

## Writing Pains: Exploring the Writing Activity of a “Slacker”

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Eagon utilizes her personal struggle writing a film analysis to illustrate the ups and downs of her writing process and her negative feelings towards the act. By describing the literate activities she practices and the frustration she encounters as a result, Eagon debunks the rather romanticized idea that writing is inspired and instead reveals it to be a slow and stressful experience. She also admits that the writing experience is different for every writer and every genre. Consequently, she realizes in the end that though the process may never be easy, she can begin to approach writing with less anxiety by trying out various writing habits to find what suits her individual needs best.

*I tried to avoid this! I tried to start early, be proactive. How did I wind up in this situation once again? Writing at the last minute is so stressful, and I feel like I've been working on this paper all weekend long—why is it still not finished?! I'm so tired . . . I just want to go to bed. My writing is probably suffering as a result of my sleep deprivation. Not to mention the stress. Maybe I could lie down for a 20-minute nap? No, I should probably just make another pot of coffee.*

This situation is one of the reasons why I hate writing papers. For me, they inevitably end up in long, stressful nights consisting of too much caffeine and “napping” with my head atop my desk, trying to find an angle at which my face is not painfully balanced on my nose or sharp cheekbones. These all-nighters wind up occurring frequently before my deadlines because I'm a procrastinator—although some prefer the term “slacker” and others have even ventured “perfectionist.” Although these terms have very different meanings, there is some connection between them as I find that my desire for mastery in writing becomes so stressful it often leads to putting work off until later. Despite the mostly negative associations friends and colleagues have given to my writing identity, these bad habits aren't quite steeped in the apathetic torpor or laziness that people suspect. I think Emily Dickenson

defines my condition best when she writes: “Much madness is divinest sense / to a discerning eye” (lines 1-2). There is definitely some sense to my madness, which I otherwise refer to as my personal “writing process.”

For me, my writing process begins as soon as I receive a writing task, whether it is an email that requires response or an assigned essay. Even if all I do is mark the email as unread or stuff the assignment sheet into the back of my notebook and forget about the task until confronted with it again, I still consider myself to be taking part in the writing process. Once I’m given that writing task, I’ve crossed the line between someone who didn’t have writing to do and someone who definitely has to write a specific genre for a specific audience. If I choose to, I can spend the majority of my writing process pretending I’m the former person and that this task doesn’t exist; but in the back of my mind I know it’s there, and I’m making a conscious choice about how to approach writing it. Offering a more succinct definition of process, composition scholars David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen claim that “The process includes everything you needed to do in order to get to the finished draft” (14). Writing process can also be described as a literate activity system in which all of the numerous and complex components of the process—from where writing happens to when it happens to how it happens—make up the activity of writing. Joyce Walker explains this idea in much more detail in her article “Just CHATting” (74-77), where she describes literate activity from multiple different perspectives that “can be used to help researchers [as well as writers at all levels] investigate the complicated factors that impact what/how/when/why we write” (74).

There are many different genres of writing and probably just as many ways to participate in the activity of writing, but there’s not just one “right” way. For instance, some writers approach Facebook status updates as something they can write quickly on their phone while on the go, while others linger over these updates, constructing creative expressions or lengthy rants. Similarly, other writers, when given a research paper, immediately begin brainstorming, researching, drafting, revising, etc. I envy these writers and their ability to sit down and get work done—yet, I don’t pretend to assume that these activities qualify such authors as better writers or even good writers. In fact, I’ve encountered many writers who employ such practices because they struggle with writing, and drafting early means having time for necessary revisions and edits. Therefore, I do not wish to be these writers as much as I wish I had their diligence. Instead, my particular method of writing involves being in a constant battle with myself, and it’s definitely not a model to follow; however, my writing process could perhaps be a model in the “learn from my mistakes” vein. Indeed, my composition activities at least serve to debunk any glorified ideas of writing as a sort of magical event inspired by the muses. I think

my activities also reveal the reality of writing as hard work that involves not only putting words on a page, but thinking critically, researching, scheduling, working in difficult environments, and mediating harsh self-criticism with the effort to draft. Thus the act of writing for me is an intricate and complex system that requires much more activity than simply typing words onto a computer screen; and as I mentioned, this activity begins when I receive a writing task.

## The Analysis Writing Assignment

In one of my first graduate classes as a student in a Master's of English program, I received this assignment: write a four- to six-page academic essay for which you choose an object to analyze. The object can be a place, relationship, experience, institution, or anything literary, popular, cultural, written, filmic, musical, or pictorial. The essay should describe/contextualize the object. Furthermore, whatever object is selected for this paper will also be the topic of three more four- to six-page papers. The paper should be written in MLA format and double-spaced; it's due in three weeks. My reaction?

*This is an awesome assignment! I'm not quite sure in what way this paper will work with the subsequent papers for this class, but I'm excited about it nonetheless because of the complete freedom it gives me. I've wanted the chance to focus on my own research interests and write something that I could potentially get published; now I have the opportunity. Plus, since the topic is entirely of my own choosing, my interest in this assignment should make it easy to write.*

I put the assignment sheet on the dry erase board hanging up in my home office so I can see it every time I walk in the room. I'm determined to make my writing process productive from the beginning so that the writing experience doesn't become stressful and neurosis inducing in the end. My next activity was to find a topic.

## Brainstorming for Topic Ideas

In their book *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*, Donald A. McAndrew and Thomas J. Reigstad offer eight helpful strategies for finding a topic including free writing, rapid sketching, conversation, free talking, doodling or sketching, using a three-by-five index card exercise, heightening alertness, and using writing territories, which consists of generating a list of familiar and/or interesting subjects (32). Personally, I find conversation to be a particularly helpful activity, even if it's only a conversation with myself—

although, I do generally rely on friends to help me with this part. I actually enjoy thinking about possible topics; therefore, brainstorming can often take up a large period of my process, which ultimately produces time constraints for my several remaining writing activities. For this paper, brainstorming lasted two weeks. This is the condensed version of that activity:

*Since I have absolute freedom and I have to write four papers on this topic, I should probably pick something I like. I could write about the 2011 Jane Eyre movie! After all, why are there about two-dozen Jane Eyre movies anyway? But then again, I've never written about movies . . . Maybe I should pick something I know? What do I know? I know literature; I should probably write about literature. I've wanted to read Nabokov's Lolita for over a year now; I could use that. But I don't know anything about Russian literature. Plus, there is the issue of working with a translation. Wait . . . Lolita wasn't translated; it was written in English. But still, I better stick with British literature. I could write about Harry Potter! It would finally give me a chance to finish the series. But then I would have to work with all seven books since it's a series. That's a lot to take on, and it adds more reading to my workload. Maybe I should pick something I've already read. I could use Wilkie Collins's Armadale since I wrote my Honors thesis on it—I have so much more to say about that book. And I've also read quite a lot of secondary criticism on that novel. But would that be cheating? I'd still be writing from scratch, and I'd be taking up new ideas. I don't think it's cheating. I should definitely use Armadale.*

One week before the paper is due, I find out my professor wants this assignment to be not only an opportunity for us to explore a topic we're interested in, but he's encouraging us to try experimenting a little. So after all this thinking, I decide to write about Cary Fukunaga's 2011 film adaptation of *Jane Eyre*.

## Reviewing the Topic

If I had chosen a novel for my object, I would have to read it and fortunately I had already read Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Since I chose a movie, I watched it while sitting on my comfy couch and taking detailed notes.

*Opening scene: Adult Jane leaving Thornfield in tears; wobbly, frantic camera angles; Jane walking through moors—wide angles; Jane walking through rain—sees the Rivers' house. St. John finds Jane on doorstep—in book, Jane is turned away by the Rivers sisters.*

*Flashback: Jane remembers being child (book opening scene).*

Now that I had a good set of notes, I had to sit down and start writing; but my anxiety about what exactly to write made this part a little challenging for me.

## Making Time to Write

Monday: work, read for class, go to class, eat dinner, go to next class, come home around 9pm. *I'm too tired to start writing my paper tonight. I'll start it tomorrow.*

Tuesday: work, prepare for class, teach, office hours—*I've got to read for class tonight*—go to class, come home around 9pm. *I'm too tired to start writing my paper tonight, but I still have time. I'll start it tomorrow.*

Wednesday: work, read for class, go to class, get home around 5pm. *I'm so glad to have a night off! I'll just enjoy my evening a little and then start working . . .*

Thursday: Sitting down to write. *How do I start? I'm not sure what I want to say. I wonder what other people have said about this movie?* Google. Milner Library Online. MLA International Bibliography database.

Making time to write is an extremely difficult activity for me. As I mentioned earlier, I often hold off on returning emails—I also frequently forget about text messages I've received as other situations arise while I'm contemplating how to respond—but academic writing is my worst form of procrastination. Whether it be memos, lab reports, research papers, or literary analysis essays, sitting in front of a Word document seems like the most boring way to spend time I could be using to do other homework, clean my apartment, cook dinner, or catch up on sleep. For me, there is never a *good* time to write. Maybe eventually I'll find my perfect time of day and the ideal atmosphere for writing; but since it currently eludes me, I must force myself to sit and just write.

## Reading to Write

Inevitably, when I sit down to write, I feel like I have nothing to say. Or sometimes I have so many things to say that I have no idea where to start. This always prompts me to do some research, and this is the dangerous part for me—after all, there are so many interesting things on the Internet. I'm a pretty big nerd when it comes to literary study and even though I don't like writing, I love researching. Because this activity is so much fun for me, I usually spend a lot of time here—like with brainstorming—and I try to make it as productive as possible. So, in this instance, I Google “Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre*” and search through film reviews. I start a working bibliography to keep track of these sources and a new Word document in which to paste quotes that I like from my readings. In my experience with research, one idea

always leads to several others so I end up spending [too much] time watching interviews with Fukunaga on YouTube.

### Really Writing This Time

*Okay, now I'm committed. I'm sitting down at my desk; my blank Word document is open—I hate how that blinking cursor taunts me. What to write? I don't know how to start this essay. Oh, it doesn't matter! If I just start, then I can go back and edit it later: "Charlotte Bronte's novel Jane Eyre (1847) has been gaining attention for over one hundred and fifty years." Okay, I've got the first sentence. That's always the hardest part—why do I start with intro, anyway? I usually end up changing it drastically once I've figured out what my paper is actually about. Have I always started papers this way? It doesn't seem very productive. Anyway, now what am I going to say? I have thoughts; I just don't have any words for them. Maybe my thoughts will develop if I just linger on them for a bit while I play on the computer.*

This thought usually results in me checking my Facebook page, playing a game (or two or three) of FreeCell, or taking ridiculous pictures of myself in Photo Booth that strangely offer a visual epitome of my writing activity (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. I hate writing.



Figure 2. Pretending to think hard.

I usually have an ideal in mind of how I want my writing to look and sound, but I don't think I ever quite get there. I can't ever seem to completely master my thoughts and words into a perfect textual body. I have all of these ideas jumping around in my head like little kids in a bouncy castle, but translating those thoughts into words on a computer screen is a slow, time-consuming process that involves hours of what feels like wasted time. This time is otherwise manifested in me sitting at a local coffee shop and staring out the window as if the words I'm looking for are going to stroll right down the sidewalk, into the front door, and sit down at the table with me (I happen to be looking out the coffee shop window waiting for the words to arrive at

the time of this writing). This activity always takes longer than I think it will, which is what leads into the miserable middle-of-the-night writing described in the opening of this article.

### The All-Nighter, etc.

By this stage in the writing process, I actually have something I want to say—usually. I’ve spent several hours over the course of multiple days thinking about my topic, reviewing my topic, reading up on my topic, but it took me so long to sit down and write that I end up pulling that all-nighter, writing up to the deadline, and drinking enough coffee to cut years off of my life. This is why I hate writing. It’s stressful, time-consuming, hard work, and there’s no guarantee of positive feedback for all the effort. I’m working on overcoming this approach to my writing process by focusing more on how to improve the individual activities that make up writing. And maybe when I do, I’ll write another article about how I’m such a fabulous writer and I have this great strategy and everyone should follow my lead. However, I don’t think such a universal truth exists. I think writing is a complex activity system that varies for each person and each situation. So even though my personal process for writing academic essays is slow, stressful, and riddled with self-criticism, my approach doesn’t make me any less of a writer. I’m still translating my thoughts into words on a page, which makes me—good or bad—a writer. I realize that I may never be able to “overcome” my writing problems—but at least by recognizing the different activities that form my own writing process, I can point to specific areas that need tweaking.

So let the writing process begin again. This time I’ll try something new and different to see how it works for me. Maybe it’ll be scheduling a writing appointment with myself at an exact time every week. Maybe it’ll be writing in a place I haven’t tried before. Maybe it’ll be making myself a writing snack right before getting started. Maybe these habits will work for me and maybe they won’t, but I’ll keep trying until I find some strategies and techniques that help relieve my writing pains.

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