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My Quest for Confidence (2020 - 2021)

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“My Quest for Confidence” Tai Tran (Critical Evaluation example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

This example of a critical evaluation involves both a reflective cover letter of items in a list (or a set of author notes) and a more formal essay. Both documents together detail specific areas that Tran identifies in a changing writing process from high school to college. As you read Tran’s cover letter and essay, consider the following questions:

- One of the key concepts that Tran uses to frame this piece is the need for confidence as a college writer. What other concepts do you think are important to cultivate in college writing, and why? How does emphasizing these concepts in college differ (or not) from other, previous writing experiences you may have had?
- Another area that Tran notes is the importance of diction, style, or voice in clearly conveying meaning to a reader. Tran calls this not writing like “a thesaurus.” Why is it so important to balance formal and casual voice in writing? What are some strategies you have for knowing when to be more casual and when to be more formal in your own writing?
- Finally, Tran discusses the importance of purpose and audience for college writers. In your own words, why is it important to keep purpose and audience in mind? What opportunities can that create for your own or future college writing?

My Quest for Confidence by Tai Tran

Cover Letter/Author Notes for the Essay

1. As stated in the essay guidelines, I was writing this paper for professor Wiegard, my future CPN 101 professor Miranda and for the new students taking CPN 100 next semester. The body paragraph was mainly focused towards my professors about my specific writing development. Meanwhile my conclusion was targeted towards the new CPN 100 students. I wanted to tell the new students about the importance of having confidence when writing.
2. *Comparison between before and after something* One interesting comparison I did was the line in my assignment on Charles Murray, “I beg to differ this binary viewpoint, as college can provide a multitude of resources that can help prepare someone for such a difficult market such as job shadowing, internships and can also provide advisement on whether to pursue a different career”. First, I explained the problems of my original statement. Then, I used what I learned from the article, “Ain’t So / Is Not” to make the quote more coherent.
3. Key Concepts: confidence, voice, style.

4. A ground for possible argument is that I still appear to be heavily dependent on source material and not on my own words. This is something I am currently working on as a college-level writer.
5. One area I still feel like I need improvement on is my conclusion. It still feels a bit off to me, but I do not know how I can specifically improve it. Also, as I said earlier, I could be less dependent on my sources and expand further on my own writing development.
6. The drafting process was mainly on organization. I went through a great process of trial and error to organize this essay. I had trouble on what point I should make and when to address it in the paper. I also found myself referring more to the past rather than talk about my change in writing skills and needed to balance the two.
7. What I have learned as a writer out of this is that I will always have to move out of my comfort zone when it comes to writing. I thought that my writing skill was good enough for college, but it turns out that I was wrong. I needed the confidence to speak up and meet with my professors and peers for help.
8. What I have learned about writing in general is that writing can help you discover who you are as a person. Writing, like any other form of communication, is a way of expression. I never realized that I had trouble expressing myself in my writing until I got to SUNY Cortland. This may be a stretch, but I think there is a correlation between my lack of confidence in writing alongside being an introvert. Both writing and speaking are skills tied closely together and are necessary to master as a college student.

Entering SUNY Cortland as a freshman, I had the mindset that writing would still be like high school, just with more words and research. Boy was I wrong. My writing style had to be completely reworked in order to fit into the college level. The biggest problem was that I lacked a voice in writing. I had no confidence in myself when it came to both writing academically and in self-expression. Even though my high school teachers helped me develop as a writer, I still had heavy doubts on expressing my own ideas and thoughts onto the page. It didn't help that I was encouraged to stick to formal language, avoided the first person and wrote papers that had little open inquiry. In High school I would pluck my sources and plopped them into my papers with bare commentary. It wasn't until I got to SUNY Cortland where I reconsidered my current writing abilities and got rid of my old high school habits. Thanks to the newfound writing knowledge I acquired along the way, my journey towards being a worthy writer began. It was time for me to have the courage to use my true voice in my writing.

Starting off at SUNY Cortland, I didn't have the confidence in expressing my own ideas on paper. At the time, my writing skills consisted of finding sources, collecting information and making citations for research papers. I barely focused on writing style, so I felt safe relying on quotations and simple descriptions instead of a deep, inquisitive commentary. My composition and history courses overwhelmed me at first with writing assignments. The days of citing down and describing sources were over for me. I needed to apply my own knowledge and insight into what others were saying since college academic writing emphasized argumentative or persuasive discourse on a subject. This lack of insightful analysis in my writing never crossed my mind as an issue until I started meeting with my professors face to face.

Originally, I wasn't accustomed to having teacher conferences to develop my writing. Instead, I was used to the teacher's ink marks left on my papers for feedback. Conferences with my Composition 100 instructor helped me realize the importance of personal commentary regarding academic writing thanks to her explanations. One time, my professor and I reviewed my second draft for our first essay assignment on higher education. She pointed out that I often didn't connect the sources with my main argument. My second draft basically was a list of recounting what my source has said and required my valuable input to support my argument. If it weren't for the conferences with my professor, I wouldn't have been able to identify my lack of insightful analysis in my writing. The conference was also important on building my confidence on having others critically review my work. I now realized that having others review my writing can open another perspective on how to develop my writing skills.

Weeks later, I was able to revise my first essay draft into a solid final paper with thoughtful analysis thanks to the conference with my professor. The essay #1 final draft had my own subjective commentary on the source's information. I even criticized what the source's author said. "Sure, it is good to start earlier for students, but they often quickly forget what they were taught in primary school once they head to college." By restating what the author implied in their point and bringing a new perspective into the conversation, I was able to strengthen my argument further. Having a stronger argument meant my writing had a more developed voice that the audience could comprehend. My readers would see why I chose these points as evidence and grasp the full picture of my argument. At the time, I also gained confidence in refuting others which showed that I was even capable of expressing my own commentary on opposing viewpoints.

However, just having personal input wasn't enough to support my argument for academic writing. I also needed to be clear enough that I could reach my audience. Aside not being able to express myself, I also discovered that I still didn't have the confidence to muster my own writing style. Initially, I thought using academic words would compensate for my lack of unique voice and elevate my writing to the college level. Instead, my writing turned into a thesaurus and became too difficult for my potential audience to comprehend thanks to my improper word choice. For example, I was assigned to discuss Charles Murray's article "Are Too Many People Going to College?" to prepare for my first essay, I argued against Murray's point that college is little benefit for the average high school graduate. "I beg to differ this binary viewpoint, as college can provide a multitude of resources that can help prepare someone for such a difficult market such as job shadowing, internships and can also provide advisement on whether to pursue a different career". The complicated phrasing of this sentence threw diction out the window. The term 'binary' did nothing for my argument since it made no sense in the context of college. Eventually, I realized that talking like a thesaurus was not the key to becoming an able college-level writer. Instead, I searched for how I could balance my formal and casual voice.

One of my reading assignments in *They Say, I Say* led me to the article, "Ain't So / Is Not". This article reassured me that it's totally fine to implement an informal voice into my college writing if I keep the audience and purpose in mind (Graff, Gerald, et al., p. 121–128). My previous statement refuting Charles Murray was supposed to convince high school graduates the benefits of college. However, the excessive vocabulary was unnecessary and could alienate my audience. Therefore, it's perfectly fine to implement some casual lingo into my writing as it gives me my own unique style and gets my point across quicker. A better sentence would have been: "I would beg to differ, as college provides plenty of resources to prepare someone for the job market via

job shadowing and internship opportunities alongside career advisement.” This new statement is much easier for a general reader to understand. All the words serve purpose and meaning to the sentence, helping me get my point across faster for the audience. My writing was becoming clearer yet still wasn’t coherent enough. My new writing style had to be more specific and concise.

Even though I got rid of my ‘overly scholastic’ vocabulary, I still struggled on word choice. Sometimes in my writing, I had trouble choosing the right phrase to the point where I end up writing down a bunch of synonyms. For example, I had to write a review about our reading assignments on attending college named, “Response to Higher Education”. In the assignment, I said “Today, people often follow the notion that it is the best choice for graduating high school students to pursue a secondary education by enrollment into a specific university or college”. When writing this, I thought repeating phrases helped emphasized my point to the audience. However, that is not the case. According to the article “Part II: Style: Why It Matters and How to Do It Well” in *Rhet Dragons*. The authors insisted that I cut off phrases that add no new meaning, which can help my “readers focus on the content... without being distracted” (Rutherford, Kevin J, et al, p. 13). Unsurprisingly, this redundancy of phrases creates a confusing mess out of my writing and leaves my readers distracted. Distracting the audience means that they’ll likely miss the point and be left confused.

I needed to chop off unnecessary words so that my audience has a better understanding on what I’ve said in my written assignment. The phrase, ‘enrollment into a specific university or college’ was redundant because that’s exactly what pursuing a post-secondary (not secondary) education means. I should’ve stuck to one specific phrase that best encompasses my point rather than using multiple words. Natalie Goldberg taught me about proper word choice in her article “Be Specific” in *Writing Down the Bones*. Goldberg emphasizes the many benefits of being specific in writing. Goldberg claims that “one word gives us a much more specific picture” and proper / specific names help take “the blur out of our mind” (Goldberg, p. 70). Word choice means quality over quantity and that specific names can make a much heavier impact than multiple meaningless phrases. Thanks to Goldberg, I overcame my self-doubt and began using my own words that are most relevant and concise to my writing. In the end, writing is about communicating in a manner that fits who I am and not just throwing meaningless words onto a page.

My journey as a writer meant battling away doubt, building confidence and expressing myself in a meaningful manner. Me being a history and social studies education major means that I will have to utilize the many aspects of writing to the fullest. This includes having the confidence to have a meaningful writing style in my future research papers and assignments. Thanks to the conferences with my professors and helpful articles in the textbook, I was able to find my own writing style. However, I also discovered that there is another purpose to writing aside from academics. As I developed my writing skills, my former irrational fears of writing were replaced by a newfound sense of progress and future potential. Writing, both academically and personally, can reveal things someone may never notice in their life such as their thought processes, communication skills and even about their self-esteem. Just after graduating high school, I continued my poor writing habits and didn’t move out of my comfort zone. Changing fear into confidence is important, not just in writing, but for any major advancement in life such as becoming a college student.

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