

Final Writing Assignment: Writing: Living with/in Words

Due Date: March 29, 2022

Grade Value: 15%

Length: 4-5 pages (double spaced)

Part One:

Writing...is an action, an event, a performance.

David Bartholomae

We have been thinking and talking about editing and writing and reading and language, and the way they are always and already elegantly entangled. But you already know this: your in-class writing pieces, in fact, are already flickering with ideas that are connected to an ongoing conversation and debate taking place among contemporary writers, theorists, philosophers, and sociolinguists who are writing about language, and who are paying attention to the relations between language and society, the relations between language and identity, between language and writing, between language and memory. What we don't know enough about, however, is what *you* think language is, what you think it does, what you think it can – or can't – do. We don't know enough about what you think it means to live with/in words.

Over the course of this term, you will be developing, with your editor, a writing piece that explores the notion of “Language: Living with/in Words”, a piece that you will submit for potential publication to the PWSA's online journal *Inventio*. I am inviting you to add to the contemporary conversation about language/s by zooming in on a particular encounter you've had with language to investigate and explore an aspect of your relationship to language from your own personal, particular, and peculiar context.

I'm asking you to write about something that is interesting to you, to write about something you care deeply about. I'm asking you to open up a process of questioning and then write a conversational essay (or story, or series of poems) that shows your thinking on the page: develop a critical, contemplative, and reflective exploration on your topic that narratively and stylistically unfolds your insights about a specific question that addresses your particular encounter with language.

I ask that you also keep in mind the larger social, temporal, cultural, and educational context from which you are writing. Your experience in the world gives you access to this context. It's always a good idea, however, to think *with* somebody: another writer. Gilles Deleuze reminds us that “...writing is a flow among others.” Write, then, in the company of one of your others. I supplied you with a few quotations to think-write with on our first day together; I will add a few more here at the bottom of the page. You are not limited to these quotations and are free to find your own writer to think with. Choose someone who can offer you a framework, someone

whose views prompt you and guide you toward a different way of “seeing language” and how it is implicated in the various ways we navigate and negotiate identities in everyday life.

Let me say this bit again: write about something you care about. Find out more about that thing you care about by writing through its complexities. I am asking you, above all, to produce knowledge, to take us into a scene of writing that will reveal insights about your experience with language. I’m inviting you to add to the conversation and let us know what you think about the topic and how, from your perspective, we might know about or experience language differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities of language, I invite you to help us see and experience language, uniquely, by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the preconceived representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about language.

Language is not just your topic this term, it is your event.

Part Two:

On March 2nd, you will submit a substantial draft of your writing piece to your in-class editor. On March 16th, you will receive your editor’s substantive editorial recommendations (Part of Assignment 2, due March 16th). Once you receive these recommendations, step into the final revision process and, while editing your own manuscript, please engage with the following:

- Critically reflect upon your editor’s recommendations and consider which suggestions you will accept and/or reject.
- Revise your piece by further developing your “argument” while keeping in mind Williams’s and Bizup’s key principles of cohesion, global coherence, concision, motivation, emphasis, shape, and elegance.
- Keep reading: pop on to *The Electric Typewriter* (<http://tetw.org/Linguistics>) and read through the smart, stimulating, and critically reflective essays, all of which are written in conversational style. Use them as a structural template. Let them inspire you and give you permission to play with and experiment with your own style. Notice, too, how these essays are in a conversation with language, with writing and reading and editing, and that they are, like your own piece, making a contribution to the ongoing, vital, and urgent debate in the field of language.

- Make an appointment, if you wish, to come and talk with me about your manuscript. We can have a conversation on Zoom to discuss your paper and move through any pressing questions you have about content or style.

Finally, here are a few quotations about language which have inspired me and my own work, quotations I like to think with when I am thinking about language and writing:

If there is no risk, there is no writing.
Paul Auster

For each language you know, you are a different person.
Czech proverb

We don't live in a country, we live in a language.
E.M. Cioran

I only have one language; it is not mine.
Jacques Derrida

...writing is a flow among others.
Gilles Deleuze

....there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. Sometimes – I would even say always – several tongues. There is impurity in every language.
Jacques Derrida

First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.
Virginia Woolf

A sentence has been heard, now listen.
Gertrude Stein

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative.
Eva Hoffman

For some, to find beauty is to search through ruins. For some of us beauty must be made over and over again out of the sometimes fragile, the sometimes dangerous. To write is to be involved in this act of translation, of succumbing or leaning into another body's idiom.

Dionne Brand

...the humanists have always insisted that you don't learn to think wholly from one language: you learn to think better from linguistic conflict, from bounding one language off another.

Northrop Frye

We invented language so we could lie to each other and ourselves.

Charlie Kaufman

There are no truths, only stories.

Thomas King

We are fictions.

Lola Lemire Tostevin

Language is for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other.

Jacques Derrida

Language reveals the speaker, his position in terms of class, ethnicity, education, place of origin, gender.

James Baldwin

One never owns a language. A language can only be borrowed; it passes around like an illness or currency.

Roland Barthes

Living on the edge of two languages, living on the edge of two selves named and constructed by language, liberates the self from a monologic existence.

Smaro Kamboureli

From one day to another, from one page to another, writing changes languages. I have thought certain mysteries in the French language that I cannot think in English. This loss and this gain are in writing too. I have drawn the H. You will have recognized it depending on which language you are immersed in. This is what writing is: I one language, I another language, and between the two, the line that makes them vibrate; writing forms a passageway between two shores.

Helene Cixous

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.

Roland Barthes

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

John Updike

A writer must resist the pressure of old formulae and work towards new combinations of language.

Jeanette Winterson

I have been given this language and I intend to use it.

Chinua Achebe

What counts and is counted then, is what we do while speaking, what we do to each other, how we again touch each other by mixing our voices.

Jacques Derrida

Style becomes nonstyle, and one's language lets an unknown foreign language escape from it, so that one can reach the limits of language itself and become something other than a writer, conquering fragmented visions that pass through the words of a poet, the colours of a painter, or the sounds of a musician.

Gilles Deleuze

Everything in my memory strives to be the collection of a language that has not yet been invented and the invention of a language that one recollects.

Maurice Blanchot

What a writer is looking for are the relationships within languages. The tensions and harmonies between words and meaning that gradually can be resolved into form.

Jeanette Winterson

One studies what one desires or fears.

Roland Barthes

I have withheld more than I have written.

Dionne Brand

I look forward to reading your pieces.

Leaking Matter

As a student of writing, I am frequently tasked by my professors with crafting ideas I assume are novel. I assume such because to do otherwise would be self-defeating. There is nothing new under the title page, but to admit this would deflate my ability to get anything done. Still, the more I learn about writing, the harder it is to ignore what I know. Now, the challenge—finding my own words—has become like a fortress siege.

My words are still here inside the walls, but my reserve of salted schemes has run dry. My besiegers, meanwhile, have grown numerous: they are all the things I've learned, and all the pieces of good advice I've tried so hard to ignore. Assuredly, I will have to adjust myself to others' expectations—to some degree. My concern is this: if I keep learning how to write the way other people want me to, will my voice remain my own?

Such words I pile 'round my brain! A squishy lump, it yet remains—an oozing grey terrain.

It squeaks out logic so inane, it's clear the lump has been well trained.

A citadel on soft grey plains will sink if not built up again, again, again.

The paragraphs are falling short, the parapets are trembling thin.

My wall of words and spires of spin can't keep the leaking matter in.

A well-wrought student is an embattled thing: set upon by expectations, trampled under information, hemmed in by convention and fear. It is the sum of others' efforts, an undead amalgamation, a pickled brain in a jar: no longer lighted with electricity, now

swirling with foreign juices—not alive, but preserved for future consideration. I am in the process of being pickled, and my writing reflects the pickle I'm in.

Thanks to the study of writing, I believe I have developed a second authorial voice.

There is me, and then there is me plus education. This new voice is superior by most metrics, and more agreeable to most readers. It contains not just my ideas, but also those borrowed from lectures and readings. Having adapted the teachings of style-coaches, it has greater control over its use of language, and thus over itself.

That said, it is not an expansive voice, nor an expressive one: like the brain in the jar, this second voice is inherently confined, unable to articulate ideas outside the conventions that govern its decision-making. However, this voice—beyond anything I could achieve alone—has the potential to gain what I've been seeking: self-control.

But my lump is a special lump! I've heard this many times.

To have a wall is a good sign, even if that wall leaks.

If we were all to test our walls, would my wall learn to speak?

And if my wall of words could speak, would that make it a mind?

A lump quite separate from my own—an intelligence beyond mine.

The cornerstone of my self-image is that control over one's language is control over oneself. My theory is that most people don't really know what their words are going to do once escaped from their brains, because they've never studied writing. Rather than

working with language, in their ignorance they allow language to work them. Stumbling through every communication untrained strikes me as stupid. It's no stretch to say that for anyone publishing their words, the modern world is a veritable viper-pit of potential dangers. Those who have studied writing are, logically, better able to avoid getting bit.

Fact is, as I learn more techniques to control my language, and thus myself, I worry that I am actually ceding control over my language to those techniques. I used to find my own writing instincts sufficient, but recently those instincts have hit a plateau. I have become reliant on the teachings of others to hold my writing to the standards now expected. I fear that I have lost independent power over my voice and can now only progress as a writer by imitating the accomplished and abandoning control.

"Control over one's language is control over oneself."

A cup placed on a pedestal, a chalice on a shelf—

it's how you dress and demonstrate that makes the wise lumps melt.

So plain, so bare, so void of spunk, but held much higher up;

who can blame the lumps so wise for sipping from the cup?

Writing theorist Roland Barthes says that "one studies what one desires or fears." I am a student of writing. More broadly, I am a student of language. I fear language, because I understand that language controls people. I fear being controlled, and I desire to control

myself, so I study language. Through training, I am gaining that control, but at the price of my instinctual voice. I don't relish the loss of my voice, but I acknowledge it as an inevitable part of growing up. Despite my best efforts, the world extends beyond my skull, and if I want to operate in that world, I have to accept its teachings.

Acceptance, then: if education can be preservation, not replacement, I will have no loss to regret. To grow—to prune—to contain—to extend: to pull thoughts from the rolling grey loam; to wash them, rinse them, and prepare them for market—this is learning. A mind raw from the loam may be nutritious, but its expiration is one rotten idea away. If nothing else, I know my new jar-brain won't go to waste.

Pickled goods are invaluable in a siege.

My word walls fall, and matter rides forth 'midst the lumps so wise.

It plucks each pen, from each old hand, and cast them all aside.

"Fear not" the matter calls to me, "I've dashed them like the tide."

But tides return, and in good time, the wise lumps will preside.

I have to heed their wisdom now—but wisdom, matter can't survive.