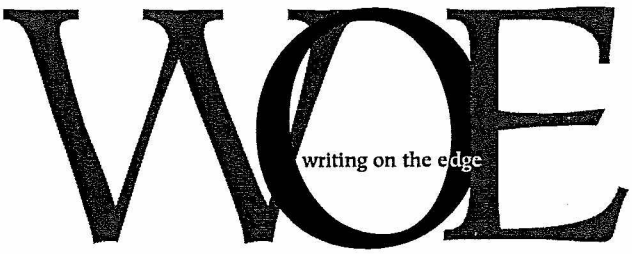

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Why We Write in College

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Let's start by taking seriously the college student who has been assigned to write a ten-page paper on, say, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or urban sprawl in Mumbai or nineteenth-century drawings of fetuses and who grumbles to classmates as the clock winds toward the due date, "Why are we doing this?"

Why do we write so much in college? Why are so many papers assigned? What's the point? Why do most colleges require a first-year writing course and sometimes another upper-division writing course? Writing a bunch of papers in graduate school makes plenty of sense because grad students are likely to go into academia: essays, articles, and books are the primary modes of advancing knowledge in the academic world. But what about the undergraduate pursuing a career outside of academia—the forensic pathologist, the structural engineer, the businessman, the congresswoman? Why require these students to write essays when what they really care about is the substantive knowledge of their chosen fields? Why not just give them multiple-choice tests? Why is the undergraduate essay such a massive phenomenon?

These questions have some easy answers that are perhaps true but don't really get to the heart of the matter. For one, students need to know where to put their commas. Given the diverse backgrounds and high schools from which students come to college, a baseline of competency in the English language needs to be established. Second, writing assignments are often used for examination. Does a student know the content of a course, and can he or she articulate it in a meaningful way by bringing abstract ideas and concrete examples together? I'll often assign a paper for this purpose, or I'll assign a paper because I believe the ability to write—which requires, of course, the ability to think—is a fundamental skill in the acquisition of knowledge with a huge instrumental value. That is the main reason universities have required first-year writing courses. Only when a student can think and write well can he or she succeed in the field of his or her choice, whether it is in the humanities or the sciences.

But these answers aren't totally satisfying when I think about what really happens when a student in college sits down to write a paper. The student who writes a paper—at least the serious student and the serious paper—must spend hours reading, thinking, and writing in depth about an issue that is remarkably, sometimes bewilderingly specific and seemingly inconsequential given the immediate demands upon that

student's time and energy (food, sleep, sex, family, friendships, etc.). For a paper to be successful, it must devote an extreme, perhaps even irresponsible amount of time and attention to a narrow, perhaps even trivial topic. What is the point of having a student spend all this time on a ten-page paper on *Hamlet* or Mumbai or nineteenth-century fetuses?

In addition to the not insignificant reasons mentioned above, we write so much in college because each paper we write has the potential to generate an insight and passion that will give our lives direction. Arguably, that's the whole point of college—the discovery of interests and talents that can then develop into professional ambition and expertise that provide personal satisfaction and financial security while making a slight contribution to the lives of others and the success of society. If that really is the purpose of college, then the undergraduate essay may be the single most important mechanism for realizing that goal.

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To see how an essay can change a life, we can look at the *Zong*. In the eighteenth century, Great Britain was the biggest slave trading empire in the world and the institution of slavery was a given. As the historian Adam Hochschild has narrated, slavery was such a given that the British captain of the slave ship the *Zong* wasn't even charged with a crime when, on his way from Africa to America in 1781, he threw 132 malnourished slaves overboard because he knew he could get more money by filing an insurance claim than he could by trying to sell the debilitated slaves. It was a cold calculation, but attempts to bring murder charges against the captain were thrown out of court, the judge saying it was no different than if the captain had decided to throw 132 horses overboard.

When news of the *Zong* case reached the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, Peter Packard, it moved him to make the topic of the university's annual Latin essay contest, *Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?* "Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting?" A 25-year-old student named Thomas Clarkson decided to enter the contest. He was a graduate student in the Divinity school planning to follow his father's footsteps into the Anglican ministry, but he had received his B.A. in Classics, so he had the chops to write the essay, which had to be in Latin. It also had to be completed within two months, which was tricky because Clarkson had never really thought about the issue of slavery. But he was a serious student and dove headfirst into his research. With the dedication and resolve that would come to characterize his life, he read everything he could find about the history of slavery. He travelled to Portsmouth and met and interviewed naval and military men who had personal experience with the slave trade and slavery in Africa and the West Indian islands. He was committed to forming his understanding of slavery based only on what people saw for themselves, not what they

had heard. And upon discovering the harsh realities of the slave trade, which most Brits had been shielded from by the curtain of an ocean, he concluded that slavery was an unethical violation of human rights and Christian values, something that sounds obvious to us today, but something that was almost unheard of in his time.

Clarkson's essay was no silly little op-ed in Latin. The first part gave a thorough history of the institution of slavery from ancient times to the present. Part two gave a philosophical critique of the slave trade as a violation of human rights. Part three presented his original research compiled from interviews and observations. And for his efforts and accomplishments in the essay, Clarkson won first prize in the Cambridge contest, and he was invited to read his essay aloud in Latin to an audience at Cambridge (to me, that sounds like it should be punishment for last place).

But that was not the end of his work on the issue of slavery. It came to engross his thoughts and eventually his life. One day in 1785, while traveling on horseback from Cambridge to London, preparing to start his career in the clergy, Clarkson had a crisis of conscience. As he neared Wades Mill in Hertfordshire, he stopped his horse, fell to the ground, and—as he later wrote in his diary—"a thought came into my mind that if the contents of the essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end" (Hochschild 89). Today there is a monument commemorating the place where Clarkson had his epiphany because, as Hochschild wrote, "If there is a single moment at which the antislavery movement became inevitable, it was the day in June 1785 when Thomas Clarkson sat down by the side of the road at Wades Mill" (89).

Encouraged by some early abolitionists, Clarkson translated his Latin essay into English, expanded it, and published it in 1786 as *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. In 1787, he was one of the 12 men who met at a London printing shop and formed the Society for Affecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Working sixteen-hour days, he travelled England giving speeches, collecting signatures for petitions, conducting additional research, and publishing additional books, all of which was used by a young Member of Parliament named William Wilberforce in his repeated attempts to introduce a bill that would abolish the slave trade. These bills were routinely defeated, but Clarkson, Wilberforce, and the Society kept working tirelessly for their cause. In his life, Clarkson traveled some 35,000 miles on horseback drumming up support for abolitionism until Parliament finally approved one of Wilberforce's bills and passed the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished the international slave trade and provided British naval support to enforce the law. One year later, the United States followed suit and ceased its slave trade. It had taken Clarkson more than 20 years

of hard work to end the slave trade, but he wasn't finished. He spent another 26 years fighting to abolish the whole institution of slavery in the British Empire. In 1833, Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, and then Clarkson spent the last 13 years of his life campaigning for the abolition of slavery around the world, focusing on the United States. He did not live to see the United States abolish slavery in 1865, but he was one of the earliest and one of the most steadfast supporters of the cause that led to that defining moment in modern history, a life's work which started with an essay he wrote in college.

* * *

Not every essay will change the world. In fact, almost none of them will. Thomas Clarkson's essay didn't change the world. But it did change the course of his life, and his life made a remarkable impact on human history. It would be hard to top Clarkson's essay, but a good number of people can point to that one undergraduate essay that gave their lives purpose and direction. In that essay, mastery of a topic combined with just enough original insight—and the fire of youth—to encourage someone to devote his or her professional life to a certain field or cause.

For me, it was a ten-page essay about the representation of Galileo Galilee in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an essay I wrote while in college as a safety net as I pursued a career in music. Writing that essay was so enjoyable, and it got such a good response from my teacher, who encouraged me to pursue literary studies in grad school, that it completely altered my life course. For someone else, it could have been an essay about the age of the Anthropocene in a course on environmentalism or an essay about Title IX in a course on the culture of sports, but for me it was—this is absolutely crazy to think about—an essay on the treatment of a seventeenth-century Italian astronomer in a seventeenth-century English poem that allowed me to discover my passions and talents for literary criticism.

We don't write essays in college because we expect them to change the world. We write them in the hopes that one of them will grab hold of the interest and passion of a student whose lifelong dedication to ideas first explored in that essay might someday be needed. A college essay can change the life of an individual, and it is individuals devoted to ideas whom we turn to when new problems develop that we didn't see coming.

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