

**Final Writing Assignment: Writing: Living with/in Words**  
**Length: 4-5 pages (double spaced)**

**Part One:**

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

David Bartholomae

*The boundaries of creative non-fiction will always be as fluid as water.*

Mary Clearman Blew

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 writing, 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 writing is, or what you think about when you think about writing.

We don't know enough about what you think reading is, or what editing is. We don't know enough about what you think language is, what you think it does, what you think it can – or can't – do.

Over the course of this term, you will be developing, with your editor, a writing piece that explores the notion of "Writing: 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 and writing (or reading, or editing) 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 the action of writing (or reading, or editing, or words or language/s).

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 the writing and/or reading and/or editing process. 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 writing differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities of language in connection with writing, reading and/or editing, I invite you to help us see the writing process differently by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the field’s representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about language, when you think about writing – or reading, or editing.

Writing is not just your topic this term: it is your event.

## **Part Two:**

On February 26th, you will submit a substantial draft of your writing piece to your in-class editor. On March 11<sup>th</sup>, you will receive your editor’s substantive editorial recommendations (Part of Assignment 2, due March 11th). 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 writing and linguistic diversity.

- Make an appointment, if you wish, to come and talk with me about your manuscript. We can have a conversation in my office or over a cup of coffee in La Prep (York Lanes) to discuss your paper and move through any pressing questions you have about content or style.

**A hardcopy of your writing piece is due in class (in hardcopy) on March 25th, 2020.**

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.

## Living in the Felt-Sentence

*live in the question*

— Rainer Maria Rilke

It starts with a sixth-grade student.  
He was my student, and I was his teacher.  
Or so I thought at the time.  
I first met him after he wrote a paragraph about how bad he was at writing paragraphs.  
I'm sure he didn't realize how *meta* that was, but I hope that one day he does.  
Since I was teaching him about writing, I assumed that I could *see* his writing,  
See *him*: his voice, his ideas, his personality.  
But all that was hidden. Literally. Physically.  
His sentences were covered by his hand, a rampart for his words.  
I couldn't see his sentences.  
I couldn't see him.  
I knew I couldn't ask to see his sentences.  
I knew I couldn't ask to see him.  
We were building trust.  
I couldn't breach it.  
I wouldn't dare.  
I didn't dare.  
This one-sided game of hide-and-seek lasted for over a month.  
I didn't want him to hide anymore, so I wouldn't dare seek him.

But something came over me one day.  
Not knowing why, I asked if he would let me read his work if I gave him my pen.  
In our minds, if he held the pen, he held the power.  
He knew he wouldn't be indelibly criticized.  
After all, "errors" marked in ink never truly disappear.  
They seem to settle in our minds, permanently marking us,  
even years after the work has been marked.

You may think that you are nothing like this boy.  
I didn't think I was; I was lying to myself.  
Although I didn't hide my writing with my hands,  
I hid it *with* writing,  
with lofty, yet cavernous words, hollow of me.  
This led me to be comfortable with the theory and diction that  
muted my voice  
and pressed a scholarly, jargonistic cacophony on repeat.  
It then became a habit of mine to privilege reason and persecute emotion;  
doubt was my favourite emotion.

Doubt causes us to hide in different ways.  
But what are we doubting?  
I sense, our intelligence.

And when we doubt our intelligence, we hide.

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We often think “intelligent” means “smart.”  
We often think that it means being able to apply knowledge and reason.  
But, from the Latin word *intelligere*, “intelligent” means to understand.  
I’d like to open this definition to go beyond understanding facts and theory.  
I’d like to open it to understanding our senses and our experiences,  
to understanding what truly reflects us and our voices.  
Intelligence, then, is a state of mind, not a matter of language.  
Of course, *academese* is a dialect that is appropriate for certain situations.  
There’s no denying that.  
But that’s also exactly the point.  
It is just one way of expressing our intelligence.  
Not the way.  
A way.

When I realized this, having relied on lofty language for so long, I asked myself:  
How can we bring emotion, a different way of understanding, back into the writing process?  
How can we welcome and embrace the sensations that come and go without any obvious  
explanation?  
I propose using three of the Ancient Greek Canons of Rhetoric—  
Invention,  
Arrangement,  
and Revision—  
to consider what the writing process *feels* like as meaning emerges at each stage.

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Invention, or discovery, is full of emotion.  
Invention is often where we begin our writing process.  
We experience a variety of ideas and sensations when we are first introduced to a topic (Perl  
365).  
This state of feeling, rather than thinking, is known as felt sense.

Felt sense is a plea for a pause...  
Felt sense is a moment of liminality—  
Felt sense is full of uncertainty and potential;  
But it is in felt sense where unchecked and uncritical doubt can fester,  
limiting our forward motion through discovery.  
Doubt then is also a part of felt sense.  
Doubt constantly reappears through our writing process.  
But, as poet Rainer Marie Rilke reminds us,  
Doubt can become a good quality if we train it:  
Make our doubt knowing and critical, he urges (56).  
We must train our doubt.  
We must doubt our doubt.

We must attend to our doubt when it appears.  
Once we face these seemingly negative emotions,  
we transform doubt into a propelling, rather than a withholding force.  
We can also look in the opposite direction of doubt to find a solution in trust:  
trusting in ourselves and in the validity of our lived emotions and experiences.

Attending to felt sense is much easier said than done.  
We listen to the growing sensations of felt sense through “focusing” (Núñez-Pacheco and Loke 589).

Through focusing and being mindful, we understand.  
That moment when you finally understand how to express  
your idea, paragraph, sentence, or word is referred to as  
a felt-shift.

Felt-shift is a moment of clarity.  
This moment relies on felt sense:  
the blend of emotions that helps us write,  
think,  
learn,  
perceive the world differently.

We live in and experience the question  
—the unclear feelings a part of felt sense—  
until we arrive at felt-shift.  
Then, we *feel* our sentences.  
Then, we *help* people feel our sentences.

We do this when we revise and arrange,  
when we  
re-write,  
re-organize,  
and re-view  
our sentences so that they are clear to the reader,  
when we are in the stages of Revision and Arrangement  
when we still feel emotions.

Rather than only attending to our personal emotions,  
we now also attend to those created by our sentences.  
We now consider how our sentences affect our reader and how they feel.  
We may know this as rhetorical grammar.  
The act of feeling the emotional outcomes of our sentences is known as embodied simulation  
(Rule 19).  
When we are aware of how our sentences evoke various sensations,  
we are better equipped to arrange and revise,  
we are better equipped to craft sentences that fulfill our intended goals.



This all means that emotion has an important role in the writing process,  
in the construction of “intelligent” prose.  
We attend to our emotions experienced during felt-sense through focusing.  
After felt-shift, we experience embodied simulation to help our readers feel alongside us.  
We all live through these sensations recursively, or repeatedly and in no particular order.  
Many of us, just like the sixth-grade student and me, often find ourselves stuck at felt-sense.  
Distracted and doubtful,  
we neglect the sensations—positive and negative—associated with discovery.  
We forget that discovery and doubt, emotion and reason,  
are the productive tensions that  
grow throughout  
and guide us throughout the writing process.

By tapping into and attending to these emotions—the “good” and the “bad”—  
we write felt sentences: sentences that we feel and that our readers will feel.  
We and our readers, together, will be intelligent:  
discerning,  
appreciating,  
sensing what is before us  
as we contribute to and develop our own truth.

There must be a balance between  
Reason  
and  
Emotion.  
Academic and intelligent do not mean emotionless.  
They do not mean overly stuffy and pompous writing.  
“Academic” and “intelligent” are  
ways of thinking,  
ways of seeing the world.  
Those insights can be described in any way, but they start with us,  
the person, the body, and the mind working together.  
Intelligence is not a language; it is a state of mind.  
To live in and with our questions then,  
we must sense to write and write to sense.

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Everyone writes.  
All the time.  
I write all the time.  
I write when I am walking.  
I write when I am waiting.  
I write when I am watching trains and adding those to my own train of thought  
until I think of another,  
until I think of another question to board,

until I become both the conductor and the passenger of discovery.

We all write.

We write with words and images and gestures.

We write out loud.

We write silently (sometimes too quietly for our own minds to hear).

But we are still writing.

All of what I have just said rests on one assumption:

we must live to write

about the question that we are living in

and about the question that lives in us.

Learning how to write then is about learning how to live.

To do this, we must sense,

an activity that is inseparable from the act of composing (Fleckenstein 13).

The body and mind must work with and sense each other

to make meaning

and to discover.

What stops many writers from achieving such a state are

distractions,

worries,

and even outcomes, as positive as they may be.

But, if we pause to sense our body and the language it uses to carry meaning,

the writing process completely transforms.

This way of perceiving writing is for everyone

—not just so-called “writers”—

because everyone writes.

## Works Cited

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