no longer required to read (Edmundson, 2015). Conformity and careerism among faculty “makes their complaints about student careerism blatantly hypocritical” (Reno, 2017, p. 65), but it explains why faculty have so ineffectively fought to protect the liberal arts from further erosion, and why, increasingly at elite schools, students and faculty learn “never to say out loud what they really think. One is careful to stay on script” (p 66).

“[E]ducation cannot be understood apart from the question of morality” (Davis, 2006, p. xi), yet we can have schools that avoid serious investigation of the morals, values, and virtues of life. This feat has been performed in universities where reading and writing have been treated as separate, sometimes contrary, functions, and where writing has been marginalized and treated as a tool for doing the evermore tedious, evermore specialized work of discrediting the Western scholastic tradition (Scruton, 2007).

1.3 Significance

The centrality of writing to the work of the academy ought not be questioned, particularly if we take the view that writing is thinking (Zinsser, 2006). Writing is the primary form of communication in the academy, and as a practice, writing offers a way for people to externalize their thoughts, examine their thinking, and through editing and revision, develop a more rational view on the world (Heath, 2014). Yet, as composition scholars have noted for decades, writing is often cast to the margins (Webb-Sunderhaus, 2012). Students can complete degrees by only
taking a single required course in writing. Some complete their educations without having to write substantial papers at all. (Recently, I tutored a management student who told me she reached fourth year of university without having written a single paper.)

Writing is sidelined, but so too is reading. Many disciplines, apart from literature and linguistics perhaps, assume a student can read. Students receive little training on how to read a text, how to consider the writer’s objectives, how to understand the role of the reader, how to parse a sentence, or how to edit a sentence to improve clarity of thought. An examination of how a writing class conceptualizes language—how it conceives literacy and teaches writing and reading—may bring the role of language education in the academy to the fore.

This dissertation project is significant in several ways. First, my research looks at how writing is taught and how a course called Expressive Writing addresses the writing-reading binary still at work in the academy. Second, I examine expressivist pedagogy in light of historically important discussions about how to improve students’ writing skills (Bartholomae, 2008; Elbow, 1993c) and recent discussions about the values and goals of writing in Canadian classrooms (Ho, 2013; Whetter, 2014). Third, the research addresses a gap in the literature related to how expressive writing teachers highlight the role of readers in classroom instruction. Finally, I examine how the role of the editor factors into the writing classroom and begin the work of theorizing how in-class editorial workshops modify student behaviours.

1.3.1 Defining terms.

In this dissertation, I use two words to refer to the revision process: “editing” and “revision.” Generally, compositionists use “revision” to refer to the act of revising a text from first to final draft. I use “editing” to capture the same process because this is the term used in Expressive
Writing. It is also a professional term, and the editor is a professional role that Expressive Writing tries to teach.

1.4 Questions

This study examines how students enrolled in a section of Expressive Writing at UTM understand their roles as readers, writers, and editors. Three questions drive this study:

1. What is each student’s understanding of reading, writing, and editing before, during and after taking Expressive Writing?
2. How does each student conceptualize the roles of reader, writer, and editor, and how do these concepts change over the life of the course?
3. What are the characteristics of each student’s writing at the beginning, middle, and end of the course?

1.5 Literature Review

This dissertation examines two ideas in composition research: expressivism and reader-response theory. The literature review that follows examines the three main areas of knowledge addressed in this research: 1) reading-writing connections, a field of literature that examines the relationship between the two; 2) expressivism, a pedagogical strategy for teaching writing; and 3) reader-response theory, a way of conceptualizing and teaching reading.

1.6 Reading-Writing Connections

In some corners, to say that writing and reading are integrally tied and must be taught together is to state the obvious. To spend time and money on research affirming this obvious connection is downright absurd. But given the history of English studies and the treatment of writing instruction in the academy, kind-hearted readers should forgive scholars for their decades-long efforts to reaffirm what is an obvious statement: reading and writing are connected.
The fact is, the connection was not always so obvious.

As Nelson and Calfee (1998) explain, the separation of writing and reading extends back to American colonial times, when private schools prioritized the ability to read over the ability to write. Teachers held off teaching students how to write because they thought that student could only write once they knew how to read. In these early colonial schools, teachers taught Classical rhetoric, with instruction focused on reading, listening, and speaking. But as American universities professionalized in the 1890s, English departments emerged and the “conceptual link between composing and comprehending […] was split, with part going to literary criticism and part to composition” (Nelson & Calfee, 1998, p. 9). War erupted between the “literature (reading) people” and “composition (writing) people.” It was a war for the center of English studies—for a “unifying theme” for the discipline—with centripetal forces drawing the two together, “consolidat[ing] reading and writing”, and centrifugal forces pushing writing away from reading (p. 2). The centrifugal forces won. Reading was hived off and given to English scholars. Writing was downgraded to a remedial function and writing faculty were slotted into “low-status positions” (p. 9). The low status of writing led to the impression that writing is low value work, and writing instructors received salaries in accord with this low-status, low value work (Kahn, 2017).

One of the centripetal forces, the progressive education movement, tried to bring reading and writing back together. Deweyean pragmatism brought about educational reforms that placed the student at the center of learning and led to views that treat language as an activity (a process) and not an object (a construction) (Crick, 2003). A key example is Rosenblatt’s work on reader-response, a theory that drew directly on Dewey’s progressive educational theories and sought to bring readers into close contact with what they read. Hers was a centripetal force in an
environment where New Criticism and its centrifugal pretensions continued to place a distance between readers and writers. In developments in practice that followed, expressivism and process-oriented writing instruction worked to reconnect writers with readers and marked a partial return to a view of writing as rhetoric—a partial return because even the early process instructors separated writing from reading and gave writing priority as a way of compensating for the discipline’s bias towards reading.

1.6.1 Reviving reading-writing connections.

Nelson and Calfee (1998) point to the development of cognitive approaches to learning as the significant turn in understandings about the relationship between reading and writing. Flower and Hayes (1981) found that the processes involved in reading and writing overlapped more than they diverged. Metacognitive approaches extended the work of the cognitivists by encouraging teachers to show how students relate to learning—what is called metacognition (Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2008). Cognitivists argued that while a metacognitive mindset will challenge students and demand more educational resources (Salataci & Akyel, 2002), students who are aware of how writers relate to readers will more efficiently develop the facility to learn reading and writing. They will develop an ability to learn how to write by reading and how to read by writing (Hirvela, 2004).

Earlier views that separated writing and reading gave way to an integrated view that sees the “synergism” (Tierney, 2002, p. 493) of reading and writing as important to a learner developing a facility in both. By the new millennium, the connection between reading and writing was now “more intertwined and inseparable than even the term relationships suggests” (Tierney, 2002, p. 489). An understanding emerged that writing cannot be taught independent of reading (Quinn,
2003) and students develop as writers when teachers show how writing connects to reading (Bunn, 2013; Wenden, 1998).

### 1.7 The Emergence of Expressivism

Writing instruction suffered when it was alienated from reading. By the 1960s and 1970s, composition as a discipline had lived up to low expectations. Students learned formulas for writing, like the five-paragraph essay, and what they wrote they wrote badly. Uninspired teachers gave uninspiring lessons. Tobin (2001) describes a composition class he took in 1971 as “listless”:

> We never wrote during class; never read our own essays aloud; never peer reviewed, workshopped, or even read each other’s essays; never were asked to write before we outlined; and never talked about how writers found their ideas, got unstuck when they were blocked, or used revision to discover new meaning, focus, or form (p.1)

In his genealogy of writing instruction (what he calls “rhetorics”), Berlin (1982) calls this listless form of instruction “Current Traditional.” Current traditional rhetoric dominated writing instruction in the mid-1900s. It emphasized correct usage, taught academic formulas (namely the argumentative essay), and presented students with a view of life in which they played no part. Out of this sterile, “writer-less” environment leapt expressivism, a passionate reaction to current traditional rhetoric focused on elucidating the writing process for students.

Faigley (1986) places the birth of the process movement in writing instruction in 1964 with the publication of Rohman and Wlecke’s essay “Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing.” This essay advocated for personal journaling to help students “achieve a personal sense of what is real” (Faigley, 1986, pp. 24-25). This sparked what
became called expressivism, a movement that gave the individual—the person, the expressive writer—credence and legitimacy in classroom environments that had wanted impersonal and increasingly mechanical modes of communication. In the 1960s and 1970s, progressive educators created much more room in the classroom for individual expression. Elbow’s *Writing with Power* (1980) is a classic text from the latter end of this era. It places agency in the writer’s hands but reminds writers that to wield this agency effectively, they must connect with their readers.

1.7.1 What is expressivism?

Expressivism is a process-oriented approach to writing instruction that places the individual writer at the center of the creative process. As a pedagogy, expressivism encompasses a set of practices for writing and reading a text, and for working with students to revise a text. Expressivism differs from other pedagogies on writing instruction in how it understands the writer, the audience, and language. It places the individual student at the centre of the curriculum. This philosophy manifests in several ways.

First, and perhaps most importantly, an expressivist pedagogy privileges the voice of the individual writer (Berlin, 1982; Coles, 1978; Elbow, 1981; Caldwell, 2002). “Voice” is a contested term in curriculum studies (Kennedy, 2006), but in simplest terms means the writer’s personality (Allen, 2008). Each student is unique, and this unique perspective can lend writing personality, verve, and a standpoint that makes writing pleasing. Similarly, expressivism prefers the subjective to the objective—the difference between what Geertz calls “author-saturated” and “author-evacuated” prose (in Elbow, 1991)—and places a premium value on the notions of originality and authenticity of voice (Elbow, 1987, 1995, 2007; Sperling & Appleman, 2011). Expressivist teachers try to teach students to write in an authentic voice by asking writers to
produce first person accounts of their experiences, to write in a narrative mode, and to approach intellectual affairs first from a personal position rather than a disembodied, estranged, and objective third person perspective.

Expressivist instruction often focuses on “how” students should write rather than “why” they should write, and many expressivist educators focus on the effect of writing on audiences rather than on usage and form (Elbow, 1973; Caldwell, 2002; Macrorie, 1970; Murray, 1985, 2012). This form of instruction emphasizes writing over reading in composition instruction (Allen, 2008; Elbow, 1993b) and embraces spontaneity in the act of writing because, expressivists say, spontaneity leads to greater fluency and voice (Elbow, 2008; Macrorie, 1980). Expressivists like Murray and Elbow sought to “demystify the [writing] process by talking about the craft, mechanics, rituals, logistics, [and] atmospherics of the process” (Tate, 2001, p. 3). Their classroom practices (e.g., teaching freewriting and revision strategies) aimed at helping writers overcome writer’s block, get past feelings of being judged, and achieve a higher level of authenticity.

Expressivist instruction encourages writers to enter the turbulence of language, rather than stepping away from language (Elbow, 1986a, 2006b; Poole, 2009). These kinds of classes ask writers to act like writers, not like critics, and they operate on the assumption that student writers are writers, not students apprenticing to become writers. As such, expressivist classrooms often function like a quasi-professional writing environment, with an editorial process that mirrors those found in the publishing world.
1.7.2 Erindale Expressivism: Toronto Pedigree

Much of the literature on expressivism details theory and practice found in America. But expressivism flourishes in other places. One of those places is the University of Toronto Mississauga (formerly Erindale College).

The expressivist pedagogy alive at UTM is the progeny of Dr. Guy Allen, who I mentioned earlier in this dissertation. Allen’s contribution to expressivist theory is less well-known in the literature than writers like Elbow—see Allen (1989, 2002 and 2008) and Caldwell (2002) for details on Allen’s views—but Allen’s influence on composition instruction in Canada, and the Greater Toronto Area in particular, is enormous. Allen’s pedagogy provides the foundation the Professional Writing and Communication program at UTM, the program he founded and has run since its inception. The unique features of the program—an embrace of voice and expression; a championing of narrative theory and methods—draws directly from his teaching and leadership.

As a teacher, Allen has taught writing to tens of thousands of undergraduate students at UTM and trained hundreds of teachers through OISE/UT. As the publisher of Life Rattle, the radio show, writing festival and publishing house he founded with Arnie Achtman in 1988, he has provided a launch pad for thousands of writers. These radio shows, publications and writing festivals showcase the best expressive writing produced in the many classes built around his expressivist pedagogy.

At the core of Allen’s pedagogy sits the individual, the individual’s choice, and the individual’s desire for expression (Allen, 1989). In a classroom setting, gaining the power of expression comes through guided instruction that “creat[es] conditions where people’s natural urge to express themselves through language is allowed and encouraged” (p. 9). Expressive writing, as opposed to expository writing, merges meaning and form, and “when it is successful, its content
and its style evolve naturally from the personality and experience of the writer” (p. 5). Allen’s principles of writing—economy, detail, directness and voice (articulated the classroom case study portion of this dissertation)—provide a basis for evaluating communications and for understanding how writers relate to readers.

During the defense of this dissertation, the external examiner requested that I present a more direct statement of the people and literature that influence my understanding of expressivism. This passage is that statement. In the literature, Elbow informs my understanding of the theory behind expressive writing. In the literature and in practice, it is Allen who has taught me most about expressivist ideas and methods. Indeed, what Allen has taught me, going back to my days as an undergraduate, is so baked into my mind that I am sometimes blind to his influence.

Interestingly, my early immersion into expressivism as Allen’s student made the criticisms of expressivism I encountered later, as a graduate student, seem unreasonable. The chief criticism—broadly, that expressivism inculcates a soft-minded narcissism in student writers—struck me as off-centre. It was not my experience. As a student, my experience with expressivist pedagogy never lacked for rigor. I would go further and say that the strain of expressivism Allen has nurtured at UTM defies any insinuation of softness. The Professional Writing and Communication Program at UTM reserves A-level grades for publishable work. Students begin the program with personal writing in Expressive Writing but quickly move on to writing on “hard” topics like science, finance, and history in courses like Science and Writing, Finance and Writing, and History and Writing. They craft narratives in a data analytics course, study investigative journalism, learn copy editing, and publish books in a course called Making a Book. At UTM is a testimonial to power of expressivist pedagogy and a refutation of critics of expressivism. The personal does have a place in higher education.
Readers should take note of the influence Allen had on this dissertation. As one of my supervisors, he worked with me refine this dissertation. More importantly, his ideas appear all over the place in the subject matter of the study. Much of the course content presented in Case Study: Class (below) draws on a set of instructor notes Allen shares with people who teach in the program. (Having taken Expressive Writing with Allen twice and studied his work, I can testify that the class I observed for this study deviated minimally from Allen’s core teaching.) The course textbook, *Showing the Story*, collected and edited by Allen, draws heavily on student writing produced in his classes, and mirrors *No More Masterpieces* (1989), an innovative peer model text cultivated from six years of Allen’s classroom teaching. And, of course, the section of Expressive Writing I observed for this dissertation took place inside the writing department Allen heads.

The development of Allen’s expressivist pedagogy offers an interesting commentary on expressivism. Allen began teaching writing in 1979 (Allen, 2008). He developed his pedagogy incrementally, through experimentation, trial and error, and by listening to his students, who, he says, taught him how to teach when they defied his instructions and handed in narratives rather than expository essays. This positive deviance propelled Allen in the direction of expressive writing, as did his psychoanalytic research and his studies into the nature of being. By the time he published *No More Masterpieces* in 1989, he had refined his instructional methods to the point where his students began producing work worthy of publication.

In private conversations, Allen has told me that he developed his ideas of expressivism independently, well before he had ever heard of expressivism’s brightest star (and most popular martyr), Peter Elbow. Like Elbow, Allen developed his methods in response to the needs of his students. They did not need, or want, to write “sawdust prose” (Allen, 1989, p. 12), so Allen
devised instruction that responded to their desire to express themselves. Allen and Elbow, independent of each other, put into practice a pedagogy that inspired students to write. The theorizing and explanations for what happened came later. As Walsh (2016) explains, “Practice takes precedence over theory because life is there before reflection on it takes place” (p. 3).

Expressivism, rooted as it is in experience, draws on life and action. This enduring feature bodes well for teachers who find utility and meaning in expressive writing. More than a decade ago, a colleague of mine, the writer David Penhale, described the writing program at UTM as a “flower growing between slabs of concrete.” A feeling persists that writing education should do more than teach “skills” or give students “toolboxes.” We must show students how to speak for themselves. Expressivism is a resurgent and lasting pedagogy because it is a natural pedagogy. It emerges wherever educators pour concrete. It finds the sun.

1.7.3 Criticisms of Expressivism.

“[A]rhetorical, atheoretical, anti-intellectual and elitist, or, conversely, standardless, antitraditional, and relativistic” (Burnham, 2002, p. 20). These are some of the words critics use to describe expressivism. As an outgrowth of the progressive education movement, expressivism was implicated in criticism of the progressive education movement—namely, that progressive educators destabilized the academy by pushing knowledge out of the social realm and into the sphere of the personal (Scruton, 2007). Expressivism had also to absorb the criticism leveled at personal writing, in particular personal narratives, the hallmark of expressivism. These criticisms said that personal writing is solipsistic, self-referential, non-argumentative, essential untrue (or true in only the most limited sense), and a poor way to teach virtue (Faigley, 1986; Macintyre, 2016).
In addition to having to defend itself against these critiques, expressivists also had to answer the stiffest, most common criticism—the criticism of the idea of “voice.” Voice is a complicated term, and even among expressivist writers the concept has a slippery quality. The most direct definition of voice defines a writer’s voice as an expression of her personality (Allen, 2008). Murray (1985) says voice is the essential quality of good writing, and Elbow (1981) argues that writers who speak in their own voices write with power, confidence, and clarity. When students are taught to speak in a voice that is not their own—the voice of the scholar, or the voice of the teacher—they end up producing what Macrorie (1970) called “Engfish,” a cold, unappealing style of prose. The artificial voice is the central problem with academic prose (Elbow, 2006b). Lifeless and alienated, it deadens the voice, the ear, and the mind.

The differences between the epistemological positions of the major pedagogical traditions in composition—expressivism, current-traditionalism, cognitive, and social-epistemic (Berlin, 1988)—run on the rails of language. Current-traditionalism (e.g., Hill, 2017) takes a rational, essentialist, and empirical view on the world. Writing instruction of this tradition emphasizes correctness, argument, and traditional forms, like the five-paragraph essay. Cognitivism (e.g., Flower and Hayes, 1981), what Berlin calls the “heir apparent of current-traditional rhetoric” (p. 121), puts forward a positivistic, process-oriented approach to teaching writing. Writing instruction of this tradition teaches writers how to work through the various stages of the writing process. Social-epistemology (e.g., Shor, 1987), rooted in critical theory, examines knowledge through the lens of constructivism. Writing instruction of this tradition encourages students to take a critical approach to the politics and power relations they encounter in their lives. These “rhetorics” guide the many composition pedagogies that have surfaced in the last six decades, including critical, feminist, collaborative, community-service, and Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogies (Tate, 2001).
The fourth rhetoric Berlin identifies—expressivism—has a more contentious, complex history, mainly because the main proponents spent little time articulating an epistemology. When they failed to develop an epistemological framework for the budding process movement, critics did it for them and reinforced an understanding of expressivism as epistemologically idealistic, transcendental, and Romantic, with a Platonic view of knowledge (Bartholomae, 1995, 2008; Berlin, 1988; Bruffee, 1972; Farmer & France, 1993). As others have noted (Elbow, 1972, 1994; Fishman & McCarthy, 1992; O’Donnell, 1996), these criticisms ignore the purpose behind expressivist pedagogy: to teach writing in a way that improves the student’s chances at life, not just in school (Elbow, 1968). Expressivists were pragmatic in their goals and process-oriented in their teaching and in their views on teaching. Romanticism, Platonism, Pragmatism, Transcendentalism—these philosophies appear in various expressivist texts, as critics rightly point out, but the pedagogy was not driven by these philosophies. That is, the pedagogy did not arise to advance any particular philosophy, and expressivists did not, at least when it emerged, present a philosophy of language with the same rigor as their critics did. Instead, they presented a view on teaching because education, not language theory, was their end-goal.

The fiercest criticism of expressivist pedagogy came in the 1990s, when Peter Elbow debated David Bartholomae about the purpose of the writing classroom. Bartholomae (1995, 2008), a teacher with a social-epistemic approach to language and teaching, argued that the university writing class exists to train students to become adept in the traditions, language, and methods of the academy. In his view, teachers are authorities who bring students into the systems of language upon which disciplinary scholarship rests. Elbow argued that writing classes exist for a different reason: to teach students how to speak for themselves, in their own voices, and to provide them with writing skills they can use inside and outside the academy (Bartholomae, 2008; Bartholomae & Elbow, 1995; Elbow, 1991). By the end of the debate, the two had carved
out two competing positions. Bartholomae took the position that schooling must teach students to be skeptical of language, to doubt. Elbow argued a different position: the writing class must teach students to embrace the ambiguities of language and expression, to find reasons to believe a text.

The divide between belief and doubt is enormous. But the question of how readers relate to a text was a question reader-response theory sought to answer.

1.8 Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory considers “how readers construct meaning through a transaction between themselves and a text within a particular social context” (Beach, 2002, p. 489). First conceptualized by Rosenblatt (1946, 1964, 1995), the theory holds that meaning is not objective, singular, and rooted solely and eternally in a text, but emerges from the reader’s interaction with a text. Without a reader, a text is meaningless.

Rosenblatt developed her theory in the progressive era of education (Connell, 2000; Spiegel, 1998) and in response to the prevailing view at the time that saw the meaning of a literary text as objectively held and residing in the text (O’Flahavan & Wallis, 2005). Theoretically, her ideas build upon Deweyan pragmatism and social theory. Like Dewey, Rosenblatt viewed education as essential to a thriving democracy (Karolides, 2005) and saw experience as fundamental to learning (Rosenblatt, 1946, 1964). Throughout her career, Rosenblatt consciously worked to align her theories more closely with Dewey’s theories, a shift Dressman and Webster (2001) detail in their examination of text-level differences between the first and fifth editions of Rosenblatt’s seminal work, Literature as Exploration (1995). These revisions gave readers an ever-more important role in determining meaning by reducing the agency of authors and teachers in determining the meaning of a text; reducing the influence social context and the ideological
function of the literature have on determining meaning; and, notably, substituting the term “transaction”—a key term in Dewey’s view—for “interaction,” Rosenblatt’s original language for the way readers creating meaning through interactions with a text. In response, theories developed after Rosenblatt differ on the question of context and how much a reader’s interpretation depends on the reader’s experience in life, their experience with reading, their cultural knowledge, and their ability to articulate a response (Beach, 2002). Critics argue that interpretation, if it exists primarily or solely in the mind of the reader, ignores the potential for the writer’s artistry to move the reader and for the social world to influence interpretation (Cherland, 2002).

Rosenblatt’s theory of reader-response overlaps other views on reading in a way that makes borders between different theories “fade” (Demény, 2012, p. 53). A hermeneutic approach to reading gives readers the responsibility for “finishing” a literary work through their interaction with the text. Or, as Iser (1980) explains of the hermeneutical approach, readers fill in the spaces in the work with their imagination. Similarly, critical approaches to textual analysis argue that individual readers adapt according to social and cultural structures and use these structures to orient themselves to a text. Barthes (1977), for example, says that meaning is contingent on the reader, not the author, with the relevance of the text existing in the language of the text and the reader’s position in relation to the text. Fish (1980) extends the original idea of reader response theory as an individual activity to a group activity. He argues that individual readers operate inside a group, in what he calls interpretive communities. The beliefs and assumptions of this group provide the grounds by which readers make meaning in a text.

These various approaches all assume that readers create meaning through their transaction with the text. This view mirrors developments in the field of communications in the mid-1900s that
saw radical change in how audiences perceived texts and how researchers treated communications. Innis (Babe, 2000; Innis, 2007) developed ideas about the transmission and reception of communications across time and space, and these ideas found popularity in McLuhan’s assertion that the form of the communications shaped the transmission and reception of the information as much, if not more, than the substance of the message itself (Babe, 2000; Durham & Kellner, 2006). Later scholars, notably Hall (Durham & Kellner, 2006), provide a secondary theoretical basis for Rosenblatt’s theory (her primary basis was Dewey). Hall’s reception theory states that communication media (in Hall’s case, television) cannot operate independent of the audience (Durham & Kellner, 2006). A television program may have a message encoded in its transmission, but this message has no inherent value and poses no inherent threat if the audience cannot decode the message, or if they decode the message in a way that differs from what the creators of the program intended. For transmissions to become functional communications, the audience must decode the message encoded in the media and respond. In this way, communications are iterative, shared, and participatory.

While Rosenblatt’s theory on reading was largely ignored by the wider field of literary theory, reader-response became a popular way of teaching reading, and she herself became influential in fields of composition and reading (Spiegel, 1998). Her theories have bearing on this research because of the close relationship between expressivism and reader-response theory.

1.9 Connecting Expressivism and Reader-Response Theory

Expressivism is a pedagogy that focuses on the teaching of writing. Rarely in the earlier literature do expressivists speak about the teaching of reading. When they do, they often speak about reading in relation to revising student writing and in-class workshops. Elbow’s was the largest contributions to expressivism’s small body of work on reading. Pointing to Rosenblatt
and Fish as influential to his view on reading education, Elbow (1993a, 2006a, 2008) sees reading as an act of exchange. Readers must negotiate their feelings in relation to the text and express these feelings from the point of view of the individual reader. For Elbow, reading is an actual dialogue between the reader and the writer, not an artificial or imagined transaction between a reader and a writer (Elbow, 2006a). Reading is never objectified, the writer is never reified, and the reader always relates personally to the text and to the writer of the text.

1.9.1 Expressive reading and writing.

Philosophically, reader-response theory and expressivism, particularly as shaped by Elbow (Crick, 2003; Jones, 2002), share a common heritage in Dewey’s pragmatism. Rosenblatt unapologetically placed herself in Dewey’s camp. Elbow’s views on reading in a workshop environment, in particular “methodological believing” (Elbow, 1986), incorporate elements, if not the spirit, of Rosenblatt’s approach to reading. First articulated in his PhD dissertation on Chaucer (Elbow, 1975), methodological believing (or the “believing game”) argues for a second way of verifying truth in a writing workshop. Rather than doubting a proposition as a way of determining its veracity, Elbow says that we can test a proposition by trying to believe in it. Belief erodes falsehoods as effectively as doubt, Elbow says, because falsehoods will prove themselves to be impossible to believe. The usefulness of Elbow’s method in verifying metaphysical truths deserves scrutiny—Cartesian logic argues the opposite: that truth is found only through doubt (Solomon & Higgins, 1997)—but methodological believing is useful in the practical arena of the writing classroom where it cultivated a supportive, charitable atmosphere (Elbow, 1973). Elbow’s workshop formula hinges on belief rather than a response that measures a text against external criteria (Elbow, 1973). The reader’s response to the text is essential. If the writer presents a view of the world that readers cannot believe, readers (acting as editors) must alert the writer to their disbelief and the unbelievable aspects of the text. To develop persuasive
communications is to develop believable communications. For Elbow, the way to measure writing is through belief.

1.10 Theoretical Assumptions Underpinning this Study

As a teacher and educational researcher, I align myself more with Elbow’s hopeful expressivism than with Bartholomae’s skeptical traditionalism. No doubt, teachers must uphold the standards of the discipline. This is a point Bartholomae advances, and it is a point that Elbow embraces (Bartholomae, 1995). The difference comes down to how teachers satisfy this imperative. Elbow’s argument—that teachers should let the student speak in a way that comes naturally—does not undermine this goal. In fact, when teachers ask students to present themselves fully in relation to the material, the classroom can become a place where students see themselves as participants in a dialogue, rather than passive recipients of information. As I explain below, the theoretical views underpinning this research parallel expressivist views. I share these views as a way of developing the theory behind this dissertation and to reveal some of the assumptions about teaching and learning that I bring to the project.

1.10.1 Assumptions about learning.

First, all people want to learn (Allen, n.d.). Each person wants to develop some aspect of her personality; to find stimulation, mentorship and community; to assert her will; to know her culture and history and its place in the world; and ultimately to distinguish what is true from what is false. This innate desire has consequence for teachers. If all people are willing to learn, even eager to learn and to apply their creative energies, then half of the work is already done for the teacher. The teacher’s job is to keep from squandering the student’s desire to learn, create, and know.
Second, all people want to show themselves as authentic and creative individuals. When expressivists speak about voice as an essential ingredient in good writing, they are speaking about authenticity (Elbow, 1973; 1981; 1986). Authenticity is a powerful force; it is an antidote to sameness, a cure for cliché, and a characteristic of an independent mind. Authenticity is also a goal of the Western liberal tradition—to teach students how to determine what is authentically, independently true (Schall, 2016), how to obtain their independence (Deresiewicz, 2014), and how to speak authentically (Elbow, 1980).

It is through creative acts that people obtain the independence they seek and knowledge of what is true (Johnson, 1993). (Creative acts are not limited to the arts. Great scientists are supremely creative thinkers.) The teacher’s job is to encourage creative acts, appreciate the student’s creations and urge each student to re-imagine and re-invent what he creates and how he creates. Learning is the discovery of new ways to arrive at old understandings (Davis, 2006), and re-creating and re-imaging is the primary method for extending our knowledge about the world. Authenticity demands authenticity, and teachers must present themselves to students as authentic and creative individuals if they are to develop an environment where creativity can flourish.

Third, all students, like all people, want to find meaning in their lives (Frankl, 2006). Without meaning, life is absurd, a question with no answer (Camus, 1955). A responsive classroom helps students to identify what is meaningful and what is a “proper object of interest” (Scruton, 2007, p.49). Teachers are a force that encourages students to engage in more than mere automation, to create something new that the teacher, the student and a wider audience can celebrate, something new that the student can imbue with meaning and use to understand reality (Postman, 1969; Vanier, 1989).
Fourth, all students desire productive classrooms (Allen, n.d.; Postman, 1995). The teacher is the one who arranges the classroom for learning: the teacher parts the curtain to let in light, opens the window to new vistas and perspectives, and locks the door to the things that interfere with creativity and learning. They eliminate the inertia that comes in the form of procrastination, tardiness and absentia. They eliminate ambiguity in the purpose and structure of the course (Edmundson, 2013).

And fifth, students desire to know what is true about reality. The ideal classroom is anti-sophistic (Pieper, 2015) and does not deal in the mere “retailing of information” (Frye, 1988, p. 11). Rather, the classroom leads students towards—or at least point them in the direction of—the higher things (Schall, 2016) and shows students how to distinguish knowledge from opinion, communication from manipulation, truth from falsehood, and meaningful from meaningless.

Taken together, these assumptions share a common tie, or root. That root is freedom. The desire to find meaning, work, independence, and knowledge is motivated by an overarching human desire for freedom and knowledge of how to respond to the responsibilities that come with freedom. Schools have a crucial role to play in helping students achieve independence by delivering the order and knowledge and that can change a student’s life.

The scholastic tradition is, at its base, a story of communications, as knowledge is put into words and passed to the next generation (Saul, 1995; Schall, 2016). Writing sits at the centre of this tradition (Frye, 1988; Zinsser, 1993), and the survival of the tradition depends on our ability to teach language to our students. Whether students receive the knowledge, and whether the teaching can pass along this knowledge, is the question. The unique pedagogy of Expressive Writing at UTM gives us an opportunity to examine how knowledge is passed to students, and
how exposure to particular instructional methods influences a student’s understanding of reading, writing, and editing.

1.10.2 My views on expressivism

Philosophically, expressivism suits my view of the human person. Voice is inextinguishable in, and indistinguishable from, the individual person. We each have a duty to step into the world, to speak and to act, and in only by committing ourselves to that duty of action can we realize freedom. Expression is essential to acting and to realizing our free selves.

Over the years, I have developed an understanding of writing instruction rooted in the expressive pedagogy I learned from Guy Allen. My thinking about teaching and the nature of human relationships align with Allen’s way of thinking about teaching and writing. In the writing class, expression is essential to making meaning of the world. I am with Allen when he says that “[t]eaching expressive writing means creating conditions where people’s natural urge to express themselves through language is allowed and encouraged” (Allen, 1989, p. 9). I agree with him when he says “[e]xpressive writing transcends the artificial separation of the practical and the creative. Expression is the foundation of both” (Allen, 1989, p. 8). And on many other matters of teaching, like using clear course boundaries to motivate students and foster creativity (Allen, 2002), I tend to be persuaded by Allen’s views. I differ from him in various ways, and my experiences and views on the nature of the human being surely work their way into my teaching.

But overall, I am an expressivist, informed by reading the works of Elbow, Macrorie and Rosenblatt, and by following the example of my teacher Guy Allen. With him I share a belief in the centrality of honest expression in the writing class, the positive potential of the classroom to transform lives for the better, and the overarching need to see writing as an act of caring between two people (Allen, 1989, p. 6).
2 Methodology

My expressivist scholarship relies on narrative methods. Narrative researchers report discoveries in the first person and describe their experiences in story form. Research that uses narrative methods seek to “understand how people think through events and what they value” and gather data “through a close examination of how people talk about events and whose perspectives they draw on to make sense of such events” (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 227). Narrative inquiry is “first and foremost a way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008) that organizes actions and events in some sort of chronology (the storyline) so that the researcher can identify the consequences and meaning of the actions (the plotline) (Crowley, 2015). Narrative falls under the interpretive paradigm of research and is both a naturalistic form of research and a qualitative approach to investigating human activity—at once the method and the form of the investigation (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005).

While narrative inquiry has been criticized as selective of facts and concerned with telling a good story rather than relaying the facts of the research (Atkinson, 1997; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002), there exists a long tradition of scholarship associated with narrative. Early histories took a narrative form, and later, as scholars formalized and professionalized their fields, narrative found a philosophical home among thinkers who championed experience and personal knowledge as a way of viewing, understanding, and talking about the world. Central among these thinkers is Dewey (1997), who placed human experience at the center of intellectual activity, with humans needing to perform an action or exercise a thought to know it. Narrative gives a fuller sense of a research situation by showing the human person in time and space, and in relation to other people (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).
Within the field of composition scholarship, narrative inquiry has a central place, with scholars such as Macrorie, along with many others, presenting their data in an anecdote and story form before analyzing what they saw and experienced.

2.1 Narrative Methodology and Relationship to Participants

I had a close connection to the classroom I observed. I worked in the same department where I conducted my research; I had taught Expressive Writing for many years; and I knew the instructor as a colleague. While I was familiar with the course, I do not believe my familiarity inhibited my observations. In fact, my familiarity may have aided my observations. As Day (2012) argues, acquiring knowledge about social life requires a close relationship between researcher and subject. Nearness to the subject matter allows researchers to bridge the differences that exists between the observer and the subject (Shope, 2006).

I make two assumptions in this research. First, we as humans understand life through the stories we tell (Hood, 2013; Wilson, 2015). Second, we fight over who controls the interpretation and the discourse (Puckett, 2016). Knowing this aspect of our natures, researchers must account for the confusion and complexities arising from varied interpretations without falling into the interpretist’s trap that says humans are bound by their stories, or the objectivist’s trap that social structures, like educational systems or class divisions, are immutable. Individually, we can change our lives through the choices we make (Sartre, 1993) and the stories we tell about ourselves (Hood, 2013); socially, a group can control its communal destiny, and through the knowledge afforded by research into social activities, the group can change habits in ways that move the group toward a common good.

The mode of understanding for this study is qualitative because the work centers on the interviewee’s life-world. Through the research, I sought to understand the meaning of
phenomena in this life-world through specific description. What I wanted to uncover—namely, an indirect effect situated within a complex, human context—required that I get close to individual students and observe how their thinking, perceptions, and writing changed through their exposure to expressive writing instruction. The method I used—case study research—allowed me to “go beyond a surface understanding […] to explore deeper than common sense” (Kvale, 1983, p. 173).

2.2 Rationale for Case Study Methodology

Newkirk (1992) reminds us that the “more honest strategy […] is to admit […] that we are all storytellers” (p. 134). Even the most basic research report contains a narrative and unfolds, sequentially, like a story. As a method, case studies are a method for a detailed exploration of a single, contained phenomena (Stake, 1995) that are “descriptive and nonexperimental” (Barone, 2011, p. 8). They offer the depth and insight into the individual student’s experience I needed to answer the questions that drove this research. Additionally, case studies allowed me to start with the particular (Woodhouse, 2009) before moving to the general. At issue was a desire to know the student’s experience in an expressive writing class with an eye toward understanding how writing instruction influences reading strategies. I wanted to describe what happens, not to test for veracity through experimentation.

Case studies explore an individual process or activity in depth with the goals of intense, granular description (Creswell, 2009). In the cases below, there existed a need to look closely at practices particular to an expressivist pedagogy and create detailed portraits of an individual’s experience. To bring this point back to the research goals, I needed to understand what happened to a student in the classroom. The goal was not to find causality but to see what happened to the student. This required a case that allowed me to “gather rich description of the object of study” (Barone, 2011,
Case study is a narrative method, a method designed to present “rich description” in ways that other methods, like surveying, cannot.

Case studies are inductive and give researchers a way to address open, exploratory questions, such as my research questions. With case study methods, understanding arises from a detailed description of life, rather than a hypothesis and experimentation (Barone, 2011). Additionally, case studies make sense of apparent randomness by identifying patterns (correspondence) of behaviour and issues in the data (Stake, 1995). By identifying patterns and triangulating these patterns against the case study protocols, researchers can improve the validity of the claims made through the analysis and “make the case understandable” (Stake, 1995, p. 85).

2.3 Addressing Criticisms with Case Studies

One of the chief concerns with case study research relates to the utility of the research, specifically the question of whether an investigation of the peculiar sheds light on the universal. The ability to generalize findings derives from the sample size—the larger the sample, the more likely the findings will relate to similar instances and populations (Hamel, 1993). Case studies, by design, investigate small samples and so do not lend themselves to the standards of generalizability applied in positivistic research. But questions about the generalizability of case study research are not unique to case studies. The same skepticism has been leveled against the entire field of qualitative research (Gage, 1989; Myers, 2000). Like all qualitative research, case studies can be acceptable if the researcher applies rigor in data collection and builds a sophisticated theoretical framework, “within which to make sense of the data” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 203). And, as Spinder notes, “it is better to have in-depth, accurate knowledge of one setting than superficial and possibly skewed or misleading information about isolated relationships in many settings” (in Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984, p. 203).
Another way qualitative researchers build credibility for their work is by triangulating the data. Triangulation corroborates data by measuring it against other data inputs, including other cases, as well as data sources outside the case (Stavros & Westberg, 2009). As a practice, triangulation aims to assure readers that the researcher followed established protocols and drew conclusions based on the evidence and a disciplined approach to research rather than gut feelings (Stake, 1995). Triangulation establishes patterns by identifying areas where various points of data converge—or triangulate—around particular themes (Creswell, 2009).

Walker’s (1983) three-point criticism of case studies captures the challenges facing researchers who use case studies:

(a) Case-study research is an intervention, and often an uncontrolled intervention, in the lives of others.

(b) Case-study research provides a biased view, a distorted picture of the way things are.

(c) Case-study research is essentially conservative (p. 156).

Walker’s criticisms are valid. Case studies are interventions—as is any research—and can “often” be uncontrolled. However, Walker stretches the concept of intervention. A clear example of intervention occurs with advocacy research that, by definition, seeks to change outcomes through an intervention (Creswell, 2009). Case study research like the kind presented in this dissertation does not seek to change outcomes. I, as the researcher, became involved in the lives of the participants during the study, but I did interfere. I simply made myself present in the course and observed the students. This is an intervention of a sort, but not an attempt to change outcomes. And it is worth noting that Walker equivocates when he says case studies are “often uncontrolled interventions.” “Often” is an important word because researchers can, through a
diligent adherence to research protocols, control how they intervene in the lives of the people
they study.

Walker’s second criticism, that case study is biased, deserves further reflection. First, he makes
the mistake of generalizing his point. Some case studies may present biased, distorted pictures of
life. But many case studies can report accurately on life. If the researchers report what they see in
detail, they can present an accurate picture of life. The case study method, like any method, relies
on the person using it—if a researcher cannot gather enough evidence, situate the case accurately
and deeply within the context, or analyze the data through a structured theoretical framework, the
results may not capture a fair description of events.

At the same time, we should not forget that all research methods have limits. Even the most
rigorously applied quantitative method can distort the picture if it is used imprecisely.
Quantitative and qualitative research can, and often does, capture the essentials of situations with
enough accuracy to allow researchers to understand what it means to the participants. Walker
(1983) writes: “Case studies tell a truth but not the truth” (p. 165, emphasis in original). In post-
modern thought, “truths” are multiple and diverse, and within education we need to understand
the various “truths” and beliefs held by the people involved in education. Some of these “truths”
are downright fraudulent, and they must be pulled from the crowd and examined if we are to
show people who hold these truths the error of their beliefs. Some beliefs have been ignored or
marginalized. Case studies can bring these beliefs to the fore.

Walker’s criticism raises a secondary issue. When Walker speaks about “the truth,” he is
speaking about capital T “Truth,” the unimpeachably correct truth. In certain realms of
knowledge, we can point to Truth and most will agree it is true. Logic is true: $1 + 1$ always
equals 2. Scientific truths are true. We take aspects of human life, like death, as true and fundamental to our condition as humans.

Truth in case research is not so cleanly defined. How people relate involves the logical and the illogical, and we limit our understanding of the data gathered through case method if we speak about “truth.” A better word might be “meaning,” and it might be better to say, “Case studies tell us what it means in this case, not the meaning in every case.” The meaning of a case gives insight that can help us understand a situation in relation to other meanings, readings, and interpretations. Finally, “meaning” is a more useful word because the opposite—less meaningful and meaningless—has more relevance to gathering case data than truth and falsehood. A researcher can judge some data meaningless rather than imbued with meaning. If we use the word “true,” we complicate the case unnecessarily. The opposite of the truth is a false statement or a lie. Most often when we investigate human affairs, we must prepare ourselves to encounter multiple meanings, not multiple truths. And, yes, sometimes lies (Martin, 2015). More than some other methods, case studies rely on the judgement of the researcher to distill meaning from the data. When we read case studies, we must remember the limitations of the researcher and treat the evidence, the story, and the meaning as either meaningful or meaningless, and reasonable or unreasonable, rather than true or false.

Lastly, Walker warns researchers that case studies are “essentially conservative.” What he means is that case studies conserve, or preserve, a situation, like a photograph. Case studies describe life at a moment in time. They do not move with the researcher, and so they become like museum pieces. In education research, where we often want to implement changes to improve the educational experience, case studies lag events—they take time to research, write, and publish, so much time that the study itself might have become inaccurate by the time it is read. Again,
Walker is correct in his appraisal of case studies. But we must also remember that all research describes a moment. Case studies, like any other method, are limited by time.

On the question of whether case study results are reliable, we must again remember the differences in motivations between qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research asks questions that “typically orient to cases or phenomena, seeking patterns of unanticipated as well as expected relationships” (Stake, 1995, p. 41). Whereas quantitative studies bind reliability for the study’s results in the “instrumentation”—the structuring of the research project—qualitative studies rely on “placement of the most skilled researchers directly in contact with the phenomena and making much more subjective claims as to the meaning of the data” (p. 42). The qualitative researcher does not “map and conquer the world” but “sophisticat[es] the beholding of it” (Stake, 1995, p. 43).

Further, the reasons for employing qualitative research methods when discussing reliability must be considered. While case study research may fail validity tests at a higher rate than quantitative research methods, they generate insights that quantitative research often cannot. As Riege (2003) explains, “[the] case study method is about theory construction and building, and is based on the need to understand a real-life phenomenon with researchers obtaining new holistic and in-depth understandings, explanations and interpretations” (Riege, 2003, p. 80). Modifying, or limiting, case study design to ensure the reliability of findings—reliability here defined as the ability to pass design tests—is not, as Riege explains, “the primary [driver] of rigorous case study research and even could suppress the discovery of new meaningful insights and as a result not maximize the quality of the research” (p. 80). That said, case study researchers can offer reliability of a qualitative nature by ensuring the data is confirmable, transferable, dependable, and credible (Christie, Rowe, Perry, & Chamard, 2000). These four values parallel the values we use to
measure the rigor of quantitative research. To say case data is “confirmable” means that outside observers can confirm the research methods and the collection of data. Results that are “transferable” have external validity—the findings can be replicated in other situations to give a generalized understanding of the phenomena. In practice, case studies should produce findings that lend themselves to a generalized theory of the phenomenon. The principle of dependability in case study research mirrors the principle of reliability in quantitative research. In quantitative research, reliability signals constancy—the results are reliable because other researchers can reliably obtain the same results. In qualitative studies, researchers strive for dependable results—results that show how results tie to evidence, documentation, and properly executed protocols. Qualitative research is credible in the same way quantitative research is internally valid. This means that qualitative researchers must identify causality—in this case, the mechanisms that lead people to do what they do—in a logic, consistent manner based on the evidence (Christie et al., 2000; Creswell, 2009; Riege, 2003).

2.4 Methods

The methods I used to conduct the research adhere to standards of discovery and analysis laid out in established research guides (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) and followed the ethical guidelines demanded by the University of Toronto (2005, 2009) and good practice (Gorard, 2013; Penslar, 1995). This section outlines the conduct, execution, and analysis of the research that follows.

2.4.1 Participants.

I conducted research in a class with a teacher who used an expressive pedagogy. In the summer of 2016, I canvased my department to find a class I could observe. My colleague Asitwa (a pseudonym) agreed to let me use his classroom as the site for my research.
Expressive Writing is a course designed for new writers. Most students who take the course may have taken other writing courses, including creative writing courses in high school and courses designed to teach essay writing skills. For some students, the only literature courses they had taken were mandatory courses. The only quality I used to disqualify students from participating in the study was whether they had taken an expressive writing class focused on creative non-fiction. Prior to accepting prospective participants into the research, I conducted a preliminary interview to ascertain whether the prospective participants qualified for my study. All of them did.

2.4.2 Sample size.

The sample size for the research depended on the number of students enrolled in the class and the number of students who volunteered to participate in the research. On the first day of class I solicited participation in the students, with the permission of the course instructor. In keeping with the need to be transparent about the research, I announced the intentions of the research and gave students a document advertising the study. Following Spigelman’s (2006) case study research on small group peer editorial workshop, I recruited five students. One dropped the course after the second week. Another chose to discontinue her participation in my study after the second interview and gave no reason for abandoning this project. Three students carried through until the end, and their cases follow in the next chapter.

2.4.3 Data collection.

Because a case study finds its strength in “its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 8), I collected data through a variety of means, including: 1) semi-structured interviews with subjects; 2) analyses of student writing completed during the course; 3) and observation of classroom instruction.
**Semi-structured interviews.** I interviewed each student three times over the term. I recorded the interviews on a digital recorder and transcribed the interviews to a Word document a week or so after each interview. I took notes by hand to supplement the recordings. I interviewed Asitwa three times—once formally at the start of term, and the two other times more spontaneously. I recorded two of the meetings and took notes by hand. The third happened in the hallway. In addition to interviewing Asitwa formally for the study, I chatted often with Asitwa as we went to and from class together. We talked about students, teaching, and the goings on at UTM—shop talk.

**Student writing.** I collected all the writing (including draft work) that the students generated for the course. In total, students completed fifteen writing exercises and six narratives (details of each assignment appear in the classroom case study).

**Classroom observation.** When I observed the classroom, I took notes by hand in a notebook. I tried to include as much detail as possible. I counted how many students attended each class and noted whether the students in my case study were in attendance. I copied Asitwa’s lectures and the classroom discussions in a shorthand I have developed over the last fifteen years as a working journalist. Additionally, Asitwa gave me electronic copies of all his course documentation and the PowerPoint slides he used in his lectures. He also gave me access to his course BlackBoard, where he posted homework and messages to students.

### 2.5 Interview Procedures

At the start of the course, I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the student’s impressions and understandings of the reading and writing processes and the roles of readers and writers. Semi-structured interviews broadened the range of the discussion, gave me a narrative
thread to follow, and to “generate very rich and in-depth data” (Baumann & Bason, 2004, p. 288).

The structured element of the interviews related to a set of questions I repeated in each interview. (For a sample interview protocol, see Appendix A.) The questions I asked in the interviews focused on the student’s experiences in the course and attempted to isolate the student’s opinions on particular aspects of the course, like the roles and responsibilities of writers (e.g., “Do writers have obligations to their readers?”) By repeating these questions each interview, I was able to see how the student’s views changed over the course of the term. (I document these changes in the case studies I wrote for each student.)

In addition to covering these structured elements of the interview, I asked questions to learn about the student’s interests and concerns. These questions aimed at helping me understand the student as a person (e.g., I asked Rose, an immigrant, about her impressions of living in Mississauga) and to learn about their preferences in reading. The interviews were conversational. Without my asking, the students offered up useful details about their educations and their experiences in the course. Had I limited myself to a set of written questions, I would not have been able to gather as much information from the students as I did.

In each interview, I tried to make the student comfortable. I welcomed them into my office and chatted with them about the weather, their studies, or the headlines in the student newspaper. I asked them each time if I could start recording them, and when they said yes, we settled into the discussion. I often started with, “I’m going to ask you the same set of questions I asked in our last meeting, okay?” and I ended each interview by asking the students if they had any questions for me. Sometimes they did. Once Joannie asked me about program requirements for the
Professional Writing program. Rose asked me about my graduate studies, what I studied, and how I got interested in this field.

**Frequency of contact.** I attended each of the twelve Expressive Writing classes to listen to how the instructor spoke about reading and writing connections. The classes ran from September 2016 to December 2016, and each class ran between one-and-a-half to two hours. I interviewed each of the students three times over the course, and Asitwa three times. I recorded 12 hours of tape over the eleven interviews.

**2.5.1 Method for data analysis.**
Qualitative research of the sort I conducted for this dissertation requires constant reflection with the data. As a result, I did as Creswell (2009) and Stake (1995) advise and analyzed the data “concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations and writing reports (Creswell, 2009, p. 184).

**Analysis of classroom observations.** Narrative is form and method (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005). It is at once a record of events as well as a record of the details a researcher considers most useful in answering the research questions. A narrative is a product of an analysis, as the writer determines what details deserve placement in the story and what do not.

I wrote my classroom observations into a narrative. It is a lengthy and fact-heavy story. My intention was to present readers with a detailed account of what I saw, rather than a cleverly written story. I tried to avoid inserting judgements or venturing too far into discussions of teaching methods, the utility of narrative in a writing class, or other interesting elements I would have loved to have discussed. I tried to limit myself to presenting the facts.
The classroom observations informed my findings in two ways. First, they provided the stage, or the context, for the student’s experience in the classrooms. The students learned from the instructor Asitwa, and observing his classroom allowed me to connect what students told me with what the students said. Had I not observed the classroom activities, I would not have understood how the instruction influenced student behaviours. And second, by observing Asitwa’s class I gained an understanding of how he parcelled out the classroom instruction and how he understood writing, reading, and editing—crucial aspects of the study. Classroom observation helped me to answer the questions, “What is each student’s understanding of reading, writing, and editing before, during and after taking Expressive Writing?” and “How does each student conceptualize the roles of reader, writer, and editor, and how do these concepts change over the life of the course?”

**Analysis of interviews.** Following Mortensen (1992), I analyzed the conversations captured in the transcripts in a descriptive way—with an eye for showing how the conversations unfolded and highlighting the key moments, as I saw them. My study looked specifically at how the students change, and so identifying changes in behaviour was necessary to understanding how student understandings evolved over the course of the term. I documented my interactions with the students in a narrative.

**Analysis of writing.** The writing the students allowed me to answer the third research question, “What are the characteristics of each student’s writing at the beginning, middle, and end of the course?” Their draft work showed how their writing changed over the twelve weeks of the course.

I analyzed the student texts using a qualitative approach, one that attempted to understand how the writers structured the texts and what they tried to say with the text (Goldman & Wiley,
I treated their writing as literature and focused on describing the text and comparing earlier versions of the texts to later versions of the texts. My process was iterative; I went through the student texts many times as I worked through my understanding of the changes.

In my analysis of the texts, I started by reading the final drafts first. I chose to start with the final draft for several reasons. First, I wanted to see the student’s best efforts at the start of the process. I expected the draft work would be rough and a little difficult to read, and some of it was. The final draft work would have been the work that Asitwa graded. In starting my analysis with the final drafts, I started with what would have been the student’s final intention—the text they wanted to present as a public text.

After I assessed the final drafts (the final portfolio), I looked at the earliest drafts and read forward through the drafts to the final versions of each story. I printed all the work and put the stories into the order the students wrote the stories.

By surveying the stories in the order in which they were written, I could see evidence of the students’ decision-making. I conducted my analysis on paper and highlighted the differences in pen. I noted the changes to the student writing that seemed most insightful to my study. I wrote a textual analysis that appears in each student case, following a narrative of my interactions with the students.

I organized the data I collected into a four-part case study. The first part of the case documents the classroom; the last three sections detail the experiences of the three students I got to know over the term: Deedee, Rose, and Joannie.
3 Case Study: Classroom Observations

“Start with the earthquake and build to a climax.”

More than one filmmaker has used this well-known formula for making a movie. This formula works in writing too. Waste no time on introductions, it says. Instead, spend the reader’s precious time examining the action and the consequences of an action rather than the events that precede the action. Carver (2009) had similar advice for writers: “Get in, get out. Don’t linger. Move on.”

Writing fiction would have been easier than writing this case study. If I could have written fiction, I would have opened this case study with action—a fistfight, maybe an earthquake—and moved on to the business of analysis. Even though this lengthy introduction defies Hollywood’s formula for explosive storytelling, the narrative in this case does arrive at a climax that, if it does not tear the earth in half, at least rattles the china.

This case study is long. It lingers over observations I made of a 12-week course in Expressive Writing and details the experience of three students. I have done my best to present this data in a way that lets the readers see what I saw. By this, I mean I have refrained from injecting my thoughts and opinions into the narrative—I do not want to “speak over” the data, and have done my best to reserve my analysis of the data for the final chapter of this dissertation.

The section of Expressive Writing detailed in this case ran on Wednesday nights from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., from September 7 to November 28, 2016. I travel chronologically through this case, but before I begin the narrative, I need to setup the case.
3.1 The Characters

The four cases that comprise this dissertation have five characters. The four people I interviewed requested anonymity. I gave them the pseudonyms they requested, or chose one for them.

3.1.1 Deedee.

Deedee is a science student who enrolled in Expressive Writing with the hopes of improving her skills as a writer. A few years older than her peers, she took time between high school and university to work and decide if university was right for her.

3.1.2 Joannie.

Joannie is a first-year student. Born in the Philippines, she grew up in the U.S.A. and moved to Canada to complete high school and attend university. She has kept a diary for most of her life and has volunteered for *The Medium*, the campus newspaper at UTM.

3.1.3 Rose.

Rose, a student from China, speaks with great enthusiasm—she talks fast and asks a dozen questions all at once. She distinguished herself in class for asking sharp, pointed questions, and in challenging some of the ideas and questions I presented her in our interviews.

3.1.4 Asitwa.

Asitwa, the course instructor, was 33-years-old when he taught the class I observed. He is a sessional instructor who maintains a career in marketing, communications, and data analysis. I work in the same program as Asitwa and have known him for several years as colleague. Asitwa completed his undergraduate education at UTM and took Expressive Writing as a student. The course altered his career trajectory, as it did mine. When I asked Asitwa about how Expressive Writing influenced his education, he said the course was a crucial element in his undergraduate
education and one of the most influential courses he took. Before I visited his class, Asitwa had taught Expressive Writing 18 times since 2009. He teaches three upper level classes in the program and holds a master’s degree in creative writing.

Asitwa told me in an interview that he likes teaching Expressive Writing because the course bursts “writing myths,” in particular the myth that only born writers can write. “A lot of artists have natural abilities, but for those who don’t have the natural abilities they can still be taught how to write well,” he said. “I find with [Expressive Writing] you surprise a lot of students into believing they can do something they never thought they could do.”

If the myth of the born writer is a boil, the lance is teaching “a practice.” Like others in UTM’s writing program (including myself), Asitwa uses Expressive Writing to show students how to act like writers—how to develop the practices of a writer. He focuses his classroom instruction on teaching principles of communications, sentence mechanics, and instruction on form, what Asitwa called “the groundwork of good writing.” He uses repetition to reinforce the ideas and practices of the course. As he explained to me, he drills the students in how to act as a writer. “I’m more of a personal trainer,” he said, “and words and sentences are the weights.”

I asked Asitwa if there was a “right” way to write.

“There is a more correct way of communicating than any other way,” he replied, and then hedged. “I don’t think ‘proper’ is the word. I’d say, ‘more effective.’” The more effective way of communicating engages an audience and transfers an idea clearly. They communicate “the experience.”

Price: Why is an experience important?
Asitwa: Because in Expressive Writing, you’re really creating an experience. Actually, in any type of communication you’re trying to create some form of experience or response. And [the lessons of the course] are the ways to create a more meaningful response. What I’m trying to do, I guess, and what we’re all trying to do in this program, is to get our students to communicate with more meaning, with more purpose—meaningful, purposeful communication, rather than just words on a page.

So, really, I guess my philosophy is to get them to, through reading, through their analyses and writing, to recognize meaning and how meaning is influenced, and how a response is influenced through their words and sentences and ideas. I want them to notice and know that there’s certain ways where you can just say it better or write it better.

Price: But why bother saying it better?

Asitwa: Because it’s more effective for the reader, it’s more effective for the audience.

Asitwa returned to this point about the influence the writer can have on an audience regularly in his teaching, and he often spoke about the importance of students speaking for themselves, in their own voices. During the course, he developed a pragmatic approach to teaching that focused on helping students achieve an effect in their audience. He assigned exercises and assignments designed in an expressivist mode, one that asked students to write “words and sentences and ideas” to which they wanted to attach their names.
3.1.5 The narrator.

I am the other character in this story. Early in this dissertation, I introduced myself and my connection to Expressive Writing. During Asitwa’s class, I took notes and observed the class, but I did not participate in the class.

3.2 The Course Text

Expressive Writing used a single text, *Showing the Story: Creative Nonfiction by New Writers*. This collection of 68 short stories, collected and edited by Guy Allen and the Life Rattle Collective, was published in 2014 by Life Rattle, a small press operating out of Toronto. The book is a peer-model text, meaning it is a teaching text: the stories between its covers provide exemplars that new writers can use to model their own stories. The eight chapters cover a range of topics: childhood, school life, family life, romantic relationships, people, places, and workplaces. The last chapter contains interviews.

The writers featured in the book had little or no publishing experience before having their stories published in *Showing*. I use the text in my classes, and I have a special relationship to the text: stories produced in my classes appear in the book; I read draft chapters of the book before it was published; and I helped proofread its predecessor, *Make It New*. Asitwa has two stories in *Showing*. A story of mine is featured in the text as well.

3.3 The Course Structure

The course had three areas of evaluation:

| Assignments | 70% |
Students wrote six creative non-fiction stories grouped together on the syllabus as “Assignments.” Asitwa explained in the first class that students would write personal narratives, “stories about yourself, your own life experiences.”

Exercises 20%

Throughout the term, students completed a series of technical exercises and reading journals. Asitwa assigned new exercises each week.

Participation 10%

Asitwa’s syllabus states: “This course develops your awareness of writing and the editing process. ‘Being there’ counts in this course. I expect you to attend.”

Asitwa evaluated his students’ work using a portfolio evaluation system. Students submitted work on a weekly basis, but he did not grade course work until after the course had ended. Most instructors in UTM’s Professional Writing department, including myself, use portfolio grading.

Portfolio grading is an important aspect of the course design. By putting emphasis on the final portfolio, the course emphasizes the editorial process. In portfolio-based classes, students have time to write, re-write, edit, and revise work; they also have time to absorb concepts and develop editorial technique over the course of the term.

Many students in Asitwa’s class had never encountered portfolio evaluation before. He explained the rationale for this method of evaluation several times. In his syllabus, he states: “At the end of the course, I assess the level of achievement in your submissions. I look for evidence that you have mastered the fundamentals of the writing and revision techniques you have learned.”
His syllabus also indicates the level of achievement expected from grade-A work: “Because I base evaluation on the best pieces selected from students’ files and because the course offers students a continuous process of editing and revision, the standard for the quality of writing is high, higher than the standard applied in many university courses. To achieve an average mark in this course (65%), students’ files demonstrate their ability to produce correct, readable, detailed and interesting prose. To achieve an above average mark in the course (70% or above), students must produce prose near the contemporary standard for quality publications and demonstrate mastery of editing and revision. To achieve a mark of 80% or above, students must produce exceptional, original prose that meets contemporary standards for quality nonfiction publications.”
4 Case Study: The Classroom

I attended twelve weeks of Expressive Writing and interviewed three students throughout the term and generated case studies of each of their experiences (see the following sections for cases detailing Rose, Deedee, and Joannie). This case documents the activities of Asitwa’s classroom.

4.1 Class #1: Wednesday, September 7, 2016.

I arrived at the first class of Expressive Writing with the Asitwa. He set up his PowerPoint slides; I found a seat on the inside of the room’s huge horseshoe-shaped table. As we neared the class start time of 6:10, students arrived. Twenty-two students showed. Three students were male.

Class began promptly at 6:10. Asitwa introduced himself and the course requirements, then asked everybody in the room to introduce themselves. At Asitwa’s invitation, I introduced myself and my research project and asked students to participate. After introductions, Asitwa lectured on the principles of style and finished class by reading two stories from the course text Showing the Story.

The course continued until 7:55 without a break. I took detailed notes of what happened. My observations appear in the next several sections.

4.1.1 How students introduced themselves.

Asitwa asked students to introduce themselves and explain why they took Expressive Writing. Most students appeared nervous and kept their introductions short, allowing me to capture the response of each student.

Most students enrolled because they want to improve their writing, because they like writing, and because they want to get into the writing program (Expressive Writing is a pre-requisite for higher level courses). Many prefaced their responses by saying a friend had recommended they
take Expressive Writing because it had helped them. Three students gave more elaborate answers worth noting.

Two women said they took the course because they wanted something different. “I’m sick and tired of writing essays that are point-proof, point-proof. It’s a dreadful process. A friend said this is a lot better,” said the woman sitting behind me. Asitwa picked up on her point. This course, he assured her, demands creativity.

Another student said, “Lab reports suck. I want to do something more personal to me without worrying about regurgitating what I had to learn.” Again, Asitwa said the course would give her space to express herself.

Only one student raised the specter of the English language as a reason for taking the course. In the years, I’ve taught Expressive Writing, many students have said they needed to improve their English.

“English writing is one of my biggest problems,” the student said. “A friend said this course would help and it’s fun.” She apologized for her “bad English.” Asitwa told her Expressive Writing would help her and said she would see a change in her English skills by the end of the course.

4.1.2 Four principles of communication.

Asitwa lectured for about twenty minutes. His lecture introduced the principles of communication, and he used these principles to question ideas students might have had about writing. While he focused his lecture on writing—creating text, acting like a writer, thinking like a writer—he regularly connected reading to writing.
The same principles guide my teaching. I first encountered these principles—Economy, Detail, Directness, and Voice—when I took Expressive Writing with Guy Allen, as an undergraduate student. These principles have various origins. Orwell, Pound, Strunk and White and many other writers speak about the need for economy, directness, and detail in writing. Similarly, the principle of voice has been expressed in various ways at various times, including in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1996) and more recently by Elbow (1981). The formulation of these principles that appears here originates with Guy Allen, who taught them to me in 1998.

Asitwa expressed the same understanding of these principles that I hold. For readers who may not know these principles, I will provide a brief explanation of how these principles constitute themselves in writing.

4.1.3 Economy.

The principle of economy matters most in writing. Uneconomical writing bores readers and wastes time. One aspect of economy—word economy—is familiar to most writing teachers. Writers must strive to say more with less—the fewer the words, the better. Economy has a second meaning: How does the writer treat the reader’s time? Time is the most precious commodity we have, and writers must strive to give their readers a return on the time they invest in reading a piece. Writers must understand their audience, and their writing must connect with their audience. When I teach this principle, I often ask my students, half-facetiously, why so much literature details stories of lust, revenge, and loss. Because, students reply, these topics engage us. Changes of fortune are imbued with meaning. We want to read about how others cope with changes and consider how we will act when faced with a similar challenge.
4.1.4 Detail.
Detail is evidence. Writing is believable when readers can draw their own conclusions, and so writers should “show” (present fact) rather than “tell” (present interpretation). (Another way of defining showing and telling is to describe who controls interpretation. With writing that tells, meaning depends on the writer. With writing that shows, meaning depends on the reader.) As much as possible, writers will want to turn words into pictures. In this way, writing is a visual art: We project images onto the reader’s mind. When details are unclear, writing becomes abstract and flimsy. Abstract, flimsy writing bores, confuses, and slows readers.

4.1.5 Directness.
In all human affairs, honesty is a good policy. Wallace (2008) says a contract exists between readers and writers. This contract is built on trust. The writer agrees to give the reader something (entertainment, knowledge) in return for the privilege of having some of the reader’s time. When the writer lies, fibs, confabulates, exaggerates, or leaves out important details, they break the contract and the reader flees. Writers who use cliché, for instance, violate the principle of directness, since so many clichés are associated with dishonest communications.

4.1.6 Voice.
In Writing with Power (1980), Elbow calls voice the “mother’s milk” of writing, the substance that sustains a text. Voice expresses itself in how a writer speaks, in the diction, as well as in the subject matter the writer choses to discuss. Voice is the writer’s personality. Our experiences in life, who we are and where we come from, influence how we speak, what we believe, and how we present ourselves. No two people are same; no two voices are the same. We give ourselves away in our writing by how we speak. Shy writers hide their voice by adopting a different voice. The student who hasn’t read the assigned text might hide his incompetence by pretending to
sound like an expert. We can usually tell when somebody’s faking the accent. The same is true when a writer puts on a fake voice.

4.1.7 Asitwa’s framing of reading and writing.

Throughout his discussion of the principles of communication, Asitwa spoke about the role of the writer. He tied this role to the principle of directness and the writer-reader contract—writers must constantly earn and nurture the reader’s trust. “We’re trying to make a connection from the self to the other,” he said. One way to earn trust is to tell the truth. The other way is to be responsible. The writer’s responsibility is to “communicate clearly.”

“Communication is the job of the writer, not the reader,” said Asitwa. “I’m responsible for communicating clearly.” He told his class to “make it your responsibility to improve.”

Readers have an obligation to the writer, Asitwa said. “The reader is the one that extracts meaning” from communications. “Writers must make extraction easy.” How readers extract meaning, what extraction means, and what extraction entails did not come up in his lecture. But he did return to the subject of reading at the end of the class after he discussed the peer editing workshops.

4.1.8 Introducing peer editing workshops.

Asitwa introduced the course by saying, “I’m not here to teach you how to write. I’m here to teach you how to refine the writing you’re already doing.” Expressive Writing was not a writing course as much as it is “an editing-focused course.” He described a major component of the course: the student-run editing groups.
Like Asitwa, I require students to organize peer editorial groups—every instructor in the program does. Asitwa told his class that these groups allow students to “hear and provide feedback.” Listening to how you react to another’s story “informs your writing,” he said. 

In these editorial groups (Asitwa detailed how these groups operated in a later lecture), students would develop a skill at “noticing.” In this case, noticing how a story thrills or bores a reader. “Noticing what other writers do informs and improves our own writing,” said Asitwa.

He went on to describe how students can develop these skills in noticing the world around them. “I encourage you to do what writers do: eavesdrop. Put into words what you see.” Those who ride the bus have lots of opportunity to practice their skills of observation. “The bus is like a classroom,” he said. “Try to notice things. Be observant with writing and reading and environments.”

4.1.9 Reading two stories.

When Asitwa went through the course syllabus, he encouraged students to read widely during the term. He suggested students read “good literary journals, like *Granta*.” He said, “The more you read, the more you will find your voice.”

He ended the first class by reading aloud two stories from the first chapter of *Showing the Story*: “Sesame Street,” by Laurel Waterman, and “Away Game” by Lauren Tashiro.

“Sesame Street” is a three-page story about a little girl and her father. The story is narrated by a little girl, who tries to wake up her father so that she can watch *Sesame Street*. Her father, still asleep and “without a lady friend beside him this morning” (Waterman, 2014, p. 7), tells her to wait until 7:00. The problem is, the child does not know how to tell the time, and so she constantly interrupts him to ask if it is 7:00. She passes the time by studying her father’s hairy
ears and big nostrils. When it is time, he wakes up and agrees to make her blueberry pancakes. The story ends with the narrator asking, again, if it is time for *Sesame Street*.

“Sesame Street” is a story in which almost nothing happens. It is a story about waiting. It is also a story about a daughter’s relationship with her father. Asitwa’s students reacted positively to the story. They discussed the vivid details and the plain, direct writing style. The discussion revolved around what was unspoken in the story. Where is the child’s mother? What are mornings like for the child when the father has a “lady friend” in bed with him?

I detected excitement in the room during the discussion. The story is plain-spoken and makes the mundane parts of life—like waiting for somebody to wake up—engaging. The students in Asitwa’s class remarked at the clarity of the story and how it was “like a movie.” One student said she liked the “sweetness” the story shows between the father and daughter. “It is natural,” she said.

The students enjoyed “Sesame Street” because it is a good little story and because they saw the possibilities for their own writing. Not everybody has lived a life of tragedy, and not everybody has war stories to tell, but we all have mundane experiences to share, if we can learn how to make the experiences engaging. Asitwa made this point in the discussion. “It’s a simple story, but it says a lot.”

Asitwa read a second story to the class, “Away Game” by Lauren Tashiro. “Away Games” takes place inside a car following a hockey game. The narrator, who plays goal, let in seven goals. Her father tells her she played “like crap” (Tashiro, 2014, p. 20) and itemizes all she did wrong until she cries. The father, the narrator tells us, has never played hockey before, but he acts like an expert. The story ends with the same line it began with: “I hate away games” (p. 20, 21).
The tone of the class discussion changed. Students expressed their shock and disgust with the father’s cruelty. The discussion focused on the drama and on the character of the father. Asitwa prompted students to consider the language of the story, and how the language helped the audience to see the father’s character. Asitwa asked: Did the students notice how clear the language and imagery were? Did they notice the simplicity of the sentence structure and the author’s choice of plain, direct words? Students pointed out the subtle details Tashiro included about the father, like the fact that his wife drove the car and how the car “rock[ed] under his weight” (p. 20). Asitwa re-read select passages of the story and one perceptive students noted the verbs Tashiro chose to associate with her father—slam, shout, scoff. “They are harsh words,” the student said.

On comment was repeated in discussions of both stories: “It’s so relatable.” One student said she had been in a similar circumstance as Tashiro. Another said she “felt like she was there” and this feeling of witnessing the events of the story for herself made the story easy to understand.

Asitwa assigned homework and dismissed the students. The first class ended on a positive note. As I filed out of the class, I noticed students smiling and speaking to themselves about the stories they had just heard. They seemed energized.

4.2 Homework Assigned in Class #1

Asitwa assigned exercises and assignments at the end of each class. “Exercises” refer to reading journals and other exercises that require students to reproduce a writing technique. “Assignments” refer to the personal narratives students wrote during the term. I present, verbatim, Asitwa’s homework below and after each class description.
Exercise 1, The Twenty-Minute Journal (x6): Write for twenty minutes every day for the next six days. Write as much as you can in twenty minutes each time. Do not think about content. Just write. Keep “the Judge” out of your mind and away from your writing desk. Observe “the Judge” as it tries to interfere, but keep writing. Write, write and write. On each page, write the date, and the number of words you wrote on that day. The objective is to write as many words as you can in twenty minutes. I will not read many journal entries. Sometimes, I look at them later in the course to understand your process as a writer.

Homework Important – All exercises are due one hour before the following class. All homework is to be submitted on Portal. I do not accept email submissions or hard-copies.

Exercise 2, Rhetorical Analysis (2 Marks): Do a rhetorical analysis on any other story from Chapter 1 in Showing the Story.

Observe your reactions to the story. Observe especially the story’s command of your attention.

Rhetorical Analysis: Understanding how a communication works, or fails to work. How does the writer of the story get the story to work? What devices does he/she use?

Observe: Economy, Directness, Detail, and Voice.

4.3 Class #2: Wednesday, September 14, 2016

In the second class, Asitwa opened his lecture by taking up last week’s homework. First came a discussion of the 20-minute freewriting journals. For ten minutes, the class discussed the difficulties with freewriting. The students appeared engaged and eager to share their experiences. Many said freewriting was therapeutic, difficult, annoying, fun, not fun. Asitwa closed the
discussion on freewriting by encouraging students to keep up the practice of freewriting every day because freewriting is a practice many “professional writers” use.

Next, the class took up the rhetorical analyses. Students shared their reactions to the stories in the chapter and said what they liked and what they did not like about the stories. Discussion focused on the last story in the chapter, “Piss” by Sara Middleton (2014a). In this story, the young narrator wets her bed. Her father shames her.

“‘Piss’ was very depressing,” said one student.

“All she does is show us what happened,” countered another.

The class discussion revolved around the nature of the narrator’s voice in “Piss.” One student suggested the voice of the narrator was too mature—a child doesn’t sound as mature, nor is a child’s diction so advanced. “How child-like should a child narrator be?” a student asked. The class discussed the question at length but came to no definitive conclusion.

Asitwa closed the discussion on the stories by telling students to “engage” with the stories and ask why writers made the choices they made, and to consider word choices and plot decisions. He told students to try to relate what they read to what they write. “Look for gaps in the stories,” he said. “Keep on reading this way, being critical of what you see. Look for those gaps and let that inform your writing.”

4.4 Interfering Factors.

After taking up the homework, Asitwa reviewed the previous week’s lesson on the four principles of communication. He emphasized the need for writers to maintain credibility and trust with readers. “The trust you build with readers is so important,” he said. He emphasized the
relational aspect of writing and reading and reminded students of the contract that exists between readers and writers: “You have to keep in mind how you treat the readers and whether they will continue to believe you, as a writer.”

Next, Asitwa introduced the topic for the day: Wordiness. If economy is a principle of good communications, an aspiration, writers should identify elements that inhibit economy. If writing is not economical, it is wordy. Wordy structures interfere with economy. Wordiness, then, is an “interfering factor.”

“What does wordiness look like?” Asitwa asked the class and answered his own question by explaining four forms of wordiness—redundancy, phony intensifiers, stretchers, and thinkeners.

Redundancy is unintentional repetition. Phrases like “advance notice” and “most often” needlessly repeat an idea. Phony intensifiers are adverbial phrases that writers use to try to enhance adjectives. The harder a writer tries to amplify meaning with intensifiers, the less meaningful the statement becomes. An example from Asitwa’s slides: “It’s quite hot today. Ms. Strauss is really busy right now.” Asitwa told students that they can cut intensifiers. Indeed, they should, he said, because “when a sentence is intensified, it erodes meaning, erodes trust.” He edited his examples to read: “It’s hot today. Ms. Strauss is busy right now.”

Stretchers and thickeners took more time to explain. When writers stretch their writing, they turn one word into many words. A careless writer will stretch “now” into “at this point in time.” Asitwa put examples of stretched sentences on the projector and encouraged students to edit them aloud. This portion of the class played like a game. Students appeared to enjoy themselves as they tried to eliminate stretchers from the examples Asitwa projected on the screen.
Thickeners are something different. Writers thicken their writing by inserting complex language into the text. Legal language, with all its Latinate phrasing is, for most readers, a foreign language. Asitwa highlighted academese as another thick language students should avoid because readers react negatively to exclusive, pompous language. Words and phrases like “heretofore mentioned,” “aforementioned,” and “herein” sound unusual to most reader’s ears because these words and phrases are not plain, everyday language. “Skip the smart talk and state the point,” Asitwa told his class. “Thickeners will not make you sound intelligent. At best, they can make you sound pompous.”

From a technical standpoint, Asitwa’s teaching of wordiness gave students instruction about what to look for when they read a text. This was the beginning of his instruction in editing. He also introduced terminology to the class when he introduced the parts of speech and defined terms like “adverbs” and “adjectives.”

Asitwa couched his discussion of wordiness in relational terms. At several points, he spoke about the effects of language choices. How, he asked often, do you respond when you hear wordy prose? His mockery of thickened, stretched language enforced this purpose—when language doesn’t work, it’s funny. He spoke about how readers interpret communications and how communications fail. “We want to write for an audience,” he said more than once. “We need to think about our readers and make conscious choices in our work, not unconscious choices.”

4.4.1 Reading.

Asitwa ended class by reading a story from the text: “Miss Fitzgerald,” by Ebi Agbeyegbe (2014). When he said he would read a story, a student said, “It’s story time.”
“Miss Fitzgerald” takes place in Lagos, Nigeria, and tells about a boy’s crush on his teacher, Miss Fitzgerald. Ebi fawns for his teacher’s attention, tells her she smells nice, and writes a poem for her. When he goes to give her the poem, Mr. Malcolm, Ebi’s math teacher, shows up to the class, kisses Miss Fitzgerald, and says to her, “Ready for lunch, babe?” (p. 63). Ebi drops his poem and storms from the class.

Many students read along in their books. Others listened quietly. A few typed on their computers. I know the story well and watched the students. They reacted vocally to the text—they laughed at young Ebi’s crush on Miss Fitzgerald and sighed when Ebi drops the poem he had written for her.

Asitwa finished reading and asked about the sigh he heard from some of the students: “How does one line produce such a reaction?” Students responded: because it was unexpected; because it was sad. Asitwa moved the conversation by asking how the story “satisfies economy.” The students identified what they liked—the details they heard, the funny, relatable situation of the story.

After economy, Asitwa asked how the story exemplified the other principles of communications: directness, detail, and voice. Students focused again on the question of voice. Was the voice “authentic” to the voice of a child, they wondered as they discussed the writer’s choices. They reached no definitive conclusion, but I saw them trying to understand how the text affected them.

### 4.5 Homework Assigned in Class #2

Exercise 3: Write two wordy passages, at least 50 words each. Feel free, have fun with these. We will read some out in the next class. You may use some of the examples of wordiness provided in lecture two.
Assignment 1a: Write a story about something that you observed or experienced as a child. Read Chapter One of *Showing the Story* to see examples of how other students have handled this assignment.

Special Instructions:

1. Use simple, everyday words — the kinds of words you use when you talk to your friends. But, avoid acronyms and heavy slang.

2. Limit yourself to one idea per sentence — and unless you have good reason to do otherwise, write sentences containing ten words or less.

3. Use details — Generalities are weak and dull. Details make pictures that interest readers and place them into your story. Details include: place, time, names of people and places, dialogue (what people say to each other), and actions.

4. Locate your reader at the beginning of the story — Show us where and when the story takes place. Introduce the characters.

5. Build your story around one incident or a series of incident — Do not try to depict a long period of time, or a complex chain of events. Focus on one occasion, one day, one hour, one action. Focus your story on something small.

**4.6 Class #3: Wednesday, September 21, 2016**

Asitwa opened the third class by introducing peer editorial groups. Asitwa assigned students randomly to editorial groups and provided a rational for why students should participate in weekly editorial meetings with their peers: “Editing and reading another’s work improves your own reading.” Editing sharpens the eye, and over time, improves a writer’s skill. “You will get to
the point when you do good stuff [as a writer] naturally. Certain practices come more naturally.”

He added, “You want to become more conscious of what you’re doing as a writer.”

Over the course of the lecture, Asitwa developed the idea that editing is a form of reflective reading. Editors must “notice” what the writer does and give the writer feedback about how the writing works. He linked the editor’s task to the four principles of communications. Editors need to ask: Does the writing engage the reader/editor? Does the writing have economy? Does the reader trust the writer? Is the writer credible? Are details missing? Is the story clear?

After arranging the groups and giving students time to trade contact information with their groupmates, Asitwa provided guidelines for how groups should operate. Students should meet in person, print out copies of the stories under review for their editors, and read the stories out loud. Reading out loud, Asitwa said, will allow writers and readers to “catch what you don’t catch when you read to yourself.”

Asitwa instructed students to break their editing into a three-part process. First, editors should focus on the strengths. “Point out what’s working in the story,” he said. Itemizing the strengths of a story builds a writer’s confidence and highlights how and where a story positively moves a reader. Second, editors should “focus on what’s not working”—either on a mechanical level, or at the level of the narrative. Third, editors should identify opportunities in the story, including ways to refine the narrative and build the character. “This is the editor’s contribution,” Asitwa said. “You ask, how can I help this writer make [the story] better?”

Next, Asitwa articulated a vision of editing as a creative activity. Editors give encouragement and support and lend ideas and creativity to the writer. To edit effectively, editors must articulate how a story fails to connect with the reader, and this means identifying factors that interfere with
the flow of a narrative and the reader’s engagement. These factors may appear at the sentence level, i.e., wordiness, or at the level of the narrative, i.e., whether a story has a satisfying resolution.

Asitwa said: “When you’re editing, it’s not ‘do this, do that.’ You want to know how something interferes [with the flow of the story] and make your choice [about how to articulate a solution that removes the interference].”

4.6.1 Discussing the first story.

The class took up homework. They began with a discussion of the wordiness exercise and how meandering, verbose, bloated prose confused and bored them. Asitwa mocked “gibberish” prose found in academic texts, and students who had written academese volunteered to read their wordy, academic exercises. One student did not understand the assignment. She read a passage that was cleanly written. Students objected: “That sounds good!” Asitwa encouraged the student to re-write the exercise to show she understood what wordy prose looks like. “Know what it looks like, so you can avoid it,” he said.

Next, the class discussed Assignment 1A, the childhood story students had to write. Asitwa asked the class what they found challenging about the assignment. A lengthy conversation followed. Students said they found starting and ending their stories difficult—issues most writers struggle with. Midway through the discussion, students turned their attention to how readers might react to their writing. One student said she tried consciously to remember her readers and the details she needed to give them: “I’m not talking to another me. They don’t know what I’m thinking.” Another said she had trouble writing a story with emotional weight. She worried about how readers might judge her writing: “I don’t know if the reader will get judgy.”
Asitwa offered a range of advice. Writers, he said, “need to create an experience for the reader. Capture the experience so the reader can feel it.” Regarding how to end stories, Asitwa pointed to the first chapter of the textbook and asked if the stories ended with morals. No, they did not, said a student. And why? “Morals and wrapped-up endings don’t work. They are not real. We want to present the real,” Asitwa said.

4.6.2 Interfering factor (verbs) and reading.

Asitwa lectured on verbs. He defined terms and spoke of the importance of verbs to the principles of economy, detail, directness, and voice. Using sentence diagramming, he spoke about how verbs relate to subjects and objects to create sentences. He urged students to understand and use the active voice, what he and students began calling the “S.V.O. sentence.”

Asitwa gave special attention in his lecture to reading. He introduced the rhetorical analysis, an exercise that asks students to close-read a story and explain how the story manipulates their emotions. He explained how rhetorical analyses can help students read, understand, and edit a text. To analyze the rhetoric of a text, readers must gauge their reaction to the text, he said. Do they understand? Are they confused? Do they feel bogged down? What do they like? What turns them off? Readers must become cognizant of their reactions and how the text either moves them toward the writer’s point of view or pushes them away from the reader. Readers and editors should understand how a text moves or does not move them, and how they might improve the text’s power to move an audience. He referenced the editorial strategies he had taught so far. Replace flimsy, dead verbs with strong, active verbs, he advised. Vivid verbs can shock a reader into engaging with a text and communicate a message more clearly.

Asitwa concluded the class by reading “Silver Spoons,” by Mike Pitocco (2014), a story about a young man’s complicated relationship with his overbearing yet loving father. Before he read the
story from the course text, Asitwa asked students to listen for how the writer used verbs and how they react to the text. He read; many students followed along in their books. The class discussion unfolded like a rhetorical analysis: students spoke about what they liked and didn’t like, and why they liked or disliked certain passages. They discussed the emotional content of the story and how the characters expressed ideas, moods, and emotions. What began as a discussion about how the author used verbs and nouns to shape the character of the narrator’s father came around to a personal question: “How do you communicate to your family that you care?”

Asitwa ended class by assigning homework.

4.7 Homework Assigned in Class #3

Assignment 1b: Take your Assignment 1a and revise it. Rewrite the assignment so that most of your sentences rely on active, specific, meaning-making verbs, and SVO sentences. Revise other aspects of your story as well—such as details—ideally after you have met with your Editing Group.

Also: Read a story of your choice, that was not read in class, from Chapter 2, and be prepared to discuss the story next week. Start thinking about what you will write for Assignment 2a: A story of a School experience. No need to write or submit anything for 2a at this point.

Exercise 4: Find 25 verbs for “to walk”, and another 25 verbs for “to look”, so 50 verbs in total. Examples of “to walk”: stagger, prance, shuffle, etc. Examples of “to look”: stare, gaze, view, etc.

Assignment 2a: Write about an incident you have experienced or observed in school.

Chapter Two of Make It New contains some stories other students have written in
response to this assignment. Use simple, direct language. Make pictures with details.

Guide the reader’s thoughts with your choices of detail. Use SVO sentences whenever possible. Use specific verbs to communicate the action you want.

4.8 Class #4: Wednesday, September 28, 2016

Asitwa titled his lecture for the day, “The verb to be, cliché, and imitation of meaning.” He began class with a review of the previous week’s homework, focusing on discussing how sentences read and how the students responded to the sentences when they heard them. “You don’t want the reader saying, this doesn’t read well,” he counselled students.

Asitwa lectured on verbs. Students should reduce their reliance on the verb “to be,” he said. “A heavy reliance on ‘to be’ slows the pace of the reading.” He demonstrated how eliminating “to be” creates sharper, more economical prose. Here is one example:

The original: “There is one explanation for this story’s ending in Faulkner’s diary.”

The edit: “Faulkner’s diary has one explanation for this story’s ending.”

Asitwa presented students with several examples of how abstract verbs make sentences fuzzy, and as a class they edited out the weak verbs. The class seemed to enjoy the exercise. It was like playing a game. Asitwa presented two sentences and asked students which version sounded more authoritative. Discussion followed. By the end of the exercise, a consensus arose: the edited version, the one with the clearer verb, sounded better in every case.

4.8.1 Cliché.

Next, Asitwa lectured on cliché. He advised students to remove cliché from their writing.

“Originality is valued over cliché,” he told the class. He defined terms, shared the histories of
famous cliché, and conducted an in-class exercises where he asked students to work in small
groups to generate a list of clichés. Before students shared their lists, Asitwa asked students to
“notice your reaction when you hear the clichés.” Most students reacted with laughter. This
exercise generated enthusiasm and comradery. It seemed to me that everybody got the point of
the lesson: cliché inhibits clarity, economy, detail, directness, and voice.

Asitwa ended the class by reading “Pot O’Gold,” a longer story from the text written by Sara
Middleton (2014b). Before Asitwa could read, a student raised her hand and asked, “Sir, what
books do you like?” Asitwa listed authors and books he enjoyed. The student who had asked the
question wrote down the names Asitwa gave her. Then he read “Pot O’Gold.”

“That was really good,” said the first student to speak. Students presented their emotional
responses to the story before the discussion shifted to “what’s going on” in the story—plot points
and the characterizations. “What did you notice about how the writer wrote the characters?”
Asitwa asked students. “Do we get closure?” “What is the last thing we see?” Students answered
Asitwa’s questions, and then he explained how he understood the story, giving students a chance
to see his views on what the story means and how the text operates.

Asitwa also drew students’ attention to the technical aspects of the writing. “What did you notice
in terms of sentence structure?” he asked them. “Did you see the verb to be? Is it predominant?”
No, the students replied, it was not.

The reading and the discussion of the text lasted for almost an hour—half the length of the class.
Asitwa concluded by assigning homework.
4.9 Homework Assigned in Class #4

Exercise 5 - Cliché Story: Write a brief story about anything you like, using as many clichés as possible. Try to use at least one cliché per sentence. Your objective is to make no original meaning whatsoever. Love stories make good subjects for cliché stories, and so do sports. You will see that when you concentrate clichés you become a comic writer. This is a comic technique.

Exercise 6 - Rhetorical Analysis: Do a rhetorical analysis of any story, other than “Silver Spoons”, from Chapter 3, Family, in Showing the Story.

Exercise 7 – Cliché List: Type up the clichés your group just came up with, and submit them for this exercise. Have at least 15 clichés in your list. This exercise is only open to students who were in class and on today’s attendance.

Assignment 3a: Write a detailed account of something you have experienced or observed in family life. Avoid generality. Base your piece on a particular incident or a series of incidents. Focus on all that you have learned in relation to Economy and Directness in this piece. Avoid the verb-to-be and clichés. Use predominantly SVO sentences. And, feel free to vary the length of your sentences while maintaining efficiency.

4.10 Class #5: Wednesday, October 5, 2016

Asitwa’s class had established a groove by the fifth class. The class was friendly and talkative when I entered the room. Asitwa loaded his slideshow and began class by taking up the homework. Students read the cliché stories they had written. Students laughed and seemed to want to one-up each other to see who wrote the most cliché-ridden story. Next, Asitwa began his lecture of the day: “Pronoun Hazards, the Adverb, and Active & Passive Voice.”
As he did in other lectures, Asitwa couched his discussion of language in terms of how an editor works. When he spoke about pronouns, he described how editors remove pronouns that create confusion. Pronouns are “a bad gang pushing around good sentences,” he said, adding that ambiguous pronouns “interfere with directness and give writing an abstract feel.” Editors replace ambiguous pronouns with clear, specific nouns. “We want readers to know what we’re saying,” he said. Asitwa projected examples on the screen and asked students, “How does this sound?”

At several points, Asitwa drew his students’ attention to how readers respond to writing. His instruction tended to give students a way of behaving in relation to their readers, rather than providing them with hard-and-fast rules about how language should work. “Readers associate loose pronouns, clichés and jargon with dishonesty or under the table motives,” he said.

The discussion of pronouns shifted to a discussion of how readers respond to adjectives and adverbs and how writers and editors should handle adjectives and adverbs. His main point was that writers should adhere to the principle of economy and use modifiers only to emphasize an emotion. He gave an example: “The cheerleader gyrated wildly before the screaming fans.” This sentence, he said, does not need the adverb “wildly” because the verb “gyrated” and the “screaming fans” suggest a certain amount of wildness in the gyration. But, he said, a writer may want to use an adverb if it helps communicate a specific emotion, as in, “The cheerleader gyrated conservatively before the screaming fans.”

4.10.1 Active voice.

Asitwa concluded his lecture with a discussion of the active voice. He defined terms and explained how the grammar of an active sentence differed from a passive sentence. He emphasized the rhetorical possibilities of both constructions: the active voice focuses on the actions of the subject, while the passive voice “call[s] attention to the receiver of the action, the
object.” One of his slides provides a clear guideline for students: “Maintaining a predominantly Active Voice emphasizes the action and progresses the story. However, Passive Voice allows you to paint the subject in the sentence as a victim; show the subject does not have control over their circumstances; and show that the subject is not doing.”

The class concluded with two readings. The first was a passage from Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*. The class discussed their reaction to the text and how McCarthy used active and passive constructions to create mood. The second reading came from the text, “Shit Tire: Fenelon Falls,” a story by Andrew Ihamaki (2014a). The story details Ihamaki’s exhausting experience working in Canadian Tire in his hometown of Fenelon Falls. The class’s discussion focused on the ways the writer used detail to create a relatable story. Asitwa prompted students to notice how few passive sentences the story contained. “The lack of passive sentences contributes to the rushed pace of the story,” he said.

Asitwa assigned homework and concluded class.

**4.11 Homework Assigned in Class #5**

Assignment 4a: Write a piece about a job you have held. Your objective is to show readers what the job was like. Show the job through details. Go as far as being repetitive if that is how your job was/is. Focus on some small part of the job that will allow you to be detailed. Be sure to name places and people. The “Work” chapter in Showing the Story has examples of how other students have handled this assignment. Read through this chapter before you write. If you see things you admire, imitate them; writers imitate things they admire in other writers.

Assignment 2b and 1c: Revise assignment 2a and 1b with regard to the topics discussed in Lecture 5. And submit the revisions under “Revision Submissions”.

Exercise 8: Find two instances of Passive Voice in any of your two stories. Identify the story, and convert the sentences to Active to see if they have the same effect; discuss the difference after the conversion in a couple sentences. If you cannot find an instance of Passive voice in your writing, look at other sources (newspaper, blog, etc.), identify your source, and discuss the effect of the conversion.

4.12 Class #6: Wednesday, October 12, 2016

Asitwa described class 6 as “a class in detailing.” He built his lecture around the idea that writers should create “an experience” for their readers. Writers should strive for concreteness, not abstraction. He advised students to use concrete nouns—nouns readers can see, hear, feel—instead of abstract nouns. “Abstract nouns do not help us see or sense,” he said. Similarly, he suggested students be wary about using adjectives that summarize a character. “When you set yourself up for an opportunity for further detail, take it,” he said, reading from his slides. “Often, we can recognize these opportunities by spotting general adjectives, or abstract nouns.”

These lessons provided a foundation for his discussion of “showing and telling,” a well-known principle in writing that distinguishes presentational writing (showing) with descriptive writing (telling). Writing that shows “makes words into pictures.” Writing that tells summarizes experiences, in the same way that using the adjective “secretive” to describe Brenda (“Dave thought Brenda was acting secretive”) summarizes Brenda’s character and hides the evidence. (Asitwa presented his class with a revised sentence that showed Brenda’s secrecy: “Brenda slammed the dresser drawer shut and spun around. ‘Dave...I...I thought you wouldn’t be home until six.’”). As Asitwa explained, telling leaves out “the vital ingredients that make the reader believe in our story.” Asitwa concluded class with an in-class exercise that asked students to translate passages that “told” into passages that “showed.”
He finished the class by reading the story “Yellow,” another story by Andrew Ihamaki (2014b). Asitwa asked the class to pay attention to how the writer “showed the story” and read the story aloud.

“Yellow” is a story about awkward love. It takes place at a grade school dance and begins with Andrew, the narrator, “maneuver[ing] around Jessica’s toes” as he “rotate[s]” her in “tight, timid circles” (p.107). Andrew has a crush on Jessica and cannot do more than tell Jessica how pretty she is. She replies by smiling.

The students enumerated the many ways the story “showed” evidence. They noted the sensory details—the abundant visual details and the many scents Ihamaki included. They noted the precision of the verbs and the movie-like imagery found in the opening passage:

> The soles of my sneakers chirp against the tiled gym floor as I maneuver around Jessica’s toes. Speakers blast the song “Yellow” by Coldplay from a mixed CD. Overhead streamers stir with the weight of everyone’s hot breath. The basketball nets catch the lights from the strobe. Boys and girls stand separated at each end of the court, cradling the arcs of the three-point lines. Only Jessica and I, and three other couples, dance together (p. 107).

The students seemed charmed by the story and the awkwardness of the young love. They spoke about the visual details Ihamaki included to “show” the story, but they also discussed what he left out: every time Andrew tells Jessica she is pretty, she smiles. Is she smiling because the situation is so awkward or because she likes him too?
By this point in the course, a regular band of five or six students dominated the conversation. Other students, mostly on the fringe of the room, stared into their laptops. With midterm arrived, I felt a malaise creeping in.

Asitwa assigned homework and dismissed the class.

4.13 Homework Assigned in Class #6
Assignment 5a: Write a story about a place or a relationship. Showing the Story contains examples of work students have done in response to these assignments. Use showing details to create psychic space. Use details that help the reader visualize this place or this relationship so they may have an emotional response to it.

Assignment 3b: Heavily revise 3a and submit it under “Revision Submissions.”

Exercise 9: Type up and edit the exercise we did in class. Add to this if you feel the need to.

4.14 Class #7: Wednesday, October 19, 2016
“Psychic Space is a cool thing to use in your writing,” Asitwa said when he class seven. Asitwa delivered this lecture with more passion than previous lectures. He normally lectures with energy, but this class he seemed particularly keyed to the topic. Midway through his lecture he stopped to deal with a distracted student—something I had not seen him do in previous classes. In previous classes, students at the fringe read from their laptops. Today, one student showed he had become too comfortable. He stretched himself across two chairs—he was so low in the chairs I thought he might sink through the concrete floor—and fooled around on his laptop. Asitwa snapped at him: “Close your laptop.”
Maybe Asitwa was tired of the bored look on that student’s face. (I know I was.) I think Asitwa was also enthused about the topic—“psychic space.” He had ended class the week before on a cliffhanger. “Next week,” he said, “we’ll talk about something really cool—psychic space.” Finally, today, he would reveal the cool secret—and some goofball was lounging across two chairs.

The concept of psychic space extends the principle of “showing and telling.” Psychic space exists in the reader’s mind. When a writer creates a clear picture—when they show details—a reader can become absorbed in a story. Asitwa described psychic space as a Venn diagram: one circle is the reader; the other circle is the writer; the overlap is the psychic space. “We create it, they occupy it,” said Asitwa. “Details create a psychic space that the reader can occupy.”

Figure 2: Psychic Space: Where the writer and reader meet to create meaning.

Asitwa’s developed the concept of psychic space when he answered student questions. Writers who “tell” too much, who provide summary rather than detailed narrative, can push their readers
away. Writers must create a situation where readers feel they are “involved in making meaning.”

“Psychic space is the use of detail to influence reader’s response.” It is “a room furnished with detail.” Asitwa buttressed his discussion of theory with tips on how writers can use details to create psychic space, including directing reader’s attention to specific details and avoiding gaps in the narrative and holes in details. Writers must “play on the senses” of readers and write “with the reader in mind.”


The class held the first of many workshops in this class. Asitwa began the activity with instructions on how editorial workshops run: the writer reads the story out loud and the other students in the room (“the editors”) take notes on what they hear. The editors identify “in detail” strengths, edits, and opportunities in the piece. Asitwa defined strengths as the elements the editors enjoyed and the places in the text where they felt engaged. Edits were not “weaknesses,” but places where students felt the text “was not working.” “Where do you feel your attention drop?” Asitwa asked. Opportunities, he reminded students, include ideas and possibilities for modifying and sharpening the story.

The workshop began. The student writer read. Some students listened, and some students stared into their laptop screens. The class offered few comments at first; silence hung in the air. Asitwa punctured the silence by explaining what he liked and what edits he might make. He modelled the workshop process by offering a series of strengths, listing edits to build the character, and itemizing questions he wanted answered. He encouraged students, again, to contribute to the workshopping process: “Editing will help you improve as a writer.”

Asitwa ended the class with a guided writing exercise. He instructed students to imagine a setting and to write about this setting using clear, concrete details. Students read their examples to the
class and people commented on what they liked. Asitwa instructed students to revise the guided writing exercise for homework, assigned next week’s homework, and dismissed the class.

4.15 Homework Assigned in Class #7

Submit 2 Revisions: Submit 2 revisions of any assignments under “Revision Submissions”. And again, do not wait for me to assign revisions. You should be revising on your own.

Exercise 10: Type up and edit the exercise we did in class. Add to this if you feel the need to. Note: This exercise is only open for submission by students who attended today’s lecture.

Exercise 11: Discuss 3 potential people (that you know and have access to) that you are interested in interviewing. Describe why you are interested in interviewing them by referencing one of the “3 reasons for interviewing” someone for each interviewee. If you have one person that you are certain you want to interview, you may write about that one person in greater detail for this exercise. Be detailed. Length: Write a paragraph on each interviewee.

4.16 Class #8: Wednesday, October 26, 2016

Class eight had two workshops. The workshop provided a study in contrast.

The class opened with the first workshop. A student read a story and sat back to receive feedback. The editors offered little feedback, and the writer did not write down the feedback she received. Asitwa stood up tall and told the students at the back of the room to close their laptops. He looked at his notes and identified tactics the writer had used. He asked the class about the way the writer had detailed the setting: “Did you see that?” The workshop did not move; editors did not say much.
The second workshop, at the end of class, operated differently, even though Asitwa did nothing to prep the class—he did not reiterate instructions on how the writer should read, and he did not remind students of how to edit or what to look for. In fact, he did not tell people to pay attention or warn them about their laptops. Yet the second workshop moved at a steady clip.

The second story was, to me, the better story. The student grappled with a topic of consequence—how she, the writer, would avoid her mother’s anger. The student read the story clearly (more clearly than the first reader), and the student editors had more to say. They framed their comments according to the strengths of the piece (they said, “I like,” “I felt,” “I saw,” “I could see”).

4.16.1 Parallelism.

Asitwa’s lecture, nestled between workshops, introduced the concept of parallelism. He defined the term (“Parallelism is the repetition of identical grammatical elements, a repetitive patterning”) and discussed the benefits of using parallelism (one reason: “parallelism makes writing rhythmic, and memorable”). He provided several examples of how parallelism works, drawing first on transformational linguistics to explain how grammar works before showing videos of notable, highly parallel speeches (Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream speech”) and reading examples from his slide deck.

Next, Asitwa returned to speaking about readers and the rhetorical response writing generates in a reader. He told his students to consider how readers respond to “language situations.” How does the structure of the language influence the emotional content of the communications? And, importantly, how does the language influence the reader’s emotions?
4.17 Homework Assigned in Class #8

Exercise 12: Read the “Interview” chapter in the textbook, and do a rhetorical analysis of one interview story of your choice. Be detailed in your analysis and discuss what you feel worked well in the writing, and/or did not work well. Provide direct examples of your observation. Review Lectures 1 and 3 to understand my expectations of a rhetorical analysis.

Exercise 13: Find an interview article in a newspaper, magazine, or online. Discuss whether this interview is to:

1. Get access to that person’s expertise, knowledge.
2. Capture details of a special experience that person had.
3. To reproduce that person’s interesting personality.

Discuss what details the writer presents in the interview to allow you to come to this understanding. Provide relevant, direct examples from the text.

4.18 Class #9: Wednesday, November 2, 2016

The ninth class had a similar structure as the eighth class: a lecture bookended with student workshops. And as with class eight, students said almost nothing in the first workshop but participated in the second workshop.

Joannie read first. (Joannie was one of the students I interviewed over the course of the term. Her case appears below.) To my ears, her story sounded strong. I filled a page with feedback I could have given her, had I participated in the workshop. The feedback she received from her peers, however, was vague and generalized. Students used terminology of the course to describe what they liked, but the feedback was general: “You had good parallelism.” “The detail was clear.”
The class had no edits to offer Joannie. Asitwa pushed for edits. “Could you follow all the characters?” he asked, signaling an edit I too had written down. The class seemed listless. Asitwa provided his feedback to Joannie and closed the opening workshop with advice: “If your editing group is not working, ditch the group and get another. Focus on yourself.”

The second workshop, held after a short lecture, generated more engagement from students. More people spoke, although comments tended towards the general. One student editor, for example, told the writer the story “was good.” Asitwa probed for more feedback by asking students what they liked, how they felt about the piece, and what could change. Some of the regulars spoke up and offered specific edits to the writer.

Asitwa devoted his lecture to developing the concept of parallelism he introduced in previous week. He introduced examples of different parallel constructions and spoke about how writers can use parallel sentences to improve clarity of the text.

The class ended with a discussion about the interview stories students wrote. A consensus arose: conducting an interview is difficult, finding the story in the material is a challenge, and writing somebody else’s story is harder than writing a story from your own life.

4.19 Homework Assigned in Class #9

Exercise 14: Write three sentences with parallel noun series. At least one of your sentences should contain six or more nouns in series. Also, in one of the three sentences, manipulate the series to produce a special impact in the last element in the series by shifting the content while preserving the structure.

Exercise 15: Write three sentences with parallel verb series. At least one of your sentences should contain six or more verbs in series.
Two Revisions: Revise and submit assignments 5a and 6a to “Revision Submissions”.

4.20 Class #10: Wednesday, November 9, 2016

Asitwa used the tenth class to talk about how to use punctuation. He explained his rationale for teaching punctuation to the class: “So you can get more creative.” He spoke about how the rules of punctuation evolved through “consensus, convention, and culture” and how punctuation can change the meaning of the sentence. (For example, there is a difference between “Let’s eat, grandma!” and “Let’s eat grandma!”) He itemized different punctuation marks, explained what they meant, and showed how to use them. Proper punctuation, he told students, helps a writer achieve clarity in the text.

4.21 Homework Assigned in Class #10

Exercise 16: Discuss how the process of editing is going amongst your editing group. Be honest and reflective. Is your editing group active or not, and why or why not? If your editing group is active, how valuable is the feedback you have received from them? How active are you with your editing group; again, be honest. For this exercise, also provide the names of those in your editing group at the top of the page. Be detailed and specific in your response.

Two Revisions: Revise and submit another two substantial revisions of any story under “Revision Submissions”. Focus on punctuating effectively by using what we discussed in Lecture 10.

4.22 Class #11: Wednesday, November 16, 2016

The eleventh class opened with a workshop. Two students read their stories. Again, the students in the room seemed disengaged. A few students made cursory comments about the stories. Asitwa prompted the students with questions, like “Did you feel satisfied [with the stories]?” He
used the listless response to the workshops to comment on how editorial workshops should run. Students in the course who have active weekly editorial groups are showing improvement, he told the class. “Those in active groups, I’m seeing results. Working with editing groups is crucial,” he said. “Your focus—reading as a writer—will help you improve. Be critical of others to improve your own work.”

The rest of the class was dedicated to a review of the course content. Asitwa reiterated points he had made during the term. He posed questions about style and narrative; they gave answers. He also asked how the course has changed their ideas about writing. One student said trust is important in writing. Writers, she said, “need to be a credible source.” Another said she “could tell the difference” in her understanding when she edited a friend’s essay—now she knows how to edit. Another said she saw the appeal of short “S.V.O. sentences.” Asitwa ended the discussion by reiterating the importance of keeping the reader in mind. “What do readers need?” he asked the class rhetorically, before dismissing them.

4.23 Homework Assigned in Class #11

Asitwa assigned no homework this week. He handed out instructions on how to submit their final portfolio, due the day after the final class.

4.24 Class #12: Wednesday, November 23, 2016

The last class of the term functioned as a workshop. The class began with two readings of interviews written by two subjects of this study, Joannie and Deedee. Joannie read first. She interviewed a friend who had recently come out as “trans” and had adopted the pronouns “they/them.” Deedee read an interview she conducted with her boss. He described for her a ribald experience he had at a sex club in Amsterdam in the mid-1990s.
The class discussion was less vigorous this class than they were earlier in the term. I thought somebody in the class might point out the unorthodox use of plural pronouns in the text (for example, Olivia, the interviewee, was referred to as “them” but the cat that appeared in the story was referred to as “she”). Nobody said anything about the pronouns. The few comments were general. “I thought it was very detailed,” one student said.

I thought for sure somebody might comment on the lurid sexual details in the story about Amsterdam. Nobody said anything about the sex scene. The feedback tended towards the general—“That was funny.” The discussion had no momentum, so Asitwa ended the workshop and directed students to their editorial groups, where they worked for the rest of the class on editing stories.

4.25 Homework Assigned in Class #12

Asitwa assigned no homework this class.
5  Case Study: Rose

On the first day of class, when I asked Asitwa’s students to volunteer for my dissertation project, one student, Rose, approached me and said she would like to participate, but—and this was her caveat—she was from China and English was not her first language.

When we met for the first interview, she told me again that English was not her first language. I said that was fine.

“So, it’s okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied, “don’t worry about your language.”

Language proficiency did not matter to me. Language proficiency did matter to Rose. When I opened our first interview—“Tell me a bit about yourself”—Rose dove into an exhaustive review of her English-language education. Here is a portion:

I grew up in China until I was 15. In China, we took a Mandarin education, but we had a mandatory course for English. I started learning English when I was in kindergarten, but it’s like French for Canadians—you have to learn it, but few people are fluent in the language. […] In grade four, we learned easy phrases, who are you?, that stuff. I think [I had] approximately a five-hundred-word vocabulary. I took my higher level of education in English in the capital of the province. At that point, my vocabulary was approximately around 2,000 words. […] I studied for years and remember all the grammar in the text books, 70 words per chapter, in three textbooks.

Rose admitted she had reservations about taking Expressive Writing. She worried most about the writing component of the course and how her command of English might sound to native
speakers: “The way I [speak] or write is not the way local people write. It sounds awkward and people know you’re not a local speaker.”

I told her I did not mind, and her proficiency in English was not a primary concern of mine. In fact, I said, she made perfect sense to me, even though she had a Chinese accent. Besides, what is wrong with being different?

“I don’t want to be different,” she said. “I don’t think difference is a bad thing, but I don’t want to be strange.” She does not mind style, but she does not like when somebody hears a “strong dialect” and does not understand her. She worries people listening will say, “Oh, this girl has ideas but the way she writes it makes me so uncomfortable to hear.”

Rose, a single child, was born in Hunan province and studied at a “very competitive” school. She had to work hard in a school where “you can’t choose what you want to learn or what you’re good at.” In the early years of her schooling, she lived with her parents but said she did not see them often. They were so busy. She rarely saw her father. “I don’t have an idea of my father spending time with me in middle school,” she said.

After primary school, Rose moved away from her parents to Zhengzhou, the provincial capital, to study at a “famous” middle school. Even though she spent a lot of time away from her parents, she did not feel far from them. Her parents cared for her and did not push her to study. “As long as you are happy and not doing anything illegal, it’s okay,” they told her, reasoning that “as long as the tree is growing, it always grows straight.”

I asked Rose if she liked school. “I love school,” she said. Why did she come to university? “I think it’s a basic idea in China’s culture,” she explained, but added that her decision to attend
university was her own. “My drive is my drive.” She hopes to become a psychology professor so that she can research, earn a stable income, and continue her studies.

5.1 First Interview: Starting from a Deficit Position

The way Rose spoke about reading, writing, and editing sounded familiar. I have taught many students from Asia who treat studies like an Olympic sport. Higher, Faster, Stronger is their motto. Often these students treat communications like mathematics. They act as if perfection is possible, if only they can memorize the right formula.

As I wrote this case study, I had a discussion with a student I was teaching in a business writing class. The class met at night, and every student in the class held a full-time job. Most students were my age or older (I am 41 years old). One student (I will call him Vlad) pulled me aside after class. Vlad is a Korean man who grew up in the USSR. He speaks with a thick Russian accent.

“It is strange seeing an Asian man with a Russian accent?” he asked when we first met.

“It is strange,” I said.

Vlad pulled me aside after our fifth class to ask how he could achieve perfect English grammar. As hard as he studied, he could not stop himself from making grammar and stylistic errors in his writing, like dropping articles and using the wrong verb tense. The native English speakers at his workplace interpreted his mistakes as stupidity.

I had no good answer for Vlad. “Read more English, write more English, submerse yourself in English, train yourself to understand the mechanics of these little errors, and make time to edit your work,” I said.
As I stood with Vlad outside our classroom, I thought about Rose, this case study I had to write, and Rose’s initial concerns with language, how she presented herself in English, and the embarrassment she felt about having her work edited.

5.1.1 Good Writing Speaks the Reader’s Mind

I met Rose for our first interview between the first and second classes of Expressive Writing. She arrived on time and told me all about her education once we sat down. Once she seemed comfortable, I asked her about writing.

“Do you consider yourself a writer?” I asked.

She delivered a definitive reply: “No, not at all. I like writing, but I don’t write well.” In both Chinese and English, “I don’t do a good job.” In both languages, she struggles to get her thoughts on paper “exactly” as she sees the thoughts in her mind. As a result, what she writes “is incomplete from what [I] think or what [I] say.”

I asked her what makes a writer good.

She gave me another definitive answer: A good writer communicates emotion on the page in a way that evokes an emotional response in readers. Good writers speak the mind of the reader. Rose explained: “When I read a masterpiece, I feel like the writer knows what I’m feeling, or thinking.”

And then she brought up grammar, the grail of correctness so many students, like Rose and Vlad seek.

Rose linked correct grammar with clarity. Good grammar produces clarity. When writing is clear, readers can comprehend. For this reason, “Grammar is important.”
Rose told me she had read *Twilight*, a young adult fiction novel about teenage vampires by Stephanie Meyer. Rose found “a lot of grammar errors” in the book. This imprecision upset her, and she admonished Meyer: “Tell your story clearly.”

Correct grammar alone is not the only ingredient in good writing. Writers must have a “style.” Style distinguishes writers. Style is unique and attractive. “I like a writer who has his own style, like Agatha Christie or Shakespeare,” Rose said. “If a writer can develop their own style, I think that is good.”

### 5.1.2 Reading is a Community Act

In our first interview, Rose and I spoke at length about reading—what readers do and what reading is. She told me she loves to read and considers herself a reader, but noted that her relationship with reading had changed when she came to Canada. When she was young, she loved reading in Chinese, but since moving to Canada, the “language barrier reduce[d] my passion for reading.”

“I know I have to read English novels,” she said. “I read them but find it’s not that interesting. But I still force myself to read it.” She said she can understand English literature but does not feel “touched” by the meaning. “I understand the words and sentences and I know what it means, but if I see the Chinese version, I feel more touched by the sentences, more [by] the meaning.”

Rose identified different types of reading: reading for pleasure and reading for purpose—in her case, reading for school. When Rose reads English for school, she said she has “a mission” to read the textbook and understand as much as she can. Ideally, “100 per cent.” But when she reads for pleasure, she is “not so serious with every word” and is content having “a feeling about
what the author is talking about.” She is content understanding “70 per cent” of what she reads for pleasure.

In our first interview, Rose said readers enter a relationship with a writer whenever they pick up a text. Readers simply need to open their minds to the writer’s views: “My job [as a reader] is not to be so subjective because people tend to think about what they believe and what they expect to see.” Readers also have a responsibility to a wider community of readers. Readers must “understand what the novel is talking about and then combine what they know with [their] own feelings, experiences, and then [compare their readings] to other people’s comments to see if there is any difference.” Reading is, as Rose described it to me, a community endeavour. It is a public act, not a private act.

5.1.3 Editing “Shows a Disadvantage”

Rose’s views on editing during our first interview interested me most, and over the course of the term, her views on editing became a place where I saw her views change the most.

In our first meeting, Rose told me that her understanding of what an editor is, and what an editor does, comes from what she learned in high school. Editors are “people who correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sometimes [logic] errors […] They give you feedback. They are the first readers.” Her point of view, as she developed it in our interview, pointed to the need for supportive editors, although she did not articulate this need for editors to support. Rather, she saw editors as a corrective measure. As a result, editing is “very embarrassing.” Editors see all that is wrong in early drafts, and they judge the writer.

Once, in high school, Rose asked a friend to edit her work. The project, a final cumulative assignment for a financial security class, required Rose to study five potential investments.
Rose’s friend edited the grammar and pointed out that Rose had not provided reasons for why she wanted to invest in a specific company for the long run. The friend recommended that Rose list her investment choices by short-run investments, followed by long-run investments. The experience humbled and embarrassed Rose:

You make silly mistakes, even though they [the editors] are your friends. It’s like showing a disadvantage. Editing is okay as long as the result is okay. But if somebody edits me and the result still comes back badly… [laughter].

The editing process is long and requires much back-and-forth. This involving process is difficult and emphasizes the writer’s shortcomings. The defensive writer must defend her writing, and by extension, herself:

When people edit my work, [I learn that] maybe I didn’t write clearly, and they didn’t understand, and they changed my work and took my ideas in a different direction. I have to explain what I mean. It’s a long process to explain what I think. You argue because their additions are not what I want. But I care about them [my friends] and I go through what I learned and try to see what I can correct.

Editors must always find a way of deflecting criticism away from the writer. They must ensure writers do not become defensive. This is difficult. When friends have asked Rose to edit their work, Rose has had trouble delivering feedback. Finding the right words, and delivering edits without hurting feelings, challenges her. “You have to take people’s feelings [into consideration]. You can’t say, ‘Your work is bullshit.’ You have to say what’s good.”
5.2 Second and Third Interviews: Seeing and Showing in Writing and Reading

Rose and I met twice more during the semester—once at midterm and once after the course had ended. During these two meetings, I noticed a shift in how Rose spoke about reading, writing, and editing. Reduced to a single word, Rose’s views had become “complex.” She adopted language of the course into her discussion of reading and writing, and she spoke about reading and writing as rhetorical acts—meaning she tended to speak about writing and reading together, connecting how writing and reading influenced writers and readers.

In our discussions, Rose returned to two words to describe the goals of writers: clarity and connection. She, along with Joannie and Deedee, the other students I interviewed, emphasized the need for writers to “be clear” and develop “connections” with readers. How writers achieve clarity and connection occupied much of Rose’s concern.

These views reflected in her writing. Below, after a description of the interviews I held with Rose, I present examples from Rose’s portfolio to demonstrate how the shift in her thinking translated to a change in her writing.

5.2.1 Writers Show the Story

By the second interview, Rose had found new language to describe her views on the writer-reader relationship since our first interview. I heard Asitwa use this language. Writers, she said, “take the role of showing.” They “show the story”—a phrase that is the title of the textbook used in Expressive Writing.

In our third meeting, I asked Rose to explain in specifics how her views on writing changed since the beginning of the term. She said she found new ways of expressing her thoughts—using different sentences and imagery—and moved away from descriptive, expository writing built on
adjectives. She was convinced of the truth in the rule that writers “show, don’t tell.” This change opened her ability to express herself. When a writer shows a story, they “create a psychic space” that allows readers to see what is in the writer’s mind. Good writers always consider their readers and what the reader will need to see and understand.

The course was now halfway done, and Rose had written three stories. She told me she thought her writing was improving. “I can feel it,” she said. She was writing faster and feeling more confident about how she edited her own writing. She had found great utility in adopting a presentational style of writing—of showing in her writing, rather than telling. When she generated images in her writing, she did not have to search for the one perfect adjective that described an entire experience.

Rose: Right now I feel like showing is much more important [than interpreting data for readers]. And actually, showing is much easier than just finding one word to conclude. I can use several sentences to show one conclusion. So that’s much easier and much more effective for me.

Price: What convinced you that this was the right way to do it?

Rose: The lecture and I tried it on my own. I feel like it was more interesting.

I asked her who was it interesting for. She said for herself. And, she added, she thought readers would find it interesting too.

5.2.2 Clarity a requirement.

Regardless of form or genre, all writers must strive for clarity.
Writers, Rose said, “use their words, use their language to express the thing and the emotion to the reader. They are able to create the emotional connection.” Writers have an obligation to make readers feel “very confident with your story,” even if the reader knows nothing about the material. Clarity is the goal. “You want to tell them every detail. You don’t want them to get it wrong.”

Rose said Expressive Writing was giving her a better understanding of how native English speakers produce clarity in their language. For example, in China she learned how passive sentences work, but she did not understand the rhetorical value of passive sentences—how these sentences influence audiences—until she took Expressive Writing. She became interested in understanding how writing influences readers. Asitwa’s lesson on how ambiguous pronouns sow confusion with readers struck Rose as especially important. Writers must tweak even the smallest elements in a sentence, like pronouns, to clarify the message and allow readers to see. This was a key lesson for Rose: Writers must work for their readers:

Just be more clear and more detailed because as a writer, you always know what you want to write, what you want to tell. But actually you must translate your ideas to words and let other people understand. I think this is a huge shift.

5.2.3 Readers See the Story

Rose was reading *Les Miserables* when we spoke. She had read the book several times in a Chinese translation, and she was reading an English translation for the first time. She admitted she did not understand all the vocabulary, but she felt a connection to the emotions of the characters. The book, and the language she was encountering, gave her a “special feeling.” She read for the pleasure of reading, even though she did not understand every word or phrase.
Readers must be “open to the feeling of the book,” Rose said. Readers cannot approach a text with preconceived ideas. If they do, they may misread the text by imposing themselves on the words—or, to use an example she provided, the reader may mistake Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince* for a children’s story. “When you’re not being open with the book, you are not going to get what the writer is trying to tell you.”

More importantly, readers must open their *thinking* minds. “The reader has to be thinker,” Rose said. “When you receive other information from other people you have to think about it.”

**5.2.4 Readers open themselves to effective texts.**

By our third interview, Rose described readers as people who are open and eager to be “emotionally touched” by texts. Indeed, readers want to be “emotionally touched”—this is why they read. And readers will always respond when they encounter texts. How they respond depends on the text more than it does the reader. As Rose explained, there are not two kinds of readers—either active readers or passive readers. Rather, there are “just two different kinds of books”—those that engage and those that do not.

“So,” I said, “it’s the writing that lets you get something out of the book, or a story or text?”

“Yeah,” she replied, “like my economic textbook. I have to read it for my marks and I just don’t like it.”

The reader’s openness and willingness to engage—so long as they have something worthy of their engagement—should inform the writer’s craft. First, as Rose explained, the reader-writer relationship is an “emotional exchange” built on trust and built over time—a point of view Asitwa espoused in his lectures. Writers should recognize the reader’s willingness to partake in
this exchange. And second, writers who want to cultivate a readership—if they want “to earn more and find better publishers”—they must produce texts that turn readers into “fans.”

“Writers cannot force readers to read,” Rose said. But they can strive to produce “effective” texts readers will want to read.

5.2.5 The Editing Challenge: “A Sense of Language”

The week before our second interview, Rose had met with Asitwa for a one-on-one interview. She described the experience as “strange.” To prepare for her meeting with Asitwa, she had taken one of her stories to the campus writing center. The tutor at the writing center helped her edit the grammar in her paper, but when she brought it to the professor, there were “still tons of grammar errors.” She was also struggling to find the right phrasing in English. The tutor refused to help her with phrasing or in developing the story.

She had different results after meeting with Asitwa: “I went to the professor and when he edited my work, I feel like, ‘This is kind of what I want the work to look like.’” Asitwa read the story and “got lost [confused].” He asked her questions about the places in the text where he became confused, and he asked her what the story was supposed to say. By the time they finished their interview, he had given her a series of changes to make to the story: he wanted her to clarify who said what, and to focus on the central incident in the story. He did not give much feedback on Rose’s grammar.

I asked Rose what she learned from watching Asitwa edit her work. She replied that editors must have facility with language. Rose did not believe she could learn to edit by watching Asitwa. Asitwa possesses an “ability.” “It’s ability. It’s a sense of language and I’m still developing in that sense.”
5.2.6 Editors Bring Clarity

According to Rose, editors play a different role in the reader-writer relationship. Editors, who are the second reader of a text (writers are the first reader), must point out places where writers can “clarify” the reader’s understanding. This may entail smoothing the grammar and removing “awkward” phrasing. Achieving clarity also means bringing clarity to the content and the message. “That’s editor’s job: to make them clear,” Rose said.

Around the same time, Rose had been editing her work with one other student in the class. By the time of our interview, she had met with her peer three times. These editing sessions focused on grammar and sentence-level issues, the same way the writing center tutor did, rather than larger narrative concerns.

Price: Do you talk about content and story?

Rose: I think we don’t really change other people’s story content. If I don’t understand, I just ask, “Is this what you mean? Is this what you want to tell us?” If she says, “Yes.” I’m like, “Okay, so maybe you want to make this more clear, or maybe you want to talk about this with more words.” If she says, “No.” I’m like, “Do you mind if I just take it out? Because it doesn’t work in this paragraph.”

Rose’s editorial group tended to focus strictly on grammar, usually at the expense of achieving clarity in the content and messages of the stories the students wrote. Rose’s group edited two assignments per week, on average, and talked through email. Rose told me she “loves editing” but found the editorial group “so polite.” The editors commented on surface-level grammar, but rarely on the story content.
Rose said the reluctance to touch content stemmed from a fear of intruding into the writer’s space. “It feels very bad to change each other’s story,” she said.

For example, if I say I had trouble with my father and there’s something going on, maybe there can be something added or maybe created to make the story better or more dramatic or more creative. But we found it’s awkward to put that creative part in because we feel like it’s not only just changing the story, it’s also changing someone else’s story. We weren’t in the story or the situation when the story happened.

Rose confided in a TA who studies in the writing program about the awkward caution of the editing group. The TA said to Rose: “Yeah, at the beginning of the course, people are so polite.” By the time writing students reach the 400-level writing classes, students have learned how to deliver feedback and to receive feedback. The TA told her, “Everyone’s just like, ‘I think this paragraph sucks. You have to change it.’”

Rose suggested the classroom structure contributed to the cautious editing: If students were professional editors, they would edit rigorously because, if they did not, they would lose their jobs. “But for us, there’s no losing jobs,” said Rose.

Regardless, Rose said “this course really challenged me a lot.” As an ESL student, she said she “feel[s] like I’m being more clear with everything in English.” She came to feel more confident as an editor, writer, and reader because she knows what to do in each of these roles. When she edits, she thinks about the reader. When she reads, she is open for the “emotional exchange.” When she writes, she “[tries] to imagine just drawing the picture of me being in the situation.”
She said she now could see where her writing went wrong and evaluate it accordingly. She pointed to the first draft of her first story (see below) and compared it to what she produced by the end of the term. The final draft was “much better.”

“My first draft,” she said, “was totally crap.”

5.3 Rose’s Writing

Rose shared the writing she did in Expressive Writing with me. Her work—from the first drafts of her first stories, to the final drafts of later stories—show a shift in her approach to storytelling. An analysis of three openings demonstrates how the changes Rose made to her writing improve the clarity of her stories, service the readers’ needs, and demonstrate Rose’s increased knowledge of narrative form.

5.3.1 Knowledge of form.

A change not easily seen by looking at excerpts of stories is the knowledge of narrative form that Rose acquired over the course of writing six stories. When I read her final drafts and compared them to the draft work she presented to me, I noticed she had become a better storyteller. She knew what stories needed to work as persuasive communications: She restructured openings to have better hooks; she sequenced details to improve logic and flow; she converted exposition into detailed narrative. Her later stories possess a clarity of purpose: She knew why she was writing a story and what she wanted the stories to do. More than that, she strove to write interesting, engaging stories to the audience she had in mind. This shift to writing for an audience, and working to make sure the audience saw the story clearly, was her goal, as she had explained in our interviews.
5.3.2 A willingness to change.

Of the six stories Rose wrote, she made more changes to the later stories than she did her early stories. The changes she made to these later stories, and the fact that she initiates these changes, indicates an increased comfort with rewriting her work and a greater understanding of why changes are needed: to orient stories towards the reader’s needs. For example, Rose made hardly any structural changes to her second story, even though the story would have benefited from restructuring, while she made radical changes to the structure of her fifth and sixth stories.

5.3.3 A difference in openings.

The first draft of Rose’s second story “Short-hair Rule” opens by providing backstory to the main narrative. Roughly fifty per cent of the total word count of the story is written in an expository mode as Rose explains the short-hair rule in her school. The rule stated that a child’s chair could not be longer than the bristles of a brush. Rose, who loved her long hair, worried she might have to cut her hair.

The story transitions to a scenic moment when the dean of the school enters the classroom. The narrator notes the hypocrisy of the situation:

The Dean walks in. She has a full head of long, gorgeous, black hair. A ponytail highly tied on her head, and swings around when she walks into the classroom.

The story continues with the dean measuring the hair of Rose’s classmates and sending students to have their hair cut shorter. The dean then turns to Rose. Even though Rose says she has “beautiful long hair,” the dean, for unclear reasons, approves the length of her hair. The story ends with this line:
“This girl,” the Dean points at me! I don’t even find out that, “She is ok.”

The final draft of “Short-hair Rule” maintains the same structure as the original: backstory, followed by the scene with the dean, concluding with the dean’s approval. This story could have used a more rigorous revision. The opening was dull, information-heavy, expository and non-scenic—it told rather than showed. The ending especially required revision. Look at the sentence again:

“This girl,” the Dean points at me! I don’t even find out that, “She is ok.”

I read this sentence and puzzle over the phrase “I don’t even find out that, ‘She is ok.’” Does this mean that the narrator does not learn from the dean that the length of her hair is okay? But if so, why do we hear the dean say, “She is ok”? I am confused.

And I wonder if the ending needs more. What is the aftermath of the dean’s pronouncement of Rose’s hair? Is Rose shunned by her friends, or held in envy? Do we ever learn why the dean favoured Rose? The story does not conclude, and readers are left to wonder. The closing line lacks clarity; the story lacks an ending.

Rose chose not to make radical changes to the narrative in this, an early story, even though the story cried for rewriting. But note the significant changes she makes to her fifth story, a tribute to her mother titled “From She to Me.” Rose noted in her portfolio that she thought this story was her best. I agree with her assessment.

Here is the opening from the original draft of “From She to Me”:
She is unique to me.

She introduced new things to me. There’s no McDonald in our small town back then. She went to Shangqiu (a city in Henan province) for accounting tests and brought me my first hamburger.

“Fanfan,” She finally arrived home after 10PM. I stayed up to wait her. She past a paper box to me, “This is called Hanbaobao (the Chinese pronunciation of hamburger), American food, try it!”

The story continues with Rose identifying the aspects of her mother’s personality that make her unique. Rose tells us that she seeks her mother’s affection but does not always receive it. The story ends at the airport, as Rose prepares to move the Canada to study. Her mother shows affection.

As a story opening, this opening works in certain ways. It quickly takes us to a scene (in Shanqui) and a situation (the narrator tastes her first hamburger). We learn an important detail about the narrator—she stayed up to see her mother. I consider this a solid first draft. The writer has produced something worthy of discussion. But this opening needs revision. First, and most importantly, we do not know who “she” is. “She” is not identified by name or relation. Only later do we realize “she” is Rose’s mother. Second, the first two sentences use adjective (“unique”) and generalized description (“new things”) to communicate the special quality of Rose’s mother. This opening leaves an impression about the mother that is neither unique nor special. Rose says they did not have a McDonald’s “back then,” but when is “then”? Third, the language needs a copy edit—spelling and usage errors interfere with the reader’s smooth reading of the text.
The opening that appeared in the final version of “From She to Me” is radically different and dramatically improved. Interestingly, Rose chose to invert the structure of this story, moving what had been the original ending to the beginning of the story. The final draft opens this way:

I stand at the boarding port in Beijing International Airport. My flight will take off soon. I turn back to Mama. She wears make up today. Mama and I made the decision to send me to Canada for better opportunities. I’m supposed to be frightened, instead, I am very calm now.

“I was trying to cuddle you last night, you know, you are leaving me today,” Mama smiles shyly; “But you murmured ‘hot’, so I let you go."

I hold my tears back.

Mama’s unique to me.

The story goes on to identify moments that show the unique character of Rose’s mother. One reason why this opening works better than the original is because it provides readers with clear locators. Locators are details—prepositional phrases, times, and location names—that help readers to understand where and when a story takes place. Asitwa discussed locators in class, and each story in the book present stories with clear locators. Readers needs help orienting themselves to the text. In my teaching, I emphasize the importance of locators. My favourite joke is that reading is like waking up from a coma. The reader starts reading and naturally asks, Where am I? What time is it? What going on? If you do not know where you are, you cannot feel comfortable stepping into a story.
Rose’s opening tells us where the story takes place (Beijing International Airport), what the situation is (the daughter is moving to Canada for opportunities), when the story takes place (just before the narrator’s flight takes off), who is there (the narrator and her mother), and how the characters feel (the daughter is calm at first but tears up; the mother wear make-up, an indication that she does not normally wear make-up, and smiles “shyly”).

Later in the story, we learn that, as a child, Rose had been eager to obtain her affection from a mother who sometimes withheld it. In this scene we see a reversal that becomes clear later: Rose’s mother wanted to cuddle her daughter the night before seeing her child off, but the daughter did not want to cuddle, denying her mother the affection she desired. But we also see that Rose, our narrator, receives the affection that we learn she longs for. The narrator “holds back tears.” We understand the emotion of the moment, even though we may not understand what prompted these tears: Because the mother shows affection; because her words “so I let you go” have added meaning in this moment as the mother lets go of her child; because the child is leaving home; or for all these reasons. We understand the emotional logic without the author explaining the “why” of the tears. This passage demonstrates the rhetorical value of showing rather than telling.

In her sixth and last story—an interview she conducted with a friend—Rose once again rewrote the opening to appeal to what the reader needs. The story is titled “Living as an International Student.”

Here is how the first draft opened:

This interview takes place at the dining table in my house in Mississauga. Anqi Wang, a Chinese international student
in Canada since 2013 and also a current student in University of Toronto Mississauga.

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Anqi sits and waits on the left side of the table. I pass her a cup of tea and sit on her opposite side.

I’ve prepared questions to make sure that the interview can progress well.

“We’ll start the interview in a second. I have five questions to ask you about your life as an international student. If you find any of the questions makes you uncomfortable, you have the right to refuse to answer.”

“Ok.” Anqi answers simply.

Compare that opening to how Rose opened the final draft:

Anqi sits and waits on the left side of the dining table at my house in Mississauga. I pass her a cup of tea and sit on the opposite side. She is a Chinese international student, who has been in Canada since 2013. We presently attend University of Toronto, Mississauga together.

I’ve prepared questions to make sure that the interview can progress well.
“We’ll start the interview in a second. I have five questions to ask you about your life as an international student. If you find any of the questions makes you uncomfortable, you have the right to refuse to answer.”

“Okay.” Anqi answers, a leaning her chin on her right palm, elbow propped up on the table.

Both openings offer locators. The first delivers these locators in a factual, non-narrative way. Rose had to use a text break to transition between the facts at the top of the page and the narrative. The revised opening integrates the locators within the scenic, narrative details. Rather than having two openings, she now has one opening. The revised version is more efficient than the first.

Across Rose’s portfolio, several other changes in her writing became apparent.

Rose made a shift away from writing summary to writing detailed narrative. This changed came early in the term; it is a change Rose mentioned during our midterm interview. She said she preferred to detail an event rather than summarize her experience in a single adjective.

Rose reorganized and re-sequenced the details in her later stories. Her changes improved the overall coherency and flow of the stories.

Rose developed a habit of writing shorter, sharper sentences. The technical aspects of her writing improved, overall. While she still wrote accented English, she tended toward short, active sentences, and she used parallel structuring often, and to positive effect. Where her earlier drafts felt stiff and tentative, the language of her final draft stories felt smoother, cleaner, and more confident.
5.3.4 A Confident Writer

When I met Rose for our third sit-down interview, after she had submitted her final portfolio for Expressive Writing, she was excited: She had one more exam to study for before spending the Christmas break in China. She was looking forward to going back home. After having written stories for the class, Rose gained insight into how a finalized story comes into being. She said she understood better how and why writers make certain editorial decisions. Often, she said, writers make decisions according to how readers will react. As a rule, writers strive to produce texts that “engage” the reader and are “effective” in communicating with the reader.

In our first interview, Rose did not consider herself a writer. During the second interview, she hedged, choosing to distinguish between “writers” and those who are “interested in writing.” In the third meeting, she still did not consider herself a writer, although she considered herself a better writer than she was at the start of the class. She still not confident calling herself a writer, but she was more confident as a writer.

“This course really changed my thoughts on writing,” Rose said, stating that she feels “like I can write faster and more flexible with what I want [to describe].” Speaking about her experience as a second language speaker, Rose said her experience in the course was a “success”: “Feels like I can write with more confidence than I did before.”
6 Case Study: Deedee

Deedee stood out on the first day of Expressive Writing. She carried herself differently from the other students. With more poise, more confidence. She was taller than most of the women in her class. She was older, too, but still young at 21.

When I first started teaching, I remarked to a colleague at Sheridan College about how strange I felt teaching to students who were only a few years younger than me. I was 30-years-old and teaching writing to future interior designers. Most of the students in the course were in their late 20s, many of them having returned to school to learn job skills.

My colleague, who had been at Sheridan nearly since the days when the college opened, replied, “Teachers grow older while students stay the same age.”

I have been teaching long enough to see the truth in this cliché. I am twice the age of most of my students now. Some of them look to me like babies to me. I catch myself calling them “kids.” I never mean it in a derogatory way. I just mean I am getting older. And so, I usually notice the students who are older than their peers, even if they are older by only a few years, like Deedee. The lives some students live age them prematurely. Others enroll in school a little later. However slight, there is a difference between a 17- or 18-year-old undergrad, and a 21-year-old undergrad. The difference is noticeable, and I noticed it with Deedee.

Deedee was born and raised in Mississauga by Polish parents, who immigrated to Canada when they were in their late twenties. She grew up speaking Polish at home, and when she first attended school, she struggled with English, having only learned English “on her own” at home. (Her older brother, she said, did not teach her the English he learned at school.) Today, Deedee is comfortable working in both languages.
School had always been important to her, but her decision to attend university came after much thought. She took an extra semester in high school to brush up on her sciences, and instead of entering university directly from high school, she chose to backpack across Europe and work. Deedee had thought “that maybe work would be better than going to school,” but after working full-time in retail for eight months, she decided to pursue a degree. “Working really showed me where I should go, what I should do with my life.”

Deedee hopes to find a career in the sciences. At the time of our interview, she was a second-year student studying chemistry.

6.1 First Interview: A Pragmatic View

Deedee knocked on my office door for our first interview at exactly the time we arranged, a few days after the first class of the term. As with every interview I conducted with Deedee, I asked her about writing, reading, and editing. Her views evolved with the course, as did her writing. In our first interview, she held a pragmatic view of reading and writing.

6.1.1 Strategic Reading

When I want to get to know students, one of the first questions I ask students is, “What are you reading?” As a teacher in a writing program, this seems like a fair question. I often begin the term by asking students to introduce themselves to the class by telling us what they are currently reading. I have no compunction calling out writers who say they do not like to read.

“A writer who doesn’t read?” I said. “That’s like being a chef who doesn’t eat.”

Most students get the joke. Only once did a student offer a counterpoint worthy of consideration: What about all those bald barbers?
Like many students I have met over the years, Deedee said she loves to read but does not read much outside of her studies.

“I used to read a lot, actually,” she said. “I do like reading, I do enjoy reading, I just find it hard. I just don’t have much time for it.” She used to read fiction and book length non-fiction, but once she started working full-time, she found herself stretched. “Right now, all I really read are articles on Vice,” she said. Much of what Deedee reads today, she reads for school, and the reading is dense: “Sometimes I have go through it twice or three times just to get a gist of what the article or paper is saying.”

I asked Deedee if she considers herself “a reader.” She replied she was a strategic reader. “[J]ust because I know a lot of readers and I know how much time they devote to reading and I don’t find myself devoting that much time [to reading].”

Deedee’s views on the writer-reader relationship were, in our first meeting, definitive, although she prefaced her answers to my questions by saying she had “never really thought about it.” Readers, she said, have a responsibility “to absorb the knowledge [available in the text] and be able to apply it in a difference sense than is necessarily provided in the text.” And readers should read with an end in mind: “You have to read [the text] with a sense of using it.”

6.1.2 Finding the Self in Writing

Deedee struck me as articulate. She had a sharp mind and a confident demeanor. I was surprised when she told me she considers herself a “poor” writer.

I think my writing abilities are very poor. I don’t think they’re very good. Maybe in science, but it’s a little bit different. It’s statistics, statistics, statistics, nothing to elaborate on. It’s just facts and putting words between facts, and I find that’s all I’m mediocre at
doing, at best. My lab reports last year, I got pretty good marks on, and I noticed I had a pretty good style of writing labs. But I find any other kind of written work is not very good.

Deedee measured herself against what she defined as “good” writing. For Deedee, good writing has Voice, a principle Asitwa described as rooted in “the writer’s personality.” As Deedee explained: “Sometimes you read something [and] you can really feel passion in the writer. You know what they’re seeing and feeling.” But Deedee said she did not feel her writing had this virtue:

I don’t feel I have any emotion in my writing. I can’t get that down. I’ve tried on so many times. I’ve tried on multiple occasions and tried different styles of writing and I can’t get it down. I can’t find myself in writing.

One of her reasons for taking Expressive Writing was to “improve” her writing. She had not taken any other writing class prior to Expressive Writing, and she had not had much chance to write in university, although, she said, “There was an anthro class and there was some writing in that.” She hoped Expressive Writing would help her express herself better: “I have a lot of thoughts and ideas, and I can’t get them down on paper. I think that’s my problem, and if I could, I think I would be a lot better at writing.”

6.1.3 Clarity Without Responsibility

The first Expressive Writing lecture influenced how Deedee viewed writing. Clarity, she said, is the “number one” quality of good writing: “Ever since [the instructor discussed the importance of clarity in the first class], I’ve been focusing on people write articles and how people speak,
and I find clarity is definitely number one.” The writer’s objective, she said, is to “convey their thoughts and put them all down on paper […] with clarity.”

I asked if delivering “clarity” was a responsibility, something writers owed their readers. She said no, clarity was not a responsibility, but it was a goal. Writers were free to do what they wanted when they wrote. Writers have one job: “to get words down.” But writers have no duties to the audience: “[Writers] don’t necessarily have to give the audience or reader anything.” If writing is private, if the writer is “just ranting on the piece of paper for yourself,” the text needs no purpose, nor does the writer have to be responsible to a reader. “I think [writers] can do what they desire to do,” she said. But if the writing is public, writers should work to realize the objectives of the writing. If, for example, a writer wants to write a cover letter to get a job, the writer should appeal to the audience in ways that will help the writer get the job.

6.1.4 Editing and Rejection

Good writing is clear. To that end, an editor is “one who looks back on previous writing, theirs and others, and tries to pick out any flaws in writing to re-establish clarity.” To establish clarity in writing, editors “navigate the writer in a certain direction if they’re struggling to get to a conclusion, to focus on one topic.” Deedee admitted she had not had much experience editing, or having her work edited by other people. Editing another’s writing and receiving feedback is difficult, she said.

In her first year at university, Deedee took a geography class. The last assignment, worth fifteen per cent of the final grade, required her to write about dinosaurs. “It was very last minute, it was first year, it was my first assignment, and I had no idea what I was doing.” She had her then-boyfriend edit her paper. He said her paper was “horrible.”
“He didn’t know what I was trying to get at, he didn’t know what I was trying to conclude to,” she said.

Her boyfriend called her and told her what was wrong with the paper. He marked up the file in Google Docs, using highlighted notes to indicate sentence-level errors. “It was practically all highlighted,” she said. “He was posing questions, like, what do you mean here, and putting underlines on things that didn’t make sense, like my grammar.”

The experience deflated Deedee. In the time since, she has edited the work of schoolmates. She had never received instruction on how to edit another’s work; she edited based on what made sense to her, preferring to read the work aloud helps her to “hear mistakes instead of thinking them.” Giving feedback to writers is, for Deedee, the bigger challenge. Some people are not open to feedback: “They feel they have their message down and it doesn’t matter if someone else doesn’t understand it.”

As a writer, Deedee said she tries to be open to the feedback offered by her editors. “I’ve come to terms that I’m not the best writer,” she said. “I try to learn from everyone else’s editing of my work. Sometimes it is difficult because you try so hard and you think it’s fantastic and you give it to someone else and they shut you down.”

Price: Why does that hurt?

Deedee: I think because inside everybody wants to be a little writer. Everybody has that inside them. It’s difficult to get shut down by people, regardless of what it is. Writing is probably something you have on the inside, and you give it all, and to have somebody shut you down doesn’t make you feel as intelligent, I suppose. Rejection sucks.
6.2 Second Interview: Clarity of Sight

When I met with Deedee for our second interview at mid-term, six weeks into the course, she told me she was surprised by how much she was enjoying Expressive Writing. “I really like it a lot more than I thought I would,” she said. “I wasn’t the best writer, so I thought it would be challenging for me, but I’ve noticed that throughout the class I’ve been like getting a lot better at writing.”

6.2.1 Clarity for Connection

I began the second interview by asking Deedee about writing. What responsibilities or obligations did writers have to a text and a reader? Deedee reiterated what she said in our first meeting: writers owed readers clarity. Clarity is the quality that allows readers to “connect” with the writing.

You need to clarify what you’re trying to say […] so that anyone can connect […] I feel my role is to connect the reader within my writing, so I want them to feel what I feel and see what I see. I feel that clarity is the number one thing for writing, I guess.

If writing and reading exist to connect writers and readers, interpretation of the text becomes the complicating variable of the relationship. Deedee said readers must be “open to interpretations” and willing to hear a point of view that is not their own. Writers must not “strictly narrow down” the prose to one interpretation. “[The reader] can interpret what they want to, but they should feel what [the writer tries] to get them to feel,” she said.
6.2.2 Seeing in Writing

Deedee knew she was “getting a lot better” because she could “see” what she was writing instead of “just thinking it.” The visual aspect of writing was important to her. She said she understood the value of “showing rather than telling” in communicating with readers:

I can kind of visualize what I’m trying to say from like another perspective and that’s kind of how I try to read my work […] Like, when you read a story […] you can visualize what the author is trying to narrate. Maybe a setting or a relationship. I feel like I’m getting a lot better at that.

6.2.3 Seeing in Reading

Deedee reported she noticed a change in how she read since beginning the course. The stories in the text allowed her to “see.” The details were visual. They “excited” her. She referenced “Silver Spoons,” the first story Asitwa read in class.

I just felt very, very connected [to the story]. I just felt like I could see everything that the author was trying to get me to see, and I felt so many different things, and I felt connected to my childhood, in a sense. So, I feel as a reader maybe it’s the connection to the story that you have, but I don’t necessarily feel that you’re forced to connect.

On a technical level, Deedee said she was reading texts differently than she had been. The course had taught her terminology she did not know before. She had become persuaded to write the short, active sentences Asitwa had been teaching in class.

I do look at like the SVO [active sentences] and how everything works and how [a writer] switches up patterns in sentence structure, so whether [sentences] are short or long throughout the story. I think that’s really interesting. I never really noticed that until this
semester, actually. Even in my own writing I noticed that sometimes I’d be dragging on very, very long sentences and then shortening them, chopping them up, throughout the remainder of the story. So, what I’ve been trying to do is kind of mix it up throughout every story and give myself different sentence structures or flows of the story altogether.

Deedee said writers must strive for clarity. Imparting clarity is a responsibility that writers owe readers. Regarding readers, she stayed firm with the views she expressed in our first interview: readers do not have roles or responsibilities. Unlike writers, who have a job to create the text, readers do not have a responsibility, or role, in generating an interpretation to the text. Readers have no obligations other than those obligations they choose to have. Readers are “free.” They owe nothing to the writer.

6.2.4 Editing for “Minor Constructions”

By the midpoint in the term, Deedee had not yet met with her instructor for a one-on-one interview. She had, however, met with her editorial group. The experience was, overall, disappointing.

Deedee’s editorial group comprised of “three or four” students in the class, but only one student usually showed up. These editorial meetings followed the method Asitwa had laid out—that editors should identify strengths before discussing edits. Deedee said her meetings tended to focus on “minor constructions” only.

As an editor, Deedee was still “as critical” as she was before taking Expressive Writing, but she strove to offer “positive feedback.” She was reluctant to offer a deep “critical” response to the writers she edited, and as a result, her editing was “very small.” She said she found it hard to communicate detailed criticism to strangers, even though she believed her job an editor was to
give feedback so that the writer could “to improve on the story” and “allow the reader to engage more and to understand more.” She explained: “I just don’t feel like I have the courage to go to someone and tell them that because I might change the entire piece of the work.”

Later in the interview, I returned to the issue of the writer-reader relationship. I told her I found the idea that readers had no obligations to writers produced “a very one-sided relationship.” Deedee objected. She said that when she reads, she often feels as though writers do not write for her, or for any audiences. Writers write “for themselves.” In the creative moment, a relationship does not exist with the reader because the reader does not yet exist. Deedee took the position that “passionate” writing exists first as private writing. Audiences are secondary concerns.

Price: Then what is a story for?

Deedee: Well, I suppose it is for an audience, but maybe it’s to connect yourself to the past tense. Maybe that’s what it is for some people. Like when I’m writing [my] stories, I wasn’t thinking about the reader, I was thinking about what I wanted to write and what I wanted to say in my work. And I know it’s an assignment, but that’s just kind of what I was saying. I wasn’t really thinking, like, I have to get this done, I have to get this done, I was like, I want to write this and this is what I want to put in, and this is what I want to take out.

Writing transitions from private writing to public writing when the writer has a public motive: to make money, or to teach a reader about some aspect of life. “If you’re not supposed to learn from writing, there’s not necessarily a reason for a reader,” she said. When writers write for an audience—when they product public texts—they must write with passion to connect with
readers. “I feel like if the author isn’t really giving his or her all in the story,” Deedee said, “and it’s just something that’s forcefully written, there won’t ever be a connectivity.”

6.3 Third Interview: Progressing, Grabbing, Holding

I interviewed Deedee for a third time after the course had ended. She had already submitted her final portfolio for Expressive Writing. By the end of the term, she felt “there has been lots of progress” in her writing. A week before she submitted her final portfolio, she “rewrote the entire thing because [she] didn’t even know where to begin with edits.”

“At the time I was writing them [the stories] I would have sworn that it was my best writing,” she said. By the end of the course, she thought differently.

A lot of the variables we looked at in class—directness, economy, all those things—I didn’t really see too much of it in my writing. Maybe I had a different mentality when I was actually [submitting the first drafts]. Maybe I was exposed to more writings of that style so I kind of understood the correlation between reader [and] writer, in that case, so—so yeah, I was also able to kind of push myself into the reader’s perspective when I read mine. I was more judgmental. That’s something I think I acquired throughout the course.

I asked her what she meant by “judgmental.” She said she knew how to “criticize myself based on my weaknesses as opposed to just looking at my strengths.”

6.3.1 Grabbing and Holding in Writing and Reading

Deedee’s position on writing had changed. Before, she said writers had to achieve clarity in public texts. Writers, she had said, owed nothing to readers. By the third interview, she spoke
exclusively about public texts. She said the writer’s job is to “engage the reader.” The goal was to “grab” readers and to get them to respond.

Her views on readers had changed since the beginning of the term, too. Readers, she now said, have a different job: “to get hold of the writer.” The reader must work to understand what the writer means to say. They must accept what the writer offers.

Writers “grab” and readers “hold.” They must both reach for the other. This is how they “connect.”

6.3.2 Consume a Text or Be Consumed

Interestingly, Deedee said her “style of reading changed.” She was “able to edit while reading” a text. She said that when she reads her science texts, she can now identify why a text is difficult: “I’m like why is this so difficult for me to understand, I don’t know, and then I would just read and I’m like well, these words don’t go together, the pronouns and the adverbs and that stuff.”

Deedee described this shift in reading styles in terms of consumption. She said she is no longer “consumed” by what she read. She now “consumed” what she read:

Deedee: I feel like I’m more critical when I’m reading now, like I’m not as … maybe before I was just bought by anything, I was just kind of consumed and I didn’t really know why. But now I kind of look at the variables, like what makes a good piece of work, so…

Price: So you’re not passive?

Deedee: I don’t necessarily think so any more.
6.3.3 Editors: Intermingled Between Writers and Readers

Deedee had gained more experience with editing during the last half of the term. She had started with four people in her editorial group. Two of those people dropped out, while the third person “put very little effort into his work” and “just didn’t care.” In the last two weeks of the class, Deedee met another student in the class. They partnered up and met two days a week in the last weeks of the class to edit each other’s stories. “I believe I got a lot of feedback from her [the editor] that I was kind of looking for that I couldn’t get myself,” Deedee said. “And I feel like when I applied that it was just easier for me to see what I was lacking in my work.”

Deedee wanted feedback that went beyond surface elements of the writing. Her editor gave her feedback on story, setting and character development and the details that “fogged up” the story. “Clarity was a big factor that we were looking for,” Deedee said, “how she thought the story could be improved in terms of just writing, like for visualizing I suppose.”

Deedee had developed her definition of editors since the beginning of the term. Editors “look at the weaknesses and strengths of a writer’s piece of work.” She said the editor is “intermingled between the reader and the writer’s position, because they have to understand the reader, but they also have to understand what the writer sees.”

6.4 Deedee’s Writing

Deedee’s writing changed over the course of Expressive Writing. Her later stories differed in content and form from earlier stories. Below, I document a few of the more significant changes in Deedee’s writing and decision-making.
6.4.1 Adherence to Style

At the sentence-level, Deedee’s writing changed in small but noticeable ways. Her earliest drafts suffered from wordiness and cliché. In the first draft of her first story, she used sound effects (“ring, ring”) rather than visuals (“The school bell rang”) to communicate action. I have encountered other new writers in Expressive Writing who rely on onomatopoeia rather than visual images to create pictures for their readers. Including unexplained sound effects without including explanations creates confusion. Often, I see students in Expressive Writing treat sound as a visual detail. Thankfully, most writers move through this phase quickly.

These minor details are interesting, but they do not give a sense of how Deedee’s writing style changed, or how the course influenced her writing. To arrive at that understanding, we must look at her final drafts. Those drafts show that Deedee understood Asitwa’s instructions and strove to apply his instructions on writing style to her writing.

During the second interview I conducted with Deedee, she told me she was starting to understand the lessons in writing style. She told me she could “see” her writing more clearly and she had begun to use terminology of the course to describe her writing. Overall, Deedee incorporated style lessons into her writing ably. Her writing improved. But, interestingly, the places where she misused the style lessons give insight into how Deedee worked: She tried too hard in some places to apply the rules of style she learned in the course. I read these errors as a natural part of how a writer learns to use these style rules. The new writer will learn to use the rules by misusing them.

For example, Deedee took Asitwa’s instruction to avoid ambiguous pronouns too far. Asitwa told his students that writers should replace ambiguous pronouns with specific nouns. Following this advice, Deedee produced these two sentences:

""

To naturalize the language, Deedee should use “him” instead of “Luke” in the second instance. I read in this style error Deedee’s interest in using the lessons she learned, but not yet having grasped how to moderate the style rules she learned in Expressive Writing.

6.4.2 Sharper Instincts

Deedee’s storytelling became more developed later in the term. Her revisions to her fifth story demonstrate smart editorial decision-making and sharper writerly instincts.

For the fifth story, students had to write about a romantic relationship. The fifth story Deedee included in her final portfolio was not the original fifth story she wrote. This is fortunate. Deedee’s original first relationship story was awful.

That story, titled “Holes in My Sweater,” presents readers with a romantic cliché. In the story, Deedee’s boyfriend asks Deedee to cover her eyes. He leads her to a secluded spot near Lake Ontario. When they arrive, he says:

“You can open your eyes my angel.”

Deedee opens her eyes and looks out at the city of Toronto. She and her boyfriend hug and kiss. He tells her he loves her. Deedee, now freezing, cuddles her beau. They kiss again, and he digs into his backpack for a corkscrew and opens a bottle of champagne. The story ends with her boyfriend’s loving words:

“Happy 2 year Anniversary baby.”
Deedee told me in one of our interviews that she “hated” this story. Why she hated this story is obvious: It is pure *fromage*, a grating cliché, shallow and meaningless. The story reveals nothing about these characters other than: 1) she is cold; and 2) he desires her. Deedee passes over the only interesting detail in the story: Her boyfriend says he loves her, but she does not say it back. Had the story continued, we may have seen the consequences of her reluctance to tell him she loved him too.

What does a reader take from a story like this one? Not much. Is Deedee bragging about her good fortune in love? Should we envy these people? Are we supposed to laugh at the boyfriend’s farcical romantic gesture—taking his girlfriend, who is under-dressed for the occasion, to lake’s edge where she can freeze while they sip champagne?

The writer may care about this story, but nobody else will—except, perhaps, the boyfriend. This is private writing that offers readers little room for interpretation except as comedy. Deedee made the right decision in replacing this story with another relationship story. This story—“I Smile”—shows Deedee’s growth as a writer and her willingness to tell readers a story they want to hear.

“I Smile” opens with clear, specific locating details:

> I find myself walking to Door 229 on a chill Wednesday night in September.

Inside Door 229, a dingy bar in Mississauga, Deedee meets her friend Lynda. Another friend, Luke, plays guitar on the stage. Deedee smiles at Luke and he forgets his lyrics. Deedee tells the reader:

Deedee speaks with Lynda and watches Luke play. Luke searches the audience for Deedee and finds her. Deedee tells the reader:

I smile. I always smile when Luke notices me.

Luke finishes his set, the audience cheers, and he sits with Deedee and Lynda. The three of them talk. Deedee tells the reader:

I smile. I always smile when Luke talks to me.

Deedee and Luke sit together until last call. They are alone. Luke asks Deedee if she wants to “pull an all-nighter” with him. She says yes, and they wander Port Credit together until the sun rises. Deedee tells the reader:


After a text break, Deedee relocates the reader: Two hours have passed since Luke and Deedee left the bar. She and him have been raiding half-built houses on Lagoon Avenue. Now they sit on a curb outside a Shopper’s Drug Mart. After two pages of teasing the reader with this flirting, we arrive at the turning of the story:

Luke’s voice flattens. “Well, you’re obviously smart enough to figure out that I like you.”

Deedee shifts to internal monologue and tells the reader:

I’ve been preparing for this conversation for three months now, yet I’m flustered in response. The words echo in my
head, ‘I like you.’ The reply could be so damn easy, if it weren’t for my boyfriend David.

This is the first time in this story that the reader learns about Deedee’s boyfriend. The revelation shocks. Up until now, we have witnessed a pleasant courtship. Once we learn about the boyfriend, the story shifts. This is not innocent flirtation. Betrayal is in the air.

When Luke asks Deedee if she still loves her boyfriend (Luke knows about the boyfriend too!) Deedee “mutters” “Yeah.” Luke says nothing more to her. Rain falls from “gloomy clouds.” The story ends:

I wonder if Luke will ever talk to me again. I stare at his eyes, as he zones to the sky. My heart’s pulse vibrates my chest. With my eyes fixed onto Luke, he finally rocks his body up into a seated position. His clouded eyes dodge mine as he decides to take me home.

The four minute walk is silent. I only hear the clicking of my boots on the patchy cemented ground. As I approach my apartment I gaze up at him one last time. I say goodbye to Luke, but there is no response. I don’t reach for a hug, because I know Luke wouldn’t want my comfort. I frown. I frown because I know Luke will never be mine.

Deedee made the right decision in replacing “Holes in My Sweater” with “I Smile.” This story, “I Smile,” delivers more of what readers need.
6.4.3 Recognition of Audience

“Holes in My Sweater” read like a private story, as if Deedee had written the story exclusively for herself and her boyfriend. The story portrays a relationship, as the assignment instructions required, but the story has no dramatic moment, no inciting incident—the essential element in any good story—other than the fact that the narrator was under-dressed. Deedee’s decision to reject “Holes in My Sweater” demonstrates her understanding of what makes a good story. She knew the story underwhelmed and lacked a dramatic moment, character development, and resolution. “I Smile” is complex. The behaviour of the characters in the story, particularly the narrator, offer more for readers to discuss and interpret.

6.4.4 Understating Sentiment

Importantly, Deedee shows in “I Smile” that she can handle complicated emotional material without slipping deeply into sentimentality. In her earlier stories, she struggled to present emotion on the page.

Take, for example, “A Flash of Embarrassment,” her second story. This story has a slapstick ending: A gust of wind blows up Deedee’s skirt, and Andre C., the boy Deedee likes, glimpses the comfortable, Fruit-of-the-Loom underwear she is wearing. It is laundry day, so she did not have anything to wear but “hideous” but comfortable “granny panties.” The story ends:

    Our eyes lock as Andre C. blows up in laughter. Oh laundry day, how you suck.

The last line grates. One expects to hear a laugh track. This slapstick ending exaggerates the emotion of the scene. It communicates the sentiment the writer wants the readers to feel and asks
the reader to roll their eyes in an “Aw, shucks,” sort of way. We can understand the feeling and relate, but do we care?

“I Smile” ends differently. It limits summary information and keeps the visual aspects of the writing in the fore. The scene expresses emotion primarily through visuals. We see Luke “dodge” the narrator’s gaze. We hear the silence. We see the awkward, uncomfortable body language.

The scene is not without internal narration. Deedee does let us into her thoughts, but when she does, she understates the emotion. Her heart vibrates her chest—an exaggerated image, to be sure—but the feeling is presented as a visual cue, rather than a verbal expression of emotion. What she tells us about her emotional state arrives in plain, simple language: “I wonder if Luke will ever talk to me again,” and “I frown because I know Luke will never be mine.”

6.4.5 A Shift Away from Juvenilia

Adult readers want adult stories. A story becomes meaningful when the writer adds dimensions that permit readers to view the story from various moral angles, to interpret the story in multiple ways. By definition, juvenilia is innocent, underdeveloped, immature. This is why most writers burn their early works before they die. No sensible writer wants the world to read their rookie babblings.

Deedee, recognizing the limitations of the juvenile stories, strove to deliver more complicated stories later in the term. Her last two stories of the term—“I Smile” and “Bananas,” her interview story—have complexity, ambiguity, and dimension. I get the sense that had Deedee wrote a seventh or eighth story, she would have continued the trajectory towards stories with greater depth and complexity.
Her sixth story, “Bananas,” deals exclusively with adult concerns. In “Bananas,” Deedee interviews Christian, her boss at the bar where she works. This interview uses a story-within-a-story structure. In one story, we watch Deedee interview her boss Christian. The second story comes via Christian, as he recounts for Deedee his adventures inside an Amsterdam sex club.

Christian’s story about the sex club is made interesting by the framing narrative of the interview. Deedee is a young woman, Christian’s employee, and we watch as he appears to cross a boundary of common sense and convention when he tells Deedee about the time he ate a banana out of a stripper’s vagina. As Christian tells his tale, a regular of the bar enters the scene. Deedee ignores the regular and expresses her disdain for him—he is a rude man. Christian shares Deedee’s dislike for the man. Christian’s story continues, and as he talks, Deedee “relaxes,” “grins,” and “chuckles” as Christian stares into her eyes and speaks.

Inappropriateness drives the story. Christian’s story is raunchy and outrageous. But we also see him tell the story in a bar, with a young female employee. Some details in the framing narrative suggest a connection between Deedee and Christian. In the last paragraph, Deedee reports that when Christian “firmly grips” her hand in a handshake, the hair on his hand “tickles” her “frozen skin.” This detail is odd, and following the amped up sexuality and inappropriateness of the story, it stands out as provocative. There is nothing to wonder about in Christian’s story—it is a one-dimensional pornography. But Deedee’s focus on details about Christian and his relation to her—the staring, the touching, the risqué, over-sexed confession—gives the story another layer, something more for readers to ponder.

6.4.6 Writing for Readers

In our second interview, Deedee told me that since enrolling in Expressive Writing, she had found herself more inclined to want to write.
I’ve noticed that some nights when I come from work I would just want to write after taking this course, and I would never really understand why. Like I just felt like I relieve myself from any stress or tensions around my shift or throughout my day. And if you’re trying to incorporate a reader into it as well, I feel like there is a relationship. It might not be necessarily on the same topic, but it might be more [an emotional connection].

Deedee had made a writing schedule for herself. She worked at a gym and composed the stories she wrote for class between 7:00 and 8:00 on Saturday mornings, when the gym was quiet. She wrote about what mattered to her, rather than writing what she thought readers might want to read. Writers must write what matters to them, she said.

I feel like if I’m feeling passionate about something, I’ll write very well about that topic, like I’ll be able to feel and connect and pour all my emotions into this piece, so I just kind of go with what I want. It’s kind of hard, I feel, to write for a reader because they might not be satisfied because you’re trying so hard and you might not be believable in that sense.

She appeared to change her position by the end of the course. She did not write exclusively for herself. She had—in the content of the stories she chose to write about, through the lengths she went to edit the text, and in her decisions about what to present in her final portfolio—geared the final product towards a readership outside herself. She recognized the public nature of writing and delivered a public-facing story.

At the end of our last interview, I asked Deedee to categorize her learning: How would she describe Expressive Writing? She said the course taught her a range of skills—reading, writing, and editing—but she finally settled on describing the course as “an editing-focused class.”
I asked her, Where had she grown the most? I thought she might say “as an editor,” since Expressive Writing is “an editing-focused course.” She did not reply as I expected. Without hesitating, she said she “grew as a writer” by taking this editing-focused course. She was “really proud” of her last story, the interview. She felt the story succeeded and demonstrated the quality of writing she wanted to produce. She felt elated when she finished the final draft. She felt like she had done what a writer was supposed to do: produce clear engaging writing.

“I was like, yeah,” she said, “it’s like this is what I wanted to become.”
7 Case Study: Joannie

Joannie was excited to volunteer for the research project at the end of the first class and showed up to my office for our first interview with the same good cheer. When I thanked her for participating, she thanked me for letting her participate. I thought, “This should be easy.”

Talking to Joannie was easy. She is articulate, intelligent, and detailed in how she speaks. But writing this case was not easy. Joannie and I spoke about so much that wrangling the details into a manageable form challenged me. I needed time to figure the story out, so I wrote the other cases first.

There is another reason why I wrote Joannie’s case last. She had enrolled in a course I taught in the Winter 2017 term, the semester following her section of Expressive Writing. The course was History and Writing, what I consider one of the hardest courses in the professional writing program. In History and Writing, students must select a historic subject (a person, a place, or a thing) and produce a series of stories that tell the history of their subject. Students must build their histories using primary sources. Joannie produced a 6,000-word feature length article detailing a popular singer’s strange and complicated relationship to religion. Her article impressed me, as I figured it might. I gave it a B.

When I finally sat down to write this case, I encountered something I had not expected: The first drafts she produced in Astiwa’s Expressive Writing class were superior to the final drafts. Her writing appeared to get worse by the end of the course. Joannie’s history article embodied the principles of economy, detail, directness, and voice, and told an engaging story about an artist and her religion. Some of the prose Joannie produced in Expressive Writing confused me. Some stories left me puzzled.
I felt a shock as I thumbed through the work she did in Expressive Writing. Something had gone wrong for Joannie. I wanted to find out what.

7.1 First Interview: The Not-so-Rookie Writer

At the time of our first interview, Joannie was a first-year student with straight cut bangs and a wide smile. Born in the Philippines and raised in the U.S.A, living in New York before settling in Los Angeles, Joannie moved to Brampton, Ontario, in January 2015, and took an extra year in Canada to complete her high school diploma. She majors in CCIT (Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology), with minors in Professional Writing and French. She loves school and loves learning. Her decision to attend university was entirely her own.

Prior to Expressive Writing, Joannie had not taken many courses focused on writing. In grade 10, she took an Advanced Placement course in language and composition, but, she said, “that was more teaching to the test” and required her to memorize a list of rhetorical devices. “I only remember three,” she told me in our first interview. She also took an Advanced Placement course in journalism. Instruction in that course focused on layout and design. “It was expected of us to already know how to write,” she said.

At the start of the term, Joannie said she was looking forward to Expressive Writing. “I’ve never had a formal instruction on writing,” she said. “It was always focused on a final exam and I would just forget it.” She expected Expressive Writing to be “immersive” because of the small class size. “Classes in the States were underfunded. You were lucky if there was a minimum of 44 people in a class. Yeah, the classes were cramped.”
7.1.1 Clarity through Editing

Unlike many students who take Expressive Writing, Joannie was an active writer and editor, and even though she had never taken a formal course in writing, she was no rookie. In her Advanced Placement journalism course, Joannie co-edited her high school’s student newspaper with a friend. Joannie achieved the position of editor after working her way up the ladder, from cub reporter to editor-in-chief.

The experience gave Joannie insight into editing and editors. As she explained, editors do more than “sit and fix the grammar.” Editors are “the second set of eyes,” the one “who tries to make more people understand exactly what the writer wanted to say.” The goal is clarity: “In general, [the editor’s job] is to help the writer, not really to conceive, but more to clarify their focus, their point, without changing the voice of their style in the writing.”

Joannie said editing depends as much on the writer as it does the editor. The relationship needs to have “trust.” At the newspaper, Joannie and her co-editor engineered a process intended to create opportunity for collaboration and discussion between editors and writers. Under the process they instituted, editors assigned the stories and encouraged reporters to submit their work early, so they had time to discuss and revise the work. Writers and editors would have time to collaborate because writers would finish the work ahead of schedule.

“But the writers very seldom did that,” Joannie said.

Instead of having time for collaboration, Joannie and her co-editor had to take time from their lunch periods to edit papers. “But then what happened is everything would come to the last minute, even though there were people who did exactly what we wanted them to do.”
“It was challenging,” she said. “Our class was an elective. We tried hard to make people care, but it took less priority.”

Working with writers proved difficult in another way: The editors struggled to communicate feedback to the writers. Some writers were “willing to handle the feedback, receive it [and] be collaborative.” Other writers “were very confident in their writing” and were unreceptive to edits. With those writers, Joannie and her co-editor had to work together to figure out what the writer meant to say and how to say it more clearly.

I asked Joannie if she, as a writer, has trouble receiving edits. Anybody, she replied, will find receiving feedback a challenge if an editor “stomps” on their efforts: “You try to make it perfect, or near perfect, and here are people who know better, have more experience, say that these are things that need to be fixed. It’s hard facing the fact.” Joannie’s perfectionist streak has also challenged her over the years. Accepting feedback has been hard for her because she hates to know she did not achieve perfection the first time around.

As early as elementary school, I remember getting a bad grade and I’d shut off from my mom. She would say, no we’re correcting these things so you know how to do better in the future, whereas I would focus on a stupid mistake and say, Why did I do that, I know better. It transformed into today saying, Yeah, you’re right, that correction is right, I should have known that. I listen all the time, but moving on from that trait I developed is hard. Not personally, not a thing against the editor, more a thing that that is an option, a better way of doing it.
7.1.2 Daily Writing, Voracious Reading

Joannie writes every day. She has kept a “steady” journal since she was seven years old and keeps a box of these diaries at home. The diary entries range from “really detailed” accounts of what happened each day to quick notes. “If I want to remember something that happened ten years ago, I can just flip to the page because I organize them too.” Despite writing every day, Joannie was reluctant to call herself a writer:

I don’t know. It’s relative I guess. I don’t know. Everyone struggles with the fact that in most things, somebody’s going to be better than me. Personally, I enjoy writing, so I guess I am a writer. From previous things I’ve done in school, and outside of school, I can say I’m proud of it, so I consider myself a writer.

Joannie might have been reluctant to call herself a writer—even though she is a writer—but she readily called herself a reader. She said she reads “voraciously,” for pleasure and for school. While Joannie’s first language is Talogog, she mostly uses English today and reads English nearly exclusively. She credits the Harry Potter series for exciting her love of reading and for teaching her English: “I think I learned English through Harry Potter because it was engaging, and it interested me.”

Joannie knows what she likes in a text and can articulate it. This fact distinguished her from other first-year Expressive Writing students. Some students do not know why they like what they like. Joannie does.

She spoke to me with sophistication about her desire to read stories told in an “original voice.” Above all, she dislikes inauthenticity. She said writers must “fight” to produce original work. Writers must think about what they have to say and understand “why is it important, why will
people care.” “When I read something, I don’t want to be fooled or duped by insincerity. When that happens, it more or less shows.”

Joannie likes subtlety and understatement. As a reader, Joannie likes to engage with a text and discover how a writer thrills her. “It’s like, how did you do that? How did you think of that? And how could I follow if I wanted to, like, try to do that?” She said she prefers when a writer makes her work to understand the writer. “I like the frustration that comes from not understanding at first.”

7.1.3 Responsibilities and Roles

One aim of my study is to understand how writers relate to readers. I broached the topic with Joannie in our first interview. Do writers have responsibilities to their readers? Do readers have responsibilities to writers? She said she was not sure if a relationship existed between writers and readers. It was a concept she had never considered. She thought a moment before speaking about the reader’s responsibility:

I think it’s the reader’s job to have an opinion. There is the inherent worth of the work, but then it is the readers who determine the value of it in an environment. That’s what they have to do.

When she reads a text, Joannie asks herself if she is “engaged.” This self-analysis is one way she evaluates the quality of a text:

[I ask] how am I gauging the narrator and the character? I do like them or not like them? Do I agree with their decisions? When I put the book down and think about what I just read, I take a step back and think, why did they do this and why are they writing about that?
About the writer’s responsibilities to the reader, Joannie had a clear idea. Writers are responsible for the “human aspect” of a piece of writing:

For me, [writing] has to have some truth in it. It’s made by a human, and what I find the most enlightening and engaging is when the human aspect of the process or of the story and character aren’t too hidden. What I’m trying to say is, when there is a human aspect in it, it’s me wanting to know more about the human condition. Writers, I feel they owe something, to give back to us about something that could be relatable to some people. If someone, one person, touches someone else, I think it’s a job well done.

7.2 Second and Third Interviews: The Challenges of Editing

By midterm, Joannie was enjoying Expressive Writing “a lot […] ‘cause it is the smallest class I’m in. […] Everyone gets to say something, it’s not just someone talking at you.” (Her other courses, classes in communications course and English, each had hundreds of students.)

Joannie’s views had refined since our previous meeting. She described writing as a relationship between writer and audience, with readership contingent on writership. Readers do not exist without writers who write publicly, for an audience, and with a desire to touch that audience. At the same time, the relationship is fostered only when the writing speaks to readers. The relationship is built around “what the reader can get out of it.” The relationship is “complex” and Joannie found it hard to explain. But, she said, writing that stays with you, “stays with you for a reason. The writer makes that connection.”

She said writing and reading are “a way of communicating” between people and across time. Even private writing, like the diaries Joannie keeps, communicates with one another. “It’s really nice to see my relationship with myself over time,” she said.
Writers have obligations to their readers. They must “manipulate” their thoughts so they “make sense outside of their own heads.” Writers must make “a consideration for the reader.” Public writing should be “accessible” and “cater” to readers so that readers are not excluded. “They’re not going to understand you,” she said. “And like, you’re writing for an audience, but if you alienate your audience, what’s the point?”

Readers have obligations, too. One obligation is to listen, “to fully realize the context of the message.” But this obligation is not necessarily owed to writers. Readers, even when they read for pleasure, have an obligation to other readers. Readers must assess the merits of a work. “Like, you wouldn’t want to blindly, enthusiastically laud a work that’s, like, offensive or problematic or has no merit in terms of enriching other minds,” she said. She pointed to “problematic artists” who “have done horrible things” and “victimized other people.” The audience of readers has an obligation to “assess the social context and the merits of the work” and determine the net value of writing. Should the writing be read and validated, or should it not?

Ultimately, readers must build “their own experience with [a text] that they can foster for themselves.” They do not have an obligation to the writer.

7.2.1 Improved Awareness

By our second interview, Joannie felt she was benefiting by taking Expressive Writing. The course was teaching her how to talk about writing, “things [she] was intuitively aware of but never had the terms for.” She noticed a change in how she read, too. She was now recognizing the sentence and style lessons from class. “I see it way more often in everything I’m reading,” she said.
Around the time of our second interview, Joannie had written a test for an English course that asked her to discuss passages from two stories: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” by Ursula K. LeGuin, and “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” by Ernest Hemingway. Joannie used what she learned in Expressive Writing to analyze the mechanics and rhetoric of the text.

[I see] a change in how I approach things. I kind of see stuff not—it used to be just pure did I like it? Did I not like it? But now I see things of how my—the feeling that I got was achieved through the construction of the sentences, the diction. And then like, I also question the author’s motives. Like, is that what they wanted the reader to feel?

As a volunteer for The Medium, UTM’s student newspaper, and a blogger for the Office of Student Transition, Joannie was putting what she learned about writing and editing into practice. “[Expressive Writing is] really, really useful in terms of putting what I learn into everything else I could do in terms of writing,” she said.

The course “put terms” to what Joannie was doing in her writing and made her “hyper-aware” of what she was already doing. But the course was not easy. During our third interview, Joannie told me that the regularity of the writing—writing a story per week—caused strain. “[The stories] piled up, I couldn’t just go back and edit one, like sit down and actually look at it, think about it, just because of the pacing [of the course].”

Joannie also said she felt too many of her peers were treating Asitwa’s lectures as “rules not guidelines.” She felt a sameness in the style of the writing produced by her classmates. Joannie worried her style was indistinct from her peers, “though I don’t expect to have a distinct style at my age and my development,” she said.
Additionally, Joannie reported feeling pressure from the course, and from her editing
groupmates, to write short stories built around single events, stories that were shorter than she
might have wanted to write. Joannie’s longest story was just 1690 words. “But still,” she said,
“my group members were like: You write too much.”

7.2.2 Editing as Refining

Joannie’s thoughts on the editor’s job remained consistent through the term.

Editors act as “a step in-between” the writer and reader. They are the “destination” before the
reader. Editors, she said, “are the ones […] receiving the work. […] They’re the audience, the
first audience.” The editor is “a person who kind of assesses the merits as someone who would
like to consume this work.” With a stake in both camps—writers and readers—editors give
writers feedback and ensure the writer communicates to the reader what is meant to be
communicated. Originality is a key element in good writing, Joannie said, and editors must
ensure their edits do not compromise the “integrity of the writer” or erase the writer’s “original
thoughts.” The editor ensures the writer’s thoughts are presented “for someone else’s mind to
comprehend the same way I wanted it in my head.”

Editors must “foster the relationship between [writer and editor] so that the relationship between
the writer and the reader can also function well.” Editors foster their relationship with writers by
engaging with the text, “picking it apart,” and asking questions to see if the text communicates as
the writer intends. To accomplish this task, editors talk back to the writer. Readers do not usually
talk back, although they do talk amongst themselves. “The editor can reach that author because
it’s kind of their obligation to,” Joannie said, “as opposed to the reader who can’t directly contact
the author, especially since if it is published and final.”
Joannie said editing is an act of refining. Writers work with editors to “refin[e] your thought to exactly what you intended it, like the whole”—she touched her temple—“from in-here-outwards. Unless you’re a genius or something and your first draft is perfect, which I have no experience with.”

7.2.3 Editing in the Communications Process

The second interview took an unexpected turn at the end. We had finished the formal interview and talked about school. I told Joannie a bit about my research. That led to another discussion about reading and writing. I had not yet turned off the tape recorder when Joannie said that “language can be really inaccurate in terms of like, getting what’s in here up [in my head] into yours.” She said a lot gets lost between “someone who’s transmitting [a message] and someone who’s receiving it.”

This caught my ear. It sounded like reception theory, a subject I knew she had discussed in her communications classes and a topic I had referenced in my proposal work for this dissertation. I asked her to talk about writing and reading in relation to reception theory. She ably applied the reader-writer relationship to a diagram she had learned about in class: the writer encodes and transmits, the reader decodes and responds, and between them is noise.

Price: And where’s the editor fit in that diagram?

Joannie: In that diagram? Oh, man. I wouldn’t know because like, adding any other layer between the two people inevitably creates noise, in my opinion. [The editor] could be taking some [noise] away but [the editor] can also eventually add some noise back in. I wouldn’t know in what way, but—

Price: Or does the editor occupy both [roles]?
Joannie: Oh, totally! Yeah! Cause then, as an editor, you kind of have to get in the mindset of the transmitter and then when you’re reading it, experiencing it, decoding the message as another would, you are the receiver as well.

Oh, that’s so cool. I have, like, a visual in my head now.

The editor, she concluded, helps the writer “clean up the noise.”

Joannie: But like, when they do that are they kind of contaminating it too, but not knowingly? Like, maybe when they interact with the writer, their input might change the writer, too. So then that message, I know, isn’t fixed, it obviously undergoes change, but to like the extent that it does, I wonder who’s responsible for it? The writer or the editor?

Price: That’s interesting. And the answer to that, I think, is just looking at the cover of a book. Do you ever see the editor’s name?

Joannie: No.

Price: The writer always gets the glory.

I wrapped up the interview. Joannie nodded and I saw she was chewing on what we had talked about. “It looks like a simple path,” she said, “like, writer to reader. But there’s so many more components that are overlooked, like the editor, or maybe even the person who ends up designing the cover. It’s really interesting.”

It is really interesting. Joannie had glimpsed the larger functioning of the communications process, and she saw how writers and editors fit into this process, in theory and in the professional world. Editors are not an addendum to the writing process but a primary component.
And I think she saw how she fit inside this process. Her awareness of how she related to her learning—metacognition—appeared to spark a deeper understanding that is essential to learning (El-Hindi, 2003). She was not simply a student working through a course. She was a student participating in the same activities as professionals.

7.2.4 Time-compromised Students

Joannie identified the editorial process in Expressive Writing as the main challenge she faced in the class. She was not getting a chance to give and receive edits because her editorial group was so cautious and short for time (the group was trying to edit four stories in an hour). The feedback she received focused on minor issues, rather than the merits of the work. “The comments that they make on mine personally is just like grammar or maybe you could use a different word, cause when we do run out of time, we can’t really talk about the merits of the work itself.”

During our midterm meeting, Joannie said her editorial group had met “a couple of times” since the beginning of the term. The group uploaded their stories to Google Docs. At their in-person meetings, the writers read their stories out loud, and then the editors read the story again on the screen and typed in their edits. Once they finished, the editors identified strengths and edits to the stories, as Asitwa had instructed them.

However, Joannie noted that the editorial sessions were overly careful to the feelings of the writers.

We’re complete strangers, though, so there’s this tiptoeing around each other. You don’t want to offend anyone. Especially since I don’t like making people upset. [laughs] So, I try to use really like, pacifying words, like can I suggest? Or maybe try. When really in
my head I’m just like, do this. Take my suggestion! [laughs] I feel like maybe we’re not saying all we want to say.

Joannie’s experience with the arts editor at The Medium gave her another view on editing, although she describes her experience with the arts editor as “disconnected.” The paper had no feedback mechanism. Joannie submitted her copy to the arts editor, received a thank you, and when she saw her story in print, she saw the editor had made changes without telling her.

And then I see the changes they made and sometimes there’s still that part of me that’s just like why’d you change it? It was fine! [laughs] And then I feel disoriented because I didn’t know why they changed it. Like, was it space? Was it the way it was written? Cause in the end they didn’t change any of the messages I was trying to convey, it was just like little words or grammar or sentence structures.

By the time of our final interview, after the course had ended, Joannie’s editorial group had met “a couple of times near the end” of term “because our schedules didn’t align, and our workloads were so heavy.” Joannie wished the group could have met more regularly. “[I]t would have been better,” she said. “[The editing] was very superficial.” When the group did meet:

the editing didn’t go in-depth about the storytelling itself. It’s like, oh, put the comma here, or this part didn’t make sense, maybe you could just word it this way? So once we would make the comments on the edits we weren’t able to ask them about the comments and why they made it, just because we didn’t have time. It would have been cool to sit down with the group and say, is this story engaging? As a read, did you enjoy it? What could I improve on? But we didn’t have the time.
7.3 Joannie’s Writing

Full disclosure: Joannie took a class with me and performed well. In the interviews I conducted for this dissertation, I got to see a little of how her mind works. She is intelligent and capable, and she understands the big concepts in the course.

I saw for myself that she can write well. The portfolio she produced in History and Writing embodied the principles of economy, detail, directness, and voice. And, notably, the sixth and last story she produced in Expressive Writing is a well-written story that demonstrates the lessons of the course.

Yet her final portfolio poses a problem. She made several questionable choices in the final drafts of her work that hurt the overall quality of her stories. In some cases, she took good stories and broke them by blurring details and over-narrating the events.

Interestingly, as I show below, the trouble emerged between the first drafts of her work and the final drafts. Editing appears to have made the stories worse.

7.3.1 The Sixth Story (The Good One)

Joannie submitted the fifth version of her last story, an interview she titled “A Little Bit More Mindfulness.” The interview documents a Skype discussion between Joannie and her long-time friend Olivia, a student studying in California who a few weeks earlier had come out as “non-binary” and adopted plural pronouns (“they” instead of “she”). Joannie asked about the coming out process and the challenges Olivia faced in making this transition.

This story presents Olivia’s views without much interference from Joannie. Joannie asks questions, Olivia answers. Readers get insight into a perplexing phenomenon that was, when Joannie wrote her story, topical and intensely debated on university campuses.
The interview reads like a confessional. Olivia expresses frustration and confusion, and Joannie quotes these feelings at length. An example:

“For the most part, the gender binary has made me really confused and frustrated. I’m confused as to why trivial things are part of categories that are supposed to define a person when we all came into this world without a fixed constitution to anything. Basically, I’m frustrated because the gender binary hasn't done anything but forced us to take on roles that none of us asked for,” they state.

The long passages of dialogue allow readers to hear Olivia’s words and draw conclusions about Olivia’s predicament.

Joannie also gives insight into how she reacts. Joannie admits in the interview that she, too, is on a “questioning” journey. At one point in the interview, Joannie lets readers hear her thoughts. Olivia says:

Unlearning problematic behavior [about gender binaries] should be embraced by everyone because who wouldn’t want to make the world more open and respectful? Especially when the change requires little effort, just a little bit more of mindfulness.

Joannie responds:

And that’s just it isn’t it? I think to myself. A little bit more of mindfulness. It’s not like anyone has to make
any drastic life changes. We can all be a little more mindful, more inclusive. We can stop saying “you guys” or adhere to someone’s pronouns. If simple changes can make someone feel safer and valid, why not implement them?

Near the end of the interview, Joannie broaches the topic of religion. Olivia belongs to a devout Christian household. Balancing faith with a non-binary status presents Olivia with a challenge.

Joannie ends the story with a quote from Olivia:

“It took me a long time to feel comfortable labeling myself as non-binary or genderfluid because of my lack of desire to change my appearance and how I present myself. I still have insecurities about my gender identity.

“But what’s beautiful about gender is that to me, there shouldn’t be any restrictions or judgments. It's okay to be questioning, it's okay to identify with more than one gender and feel strongly about the other. There are and shouldn't be any rules. There’s always room for self discovery and growth.”

Joannie’s interview succeeds because it lets the interviewee speak and gives readers a portrait of two people who question traditional gender arrangements. It is an engaging portrait of modern politics that begs readers to respond.
This story shows that Joannie can write well about topical concerns in ways that engage her readers. Her other stories do not measure up to this story and for a reason: she takes the stories away from her readers by dominating the text. The effect is to crowd out the reader.

7.3.2 Crowding Out the Reader

Joannie’s stories tend to go wrong in places where she crowds out the reader. To put it another way, her stories become hard to read when she misuses detail and makes it difficult for the reader to create meaning. I identify two ways Joannie’s stories crowd the reader out of the story, two technical problems that take away the reader’s ability to generate meaning in the text.

The intrusive narrator. The final drafts of Joannie’s stories tend to have an intrusive narrator, a narrator who interrupts the forward momentum of the plot to insert judgement, share feelings, and wax poetic. In the final draft of Joannie’s third story, a story about family called “Christmas Eve,” Joannie interrupts the flow of action constantly to inject her opinion. Consider the passage below. It is a key moment in the text, when Joannie must field questions about growing up from her younger cousins. I underlined phrases where Joannie’s judgements and internal dialogue intrudes into the scene:

“Will it always be like this [Joannie]?” [Karl] mumbles, graham cracker crumbs flying past his chapped lips. He tosses rocks into the pit as he chews. They hit the crumbling wood and embers fly up. In the corner of my eye, I see Sarah and Kieran shift in their seats. Their eyes drill into me. I freeze.
I don't know what to say. Karl looks up at me forlornly. He looks at me like I have the answers to everything. I don't know. In front of me is a lanky middle schooler whose haircut needs to grow out a little; what I see is my cousin, how he'll look like in a couple of years when he's in high school. I really don't know. I shove my frozen hands under my thighs.

“I really don't know, Karl. Do you want things to stay the same?”

Surprisingly, he looks down at his lap and thinks about his answer. That's a first for Karl, who notoriously has no filter, despite his overall bashful personality.

“I...I don't want Christmas to feel any other way but this,” he whispers. He peers up at me with huge brown eyes that take up half his elfish face.

The silence speaks for me. I'm astonished at his awareness, but more so with my own surprise. He isn't seven anymore, I remind myself.

I clench my warming hands into fists. I realize that we're all growing up and I don't know how to feel.

“It feels like we're growing up, doesn't it Janina?”
I peek at Kieran and Sarah. They look at me like I'm the adult. They look at me like I'll say what they need to hear.

This passage communicates an interesting moment in life, when a person realizes time is passing. The piece has potential, but it needs editing. Specifically, the narrator needs to get out of the way of the scene.

Firstly, Joannie needs to limit overstatement. A generalized exaggeration of the scene contributes to an inflation of the emotional component of the story, e.g., the graham cracker crumbs “flying past” Karl’s lips and the “eyes” drilling into Joannie. (It should be their gazes, not their eyes, that drill into her).

Secondly, and more importantly, Joannie needs to remove some of the narrator’s more overt intrusions into the scene. Joannie can cut adverbs and adjectives that contribute to the sense of exaggeration, e.g., “huge brown eyes that take up half his elfish face.” Too often the talkative, contemplative narrator retreats from the scene and takes us, the readers, into her head. For example, the vision of Karl as a high schooler overlaying Karl as a child adds little to the plot or to Karl’s character. But it does tell us about the narrator.

This is the problem: The narrator routinely draws the reader’s attention to herself and her emotional state. The moment of revelation, when the narrator realizes the kids are growing up, hits a false note, especially when the narrator completes the thought by telling us she does not know “how to feel” about this fact. (Three times she tells us she does not know what to say; two times she references her revelation.)
It is too much. The narrator’s intrusions into the scene do not deliver a return. We get talk, but not much insight, and so the intrusions stand out as unnecessary and self-indulgent. The overall effect is to overstate the narrator’s ambiguous emotions and render the moment banal.

A similar problem occurs in the fourth and final draft of her second story, a school story called “Pomp and Circumstance.” In this story, a teacher leads Joannie to a room on the other side of school where her friends and teachers hold a going away party for her. (Joannie is leaving California and moving to Canada.) At the end of the story, a friend takes Joannie’s photograph with a Polaroid camera. Joannie uses the polaroid as a metaphor: the image developing in the picture is arriving, while Joannie is leaving California:

[The image slowly emerges in the Polaroid.] Bit by bit, the colours sink in. The overexposure fades to give way to little details in the picture: the balloons behind me, my greasy hair, my pout, the cake I never touched. It hit me then. As I watched the picture reveal itself, one detail at a time, I was doing the exact opposite. This whole week, one by one, I was saying goodbye to everything familiar. The balloons reveal themselves; that was me telling my coach first about my move to Canada. My greasy hair materializes; that was the dazed two days I spent neglecting my body in crippling anxiety, worrying about how I would tell my friends. Then the cake manifests; that was me accepting the fact that I wasn’t going to prom with my friends, or graduating with them or my teachers[.]
I appreciate Joannie’s attempt to give her readers a startling image. Good writers take risks, and
the editor helps writers see when risk does not pay off. The passage has potential—the image
communicates the backstory in a creative way—but in its current form, the passage focuses too
much on the narrator’s internal situation, her feelings.

Firstly, the structure of the passage creates odd, unintentionally amusing images. Joannie’s
“greasy hair materializes.” Stranger still is the cake that “manifests.” These phrases are
distracting. They pull me from the story and make me question the writer’s word choice.

Second, the repeating “that was” construction attempts to tie the balloons, the greasy hair, the
cake to emotional moments in the narrator’s life, moments of loss. But the connection between
the objects and their significance is loose, held together more by the rhetorical art of the passage
(the parallel structuring) than by the meaning.

Lastly, the moment of revelation (“It hit me then”) seems artificial. In the moment of the story,
Joannie already knows she is leaving her friends. She might have said, “It hit me again.” This
criticism may seem pedantic, but there is a larger point, one that ties to my comments above
about Joannie’s story “Christmas Eve”: At key moments, Joannie’s narrator intrudes into the
story to tell the audience about her emotional state or to alert us to revelation, rather than letting
the action of the story play out.

The appropriate response to my commentary is, What is wrong with Joannie telling readers how
she felt? The answer is nothing. But Joannie could have communicated the same idea without
layering on so much explicit emotion. The stories cited above feel overly drawn and written to a
purpose—to tell us how Joannie felt in key moments of her life, rather than to please the
audience. For that reason, they do not persuade me, nor do they absorb me into the story.
Generally, writers should avoid what I call “selfie stories,” stories that read like a selfie photography. The “look at me” stories. “Christmas Eve” and “Pomp and Circumstance” could have communicated the same idea of loss of home and friendship with a less emotional presentation of the facts of the events. The loss and revelation might have been communicated more effectively had the stories taken us to a different moment—Joannie’s first night in the alien world of Brampton, perhaps, instead of her last night in Los Angeles. She could have also captured the loss by training the camera on the world outside herself, on the other people in the scene. How do they show loss in how they speak and act? What images show loss in ways that emotional talk cannot?

7.3.3 Obscuring the picture.

The bigger issue with Joannie’s writing deals with how she edited her writing. I reviewed her early drafts and compared them to her final drafts. In my final calculation, her first drafts were superior to her final drafts, with the exception of her interview story. (Joannie did not supply me with early drafts of the interview.) In almost every story, Joannie complicated the text unnecessarily between the first and final drafts in ways that obscured the imagery.

Here is one example. In the first draft of the fifth story, “Jasmine,” Joannie provides a detail about her friend Ophelia:

   Her eyes are crinkled and a grin reveals shiny braces.

This sentence is clear, but it does not appear in the final draft. In the final draft of “Jasmine,” Joannie replaced it with this sentence:

   Ophelia’s smile was guarded by metal links that shone under the California sunshine.
The second version makes no obvious sense. Joannie replaced a clear noun phrase “shiny braces” with a less clear noun phrase “metal links that shone under the California sunshine.” With the second version, the reader must work to put the picture together. It is not easy. The phrasing calls too much attention to itself.

Joannie obscures “Jasmine” in another way. The story tells about a kiss Joannie and her friend Ophelia share. Ophelia instigates the kiss. As they kiss, Joannie, who had been cuddling Ophelia moments before, “freezes” when Ophelia kisses her. Joannie’s heart beats erratically, and she is “dazed.” An incoherent sentence follows.

Dazed, I hear laughter and its brightness rivals the sunrise threatening to break through the night clouds above, floating and splitting apart, giving way to what I did not yet want to see, but what I knew would follow anyway despite my protests I knew I wouldn’t utter, because noise would only dissipate the moment into the dawn.

Readers will need to spend time decoding this sentence, and even then, you must guess at what she is saying.

The problems are many. There should be a comma after “laughter.” Without a comma, readers might initially treat “laughter and its brightness rivals” as a pair of objects rather than two independent clauses. The modifying phrase “floating and splitting apart” logically associates with “the night clouds,” yet is subordinate to the longer phrase “the sunrise threatening to break through the night clouds above.” There is a strange clashing, a sort of mixed metaphor or synesthesia, between what the narrator sees and what she hears. The biggest problem in the line
is negative phrasing. Twice Joannie blurs the picture by telling readers what she does not know, rather than what she does know. The suggestive yet unclear final phrase “noise would only dissipate the moment into dawn” overstates the emotion, which is itself unclear.

In this passage, Joannie “tells” us something without telling us anything. (If I read it correctly, the sentence attempts to communicate a sentiment similar to one expressed by pop singer Katy Perry: “I kissed a girl and I liked it.”) The lack of clarity, and what seems like intentional obfuscation, confuses me and frustrates me. I remove myself from the story to try to understand the sentence.

The most egregious obscuring of the story appears in Joannie’s fourth story, “Party in the USA.” The first draft included a paragraph that communicated in clear terms the situation of the story:

> Petra and I just started RIOT in September with little preparation; two months in and we’ve organized a successful campus-wide food drive. The weeks leading up to the drive, Petra and I both did the paperwork for the drive and dealt with the administration. Then we drove around and haggled some free paper bags and food from our local grocery stores. A couple of our Wednesday meetings were solely for setting up specific tasks and roles for members. Finally, for the past six weeks, the whole club has been dropping by homerooms every morning, reminding people for donations. Sometimes we get lucky, like today; sometimes crickets chirp as we exit the classrooms, dismayed. Nevertheless, as sophomores, we had little experience in handling large
groups of people, but I look at our set up now and I’m amazed.

In the second draft of the story, Joannie deleted this paragraph. In the final draft, Joannie added several paragraphs detailing the environment of the classroom where the story takes place. Without those important situational details, the story makes little sense. Cutting one of the most important paragraphs from the story undermines the writer’s intentions. Rather than watching the story play out, the reader must work to figure out the situation. Just what are these students doing inside a classroom with what Joannie mysteriously refers to as “Thanksgiving fare”? Readers with experience volunteering for food drives might make the connection. I have volunteered for food drives, but I did not immediately make the connection. Only when I read the first draft did I figure out Joannie was writing about a food drive she and her friend initiated for a club called RIOT that they had founded. And because I started my inquiry by reading the final portfolio first, the initial draft of the story was the last draft I read. I was lost and felt like she had confused me on purpose.

7.3.4 Abandoned by Editors

My commentary on Joannie’s stories may sound harsh. I hope they do not because Joannie can write and she can write well. I have seen it. The core of the stories Joannie produced for Expressive Writing are sound; the passages above highlight moments when her writing went wrong. My critiques, if we treat them as edits, should be easy for her to implement.

During our second interview at midterm, and in our final interview after the course had ended, Joannie told me she received little support from her editors. The students became too busy to meet and resorted to editing their stories online, a process she said, “was less effective since it was less immediate.” Her editors corrected commas and said almost nothing about the content of
her stories. Her meetings with Asitwa provided her with some guidance, and she had taken his advice and modified some stories to clarify the images. But, on the whole, she was left alone with her writing. “I was dismayed that we weren’t as active as we wanted to be. But overall, we did the best we could with editing the works themselves,” she said.

This is not good for a writer who told me in our first interview that she “like[s] the frustration that comes from not understanding at first.” Writers might like frustration, but most readers do not. If clarity is the transcendent quality writers seek frustrating readers is verboten.

Joannie became aware of how important editors are to the writing process. She discovered in the absence of assertive, engaged editors how important editorial feedback is to the preparation a public text. She learned something, even if she was not always able to overcome the struggles in her writing.

Like many writers, Joannie struggled to find a balance between showing and telling. When she got it right, she got it very right, as with her straight-ahead portrait of the confusion of contemporary gender politics. But when she “told” too much, and when she did not “show” enough, her stories became blurred pictures. They were hard to see, and I had trouble understanding her.

An email Joannie sent to me after my dissertation defense further explains her performance in Expressive Writing. She said she was a first-year student and “not accustomed to the pace and workload of university.” She felt “overwhelmed” by first-year. She also said the heavy workload of Expressive Writing forced her to produce pieces “that were for the deadline, and not for my own satisfaction.” “I only felt satisfied with avoiding a late assignment, but I did not feel proud of what I had written.”
8 Discussion and Implications

When I began this research, I wanted to know how writing instruction in an Expressive Writing class influences how students read. Below, I answer the research questions that drove this study.

To help readers navigate my thinking, I arranged the answers thematically, in relation to the research questions and according to three changes I noticed in the students over the course of the term. In brief, I noticed: 1) students came to view the roles of writers, readers, and editors differently by the end of the term; 2) students’ understanding of writing, reading, and editing changed; and 3) these changes in thought reflected in the writing students produced for the course.

Research into reading-writing connections seeks to understand the relationship between reading and writing and transform this understanding into improve educational outcomes. Much of the research takes the connection as given (Lee & Schallert, 2015). In my judgement, this assumption is correct. The goal now is to deepen our knowledge of this connection. At the level of practice, we need to explore how teachers and students connect reading to writing, how to build a love for language, and how to deepen literacy among the population. At the level of theory, we need to think about the place reading and writing have in our lives and how we should prioritize them in our schools.

This dissertation offers an answer. Expressive Writing at UTM connected writing to reading through editing. By teaching students how to edit, students learned how to write by seeing how writers connect—and fail to connect—with readers. They learned how to read by discovering how to diagnose problems writers encounter in a text. They came to know the relationships that exist between readers, writers, and editors by playing these roles. They learned by doing.
Expressive Writing presented students with a holistic view of the communications process. The student writers became aware they were writing in a community and for a community. The course format and instruction supported this view of communications by presenting students with an editorial process that transformed personal writing into public writing. By writing for other people, the students consciously tried to form relationships with their readers. As the students I interviewed for this project said repeatedly, they wanted to “connect” with their readers. They wanted to be understood.

8.1 Theme 1: A Change in How Students Conceptualized Roles

I set out to answer the question, “How does each student conceptualize the roles of reader, writer, and editor, and how do these concepts change over the life of the course?” By the end of the term, I noticed a change in how students conceptualized these roles. The most noticeable related to how students understood the role of the editor.

Expressive Writing at UTM introduced the editor as a key role in the communication process. The course defined what an editor is, demonstrated what an editor does, and explained how the editorial process works. The course prioritized editing to the point that Deedee described Expressive Writing as “an editing course.” But, interestingly, she also said that this “editing course” taught her how to write. Of the three students, only Joannie had experience with an editorial process prior to the course (she had worked on her high school newspaper). Expressive Writing represented the first time any of the students learned editorial technique or the role of the editor.

Expressive Writing taught students that editors help writers communicate clearly and meaningfully with readers. In interviews, Rose, Deedee, and Joannie compared editors to readers and said that editors fulfilled a specific role: to act as the writer’s most attentive and supportive
reader. This view emerged from the course instruction that presented editors as idealized readers who assent to a text, read with an open mind, try to believe the writer’s message, and explain to the writer when, where, how, and why a text becomes hard to believe.

Students learned that professional writers do not work alone. By working with editors, Rose, Deedee, and Joannie developed a greater understanding of the role editors play in preparing a text for a public readership. The students learned enough about editing and the role of the editor to know they wanted more editorial feedback to help them calibrate their writing for a real audience. When they encountered ineffectual feedback, they reacted with disappointment, not because they wanted an editor to help them score a high grade—none of the students spoke about their worries about scoring A’s—but because they wanted to produce better writing. The students wanted to communicate something about themselves in their stories. They wanted their readers to understand them.

8.1.1 Expressive Writing connected reading and writing through editing.

In Expressive Writing, the editorial process linked writing to reading. Students learned that in the communications circuit, the editor stands between the reader and writer. Editors act like readers, yet they think like writers. Joannie expressed the placement of the editor most clearly when she transposed the communications theory from another class onto the editorial structure in Expressive Writing. Deedee and Rose spoke about the interconnectedness of writing and reading too. Rose spoke about editors as readers, who must work to see the text. Deedee’s comments during our interviews suggest that she viewed editors as attentive readers who helped writers improve their messaging.

Reading as writers. Expressive Writing distinguishes itself by how it teaches language: Asitwa delivered his instruction on writing mechanics as editorial strategy, not as writing strategy. This
distinction is crucial to understanding the character of Expressive Writing at UTM. The instructor did not teach writing; he taught editing. He explained how broken sentences obscure meaning, and he taught students how to diagnose and repair broken sentences. This is editing. By teaching students how to edit, the instructor taught students how to analyze and correct sentences with the goal of increasing the potency of the sentence—which is another way of saying Expressive Writing teaches students how to read like writers.

To read like a writer is “to carefully examine the things you read, looking at the writerly techniques in the text in order to decide if you might want to adopt similar (or the same) techniques in your writing” (Bunn, 2011, p. 72). Students learn the craft of writing by apprenticing as readers (Edmundson, 2004; 2016), and they learn how to solve writing problems by seeing how other writers solved the same problems (Pinker, 2014). To read as a writer requires an ability to speak about style and grammar conventions (Clark, 2006; 2016). By learning how to speak about conventions, students can use those conventions themselves. By the end of the course, the students were starting to read like writers, and they could name and implement writing conventions.

Asitwa was clear about how he wanted students to read. He said, “read as a writer,” and encouraged students to analyze a text with the goal of understanding how the readings moved them. He modelled this form of reading in the classroom read-alongs. Later in the term, when Asitwa taught students how to edit a text, he built on this style of reading. He told students to understand why a text moves them (a reader response approach to reading) as well as how accurately a text communicated (what is the writer trying to achieve?). Students had to read both from the writer’s perspective (am I communicating the message clearly?) and from the reader’s perspective (am I understanding the message correctly?). Editors had to examine the rhetorical
value of the text, as well the text’s grammatical correctness and coherence. In interviews I conducted with the students, each spoke about their desire to write clearly. They each said editing was the way to sharpen their message and strengthen their connection to readers.

8.2 Theme 2: A Change in Student Understanding about Reading, Writing, and Editing

I noted a change in how students understood the roles of writers, readers, and editors. This changed understanding of roles helped me to answer another question that drove this research: “What is each student’s understanding of reading, writing, and editing before, during and after taking Expressive Writing?” In short, students came to view the writing they did in Expressive Writing as public writing. By the end of the term, Rose, Deedee, and Joannie understood that they were not writing for themselves but for other people, and they viewed their readers as an actual audience, rather than an imagined reader, as happens in other writing situations. Rose spoke repeatedly in interviews about her desire to be understood by her audience. Deedee showed a similar concern. The edits she made to her stories indicate a desire to appeal to readers and to tell a good story well.

8.2.1 Entering a community of readers and writers.

The students wrote for a community of readers, a real audience facilitated by the structure of the Expressive Writing classroom. The students worked in peer editorial groups that put writers in contact with editors, and they participated in classroom workshops that introduced them to a larger audience. Students went from writing for themselves, to writing for a peer editorial group, to writing for a public readership.

Deedee’s experience captures this shift. At the beginning of the term, she wrote stories I classify as juvenilia. Her editing group was dysfunctional, but she received enough out of the group to
know she needed feedback from an engaged editor. Near the end of the term, she paired up with another student in the class. She shared her stories with this editor and revised her writing based on her editor’s feedback. When she read “Bananas” during an in-class workshop, she was turning her writing towards the public reader.

Expressive Writing offered students another community of belonging, another audience. This community was found in, and through, the course textbook, *Showing the Story* (Allen, 2014). *Showing the Story* collects the stories of writers who have taken Expressive Writing at UTM. A peer model text, the book ushered students into a writing community by giving them models to imitate and stories to discuss. As I explain below, the text also created a community literature that students in the class could join.

**Imitating stories.** Imitation is a part of learning to write. As Zinsser (2012) puts it, “[W]e all need models” (p. 45). The stories in *Showing the Story* gave students models to imitate. The stories showcased narrative forms, modeled an economical writing style, and demonstrated how writers work creatively within the confines of a form. (The textbook also fulfilled an aspirational component of the course by showing students what A-level writing looks like.)

The students I interviewed imitated the models they found in *Showing the Story*. Many stories in the text speak about love, school, and growing up—the same topics Deedee, Rose, and Joannie wrote about in their stories. I suspect that the improvement in the quality student writing I witnessed over the course of the term, particularly Deedee’s, is associated with the repetition of form and style built into the course text. A writer like Deedee may not have noticed the patterns in the text when she wrote her first story. But after ten weeks in Expressive Writing, she saw the patterns clearly enough to imitate them. She said in one of our interviews that she “connected” with stories in the text and read sentences differently by the end of the term. Her final story,
“Bananas,” demonstrates how she imitated what she saw. Structurally, “Bananas” mirrors the story “The First Stop” (James, 2014) found in the last chapter of Showing the Story. Both interview-based stories use a story-in-a-story structure and includes the interviewer as a character in the story. By the end of the term, Deedee’s writing style aligned more closely with the style on display in Showing the Story than at the beginning of the term.

**Discussing stories.** Students in Asitwa’s class read intensely and discussed stories at length in class. Students who read the entire book (as Rose did) would have seen patterns in form and style, become familiar with conventions, and hopefully internalized them. The in-class read-alongs further exposed the patterns of narrative and style.

The focused discussions of the stories in the text book (e.g. Asitwa’s lengthy discussion of a single story in class six) made the architecture of the stories visible to students. Discussions of this sort acted as a kind of metacognitive moment in the class (Zhang, 2008), when the teacher made students aware of the larger factors at play in the stories, like how stories work, how writing decisions influence readers, and how narrative persuades.

The in-class discussions also gave students a chance to discuss the moral issues captured in the stories. Many stories in Showing the Story deal with life at the UTM campus, and many more examine the moral choices young people encounter in their lives. As I witnessed the in-class discussions, the students and the teacher treated the stories as familiar stories—as their own stories. Writers close to them in age and geography wrote the stories in the book; they were not the products of distant, untouchable masters. When the students spoke about the choices the characters in the stories made, they inevitably spoke about the choices had made in similar situations.
That Deedee’s and Rose’s stories featured the same patterns as those found in the text is further evidence the students were reading like writers—extracting lessons from the text and practicing this new knowledge when they wrote.

**Responding to stories.** *Showing the Story* encouraged a response from the student readers and developed a community dialogue between Asitwa’s class and the students who had published in the text. This dialogue was transmitted through in-class discussions, reflective responses, and the student’s own stories. The student writer sees what her peer has written and says, *That was his experience, now let me share my experience.* This is exactly what happened with Deedee. She wrote “A Flash of Embarrassment” in response to “The Pantsing” (Brown, 2014). Both stories discuss the terror of having other people see you in your underwear. In “The Pantsing,” the narrator pulls down a classmate’s pants—she “pants” him. In Deedee’s story, the wind blows up her skirt.

In writing a story in response to what she reads, the student contributes to the community discussion. She writes for other people, rather than for herself alone. She learns to turn personal writing into public writing that brings her to the attention of another person. This transition is the beginning of freedom.

**8.2.2 Readers, writers, and freedom.**

Again: the workshop facilitates a transition from writing-for-the-self (private writing) to writing-for-the-other (public writing). This move from the personal to the public is essential to developing self-knowledge and a key aspect of expressivist pedagogy. We cannot know ourselves as Socrates taught us to know ourselves by praying, meditating, or taking a yoga class. Self-knowledge comes to us when we encounter the world. As Schall (2014) argues, “we cannot
even know ourselves without first knowing what is not ourselves” (p. 22). Drawing on Hegel, Scruton (2016) explains:

the life of freedom and self-certainty can only be obtained through others. I become fully myself only in contexts which compel me to recognize that I am another in others’ eyes […] It is only by entering that world, with its risks, conflicts and responsibilities, that I come to know myself as free, to enjoy my own perspective and individuality, and to become a fulfilled person among persons (p. 100-101).

Reason emerges only through our encounters with the world and with others (Heath, 2014). We step onto the path of becoming reasonable (and wise) beings when we express our thoughts to others, when we move our thoughts out of the silence of our minds and into conversation with the world. Writing, a static form of communication, allows for a level of contemplation that spoken language does not. When we write our thoughts, we can read our thoughts, and so can others. When others can read our thoughts, they can help us revise our thoughts, and through this revision make our thinking truer and more rational. As Crawford (2009) tells us, we develop as human beings and situate ourselves in the world through our interaction with concrete reality. The more concrete and real writing becomes, the more easily we can manipulate it to conform with reality.

More importantly, by transforming our personal writing into a public text, we can begin to know what is true about reality. The search for the liberal truths that drive liberal education is a search to understand the truths “to which all of us are subordinate”—to understand the truth of “what is” (Schall, 2016, p. 27 & 29). This truth is not internal but external, in the world. The writer must enter into the world, investigate the world and his place in it, and to report back to others so that
they may discuss what he has found and understand it. In doing so, “[w]hat is not ourselves becomes ourselves after our manner of knowing” (Schall, 2016, p. 73).

I have seen this happen with the students I teach, and I saw this happen with the students I interviewed. An encounter with an editor is a kind of reckoning. The editor’s reply either validates the writer’s views as reasonable and believable, or shows how the writing is unreasonable and unbelievable. Rose’s decision to rewrite her story openings to hook her readers indicates that she acknowledged the shortcomings of her original thought. Her revisions made her story openings more concrete and believable.

Joannie’s obfuscation of key elements of her story represent something else—either a refusal to acknowledge the audience, or to be more generous, a reluctance to state plainly how she felt about those difficult moments in life. Her fogging of the picture might have been a last-minute attempt to avoid the reader’s judgement. Regardless, by not giving her audience accessible language, Joannie avoided a face-to-face encounter with the reality of another person.

In its ideal form, the writing workshop is a place where writers offer up for editing their understanding of what is real. Writers submit to editing so that their words and views may become more reasonable, more believable, and more truthful. And so editors ask: Is what the writer said reasonable? Is it believable? Does it speak truth? Can the message be trusted?

8.2.3 Trust in the Expressive Writing class.

Expressive Writing encouraged students to create trusting relationships with their readers. Directness, one of the four principles of Expressive Writing, means trustworthiness, and Asitwa spoke about it often. The assumption the course makes is that writing creates a relationship between people (the reader and the writer), not between people and a text (the reader and the
book). Without relationships built on trust, none of us will be willing to believe anything we hear.

The concept of voice, often used against Expressivists, makes sense in the light of this understanding of reading. Voiced writing makes the presence of the writer known more immediately (Elbow, 1985). Voice reveals the writer’s humanity and can strengthen the bond between readers and writers.

When we speak about trust, we are also speaking about faith. To trust is to have faith. The freedom humans desire hinges on acts of faith made between people. This is the case with reading, too, an act that Sartre (1966) describes as “a pact of generosity between author and reader […] Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself” (pp. 55-56). The more the writer trusts the reader will understand him, the more freely the writer can express himself. And the freer the reader is to construct meaning in the text, the freer she is. “Thus, [the author’s] freedom, by revealing itself, reveals the freedom of the other” (p. 56). Bad writing inhibits faith between reader and writer, and as a consequence, restricts their joint freedom. “The bad novel,” he says, “aims to please by flattering, whereas the good one is an exigence and an act of faith” (p. 63).

Faith holds writing together. This is what we mean when we say readers and writers work together to make meaning of a text (Harris & Hodges, 1995). This is as true at the macro level as it is at the micro level. Consider esoteric writing, a genre that exists only by an act of faith: The esoteric writer trusts faithful readers will find the secrets he weaves into the text and understand them (Melzer, 2014). Faith operates at the microscopic level too, as when Shakespeare trusts his audience to decode what Hamlet means when he says his uncle will “nose” Polonius’s rotting body under the stairs (1.2.4-5).
By the end of the term, Rose, Deedee, and Joannie each adopted the position that readers have a responsibility to approach a text with an open mind, to open themselves the message, and to engage a text, rather than acquiesce. They held the assumption that readers will fulfill their role so that writers can fulfill theirs. Rose was adamant on this point: “When you’re not being open with the book, you are not going to get what the writer is trying to tell you.” This view has threads of reader response theory that says the meaning of a text comes into being when an active reader takes up the text (Rosenblatt, 1964). It is a view that aligns with a range of other writers who see a willingness to “hear” a text as fundamental to proper reading, including Lewis (1961), who argues against prejudicial reading, and Emerson (in Edmundson, 2004), who advocates for a “creative reading” that, like creative writing, involves “labor and invention” to make a text “luminous with manifold allusion of creation” (p. 4). The open reading these writers advocated exists in the expressivist tradition, specifically with Elbow’s Believing Game and his injunction that readers should try to believe, rather than doubt, the writer’s message. If we were to construct a genealogy of open-minded reading, the line would run at least as far back as Augustine (1995), whose rules on reading require a reader to read with charity—to read with a desire to see the speaker alive in the text and to hear the message honestly.

Writing brings people together. Reading is a joint project between two people. This is the beauty of the written word. Good writing has grace. A writer speaks, the reader hears, and the message comes alive.

8.3 Theme 3: A Change in Student Writing

I started this project wanting to answer the question, “What are the characteristics of each student’s writing at the beginning, middle, and end of the course?” As I describe below, the characteristics of the students’ writing changed over the course of the term, and on the whole,
their writing improved. The students became more adept at speaking about the technical aspects of their writing. They appeared more able to define what constitutes good writing.

8.3.1 Putting names to conventions.

By teaching style and grammar conventions as rhetorical—as realized by the reader rather than as objective rules—Asitwa showed his students how language influences readers. His instruction put names to stylistic conventions and explained the effect these conventions have on readers.

What a writer does is what a reader sees. Readers need to have the language to talk about what they see, and what the writer has done. In watching the course unfold, I saw the students learn how to speak about language they were using. For example, Deedee spoke more ably about the mechanics of her writing by the end of the term. In our last interview, she said she read differently. She could identify passive constructions in the writing she did for other classes. She knew how to correct it, too. This ability to speak about the mechanical aspects of language allowed the students to determine what constitutes “good” writing.

8.3.2 Defining “good” writing.

Joannie, Rose, and Deedee each took Expressive Writing by choice. They wanted to improve as writers, and they enrolled in Expressive Writing hoping it could help them improve their writing. All three said it did. The students studied in different fields, came from different backgrounds, and wrote on different topics. By the end of the course, their views converged around how they defined “good” writing. Good writing, they said, is clear and connects writers to readers. Repeatedly throughout the term, the students said clarity was the indispensable quality of good writing and connection was the indispensable goal. Good writing is logical, sequential, visible, and accessible—i.e., clear. Clear language creates clear images in the reader’s mind; clear images generate connection, when readers and writers see the same image and find themselves
looking at the same thing. This shared definition of good writing contributed to a shared understanding of how to evaluate written communications.

Rose was emphatic on the importance of clarity, saying that writers were responsible for creating the conditions that allow readers “to see.” Communications between writer and reader cannot happen if the reader cannot see. The students modified their texts to achieve communication through clarity. Rose revised the structure of her stories to replicate the conventions found in *Showing the Story*. She added locators to help readers orient themselves to the action of the stories and established times and locations at the top of her stories. All three student writers edited their texts according to Asitwa’s instructions—they tried to cut wordiness, eliminate passive voice, remove cliché and so on. By the end of the course, Deedee edited her text to align more closely to the stylistic conventions Asitwa taught—she struck passive sentences from her text and said she became more sensitive to cliché.

In some cases, the students revised their stories to appeal to their readers’ desire for connection and engagement, a story they could enter and knowledge to change them. For instance, Deedee modified her texts to remove details that were extraneous to the plot. Her early drafts told readers too much and buried her audience in detail. But in her story “Bananas,” Deedee trusted her readers to see the flirtation between her and her boss, even though she only indicated the relationship with a few subtle clues. In other cases, as with Rose, writers made an effort to structure their stories to engage readers. Rose’s decision to revise the openings of some of her stories to “hook” her readers indicates an awareness of the reader’s desire to be hooked.

8.4 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Three limitations and implications for future research relate specifically to this study.
8.4.1 The limits of a single case.

Case studies allow a researcher to enter and describe a situation in detail. The strength of a case study is its descriptive power. This strength is often held as a shortcoming, with critics saying case studies are descriptive, anecdotal, and rely too much on the researcher’s perspective to make sense of the data (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984). The case presented in this dissertation is limited to a single classroom. It is limited by what I saw, what I recorded, and what I selected as important enough to present to my readers. Had I observed a second Expressive Writing class taught by a different instructor, I might have been able to draw insights that my single-class study does not permit. Future research using a multiple classroom case study will provide more points of comparison.

Similarly, a broader sampling of classrooms and teachers in future research will help me understand how teachers impact the results. For example, would an instructor who holds a more orthodox expressivist philosophy than Asitwa did influence the students differently? Would assigning more writing change student writing and understanding in a perceptible way?

This study also brought to light how much attention Expressive Writing dedicates to editing. Future research can investigate how editing and the role of the editor are conceptualized in non-expressivist writing classes. What is the theory underpinning the editor in courses like Expressive Writing versus writing classes that do not traditionally speak about the editor (say, a Writing Across the Curricula, discipline-specific writing workshop)? How is the editor conceptualized in professional programs that teach editorial roles, like journalism programs? Expressive Writing connects writing and reading through editing. How is the connection made in courses that do not teach editing as a role?
8.4.2 Limits to access.

Workshops play an important role in Expressive Writing. These are the places where students talk with each other as writers and editors. In conducting my research for this dissertation, I was limited by my inability to gain access to the students’ peer editorial groups. The groups either met irregularly, at odd times, or at off-campus locations. (I did, however, learn about the meetings by interviewing the students and by reading their editorial logs.).

I had other reasons for not attending the groups. If I attended the groups, I would have had to obtain consent from each student in the group, many of whom had chosen not to participate in my study. Further, my attendance at the group meetings, or even my recording the discussions, may have been constituted an intervention—the students might have censored themselves or said what they thought I wanted to hear. For this very reason, I chose not to attend the student’s one-on-one interviews with the course instructor during his office hours. My presence in the one-on-one interviews might have influenced how the instructor gave feedback (would he feel that I, a colleague, might be judging him?) or how the student interacted with him (would the student try to act in a way she thought I wanted?). And for the record, I did not attempt to listen in on one-on-one meetings between students and the course instructor. Years before I attempted this research, another researcher had made a request to the department to record one-on-one meetings. After much discussion, the department decided not to permit such an intrusion, fearing the presence of a recording device could damage the intimate, private atmosphere of the teacher-student conferences. In retrospect, keeping my distance from this aspect of the course may have been the wisest course of action.

In future studies, I want to gain a better understanding of how peer editorial groups function and what workshop methods prove most efficacious. I am curious to know the theories underlying
the workshop space. How do different workshops structure discourse and which is most effective? Workshops have become standard in many writing creative writing classrooms, but they also operate in other disciplines, like studio art and music. How is the workshop understood by these disciplines, and what can writing instructors learn about how to conduct and theorize in-class workshops?

The workshops also function as a proto-public forum. In the workshop, students offer up draft work to editors. As a place for training students how to critique the work of others, the workshop provides a model of reasoned public debate. Future research can examine how the workshop, conceived as a “first draft” space and biased towards belief, provides a model for public discourse. How does a workshop built on a dialectical model (as Elbow’s was) differ from workshops built on an adversarial model?

8.4.3 Limits of the student demographic.

The type of student I was able to interview was limited. The students I interviewed each had a second language, and two were recent immigrants to Canada. All three were women in their early twenties (Deedee was slightly older), and all were relatively inexperienced writers. A future study with a more diverse sample (i.e., one that includes male participants and participants of an older demographic) may shed light on how reading and writing connect.

I am curious to know how older, more experienced writers respond to an expressivist pedagogy. How does a course built around expressivist principles change the experienced writer?

I noted in my case study the challenges with Joannie’s portfolio. I treated the obscure passages in her text as errors, specifically as failed language experiments. I am curious to understand how guided experimentation functions in a writing class. Vygotsky’s (2012) theory of development
argues that learners follow a teacher’s instruction until they have mastered the instruction and can function independently at an advanced stage of knowledge. How do teachers manage experimentation in highly ordered classes, like writing classes, that students might view as “creative”? What is the relationship between structure and creativity, and how does a highly ordered, rule-bound classroom stimulate creative thought? How might a class with more experienced writers deal with writing experiments, and how would a teacher integrate language experiments into a class composed of seasoned writers? Finally, how does a controlled environment, like a writing class, create conditions that allow learners to learn safely through failure?

8.5 Conclusions

Joannie was hesitant about calling herself a “writer” when I first spoke to her. She said the title had to be earned. I think she earned it. So did Deedee and Rose. They took the course, they wrote their stories, and they wanted what writers want: to be understood, to be heard, to move their readers. By the end of the term, the students had learned another truth about writing: that writers do not work alone; they need editors whose feedback helps make a text more convincing, more reasonable, and truer to reality.

A writing classroom that does not support writers in this most fundamental aspect of written communications—editing—does not teach the fullness of the writing process. As I witnessed in Expressive Writing at UTM, editing lets students see the connection between reading and writing. Teaching students how to become editors places them between readers and writers and gives them the skills of both. In practice, this means teaching students how to read a sentence, how to diagnose faults in a sentence, and how to repair a faulty sentence. It also means engineering the classroom so that editing becomes the fulcrum of writing and reading instruction.
Teachers of writing must teach editorial methods and optimize writing workshops around editorial processes.

We can say with some confidence that the more efficient writing pedagogy acknowledges the connection between writing to reading. One assumes the other. The Expressive Writing class at UTM integrated writing and reading instruction primarily through the teaching of editing. As this research indicates, to speak about writing, reading, and editing as independent functions belies the reality that they are part of a single communication circuit.

In teaching communications, teachers should make the relationship between readers, writers, and editors explicit to students. Expressive Writing made relationships explicit through language instruction, workshopping, and the course textbook. The course demanded that students communicate an actual message to an actual reader. This raised the stakes of the classroom and gave students a reason to write that transcended grades and the credentialing that critics like Jacobs (2005) and Hedges (2010) say compromises a university education. The students in Expressive Writing had to prove themselves as communicators, as writers, and as readers. In this way, Expressive Writing initiates students into intellectual life, a life of communication about reality, which is one of the highest goal of the university (Pieper, 2015).

Writing is an expression of the mind and the beginning of rational public discourse and public knowledge. The in-class workshop presents students with a model of what reasoned public discourse looks like. Rational public discourse requires a desire among writers to be understood. The writer must create a compelling and believable vision of reality. Rational public discourse also requires a willingness to believe what the writer says and a flexibility among readers to accept new beliefs—to change our minds. This interaction demands St. Augustine’s charity: we
must read with belief. It also demands Sartre’s faith: that we will be free when we free our neighbour.
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10 Appendix A: Sample Interview Protocol

A. Interviewee background

These questions will provide biographical details about the student that may shed light on their perspectives on reading and writing.

Tell me about your education. Where did you go to school? Do you like school? Why did you come to university?

B. Questions related to reading

- Do you like reading? Do you ever read for fun?
- When you sit down to read, what goes through your mind?
- What is the difference between reading for yourself and reading for school?
- What is the role of a reader? What is their job? Does a reader have responsibilities?
- What, if anything, do you find challenging about reading?

C. Questions related to writing

- What are the qualities of a good writer?
- Do you consider yourself a writer? Are you a good writer?
- Do you like writing?
- What is the role of the writer? What is the writer’s job? Does a writer have responsibilities? To whom?
- What, if anything, do you find challenging about writing?

D. Questions about editing

- What is an editor? How do you define editing?
- Have you ever had anybody edit your work? What was that like?
- When you have to edit your work, or another person’s work, what do you do?
- What, if anything, do you find challenging about editing?
- What do you find most difficult about giving feedback to another person?
- What do you find most difficult about having your work edited by another person?