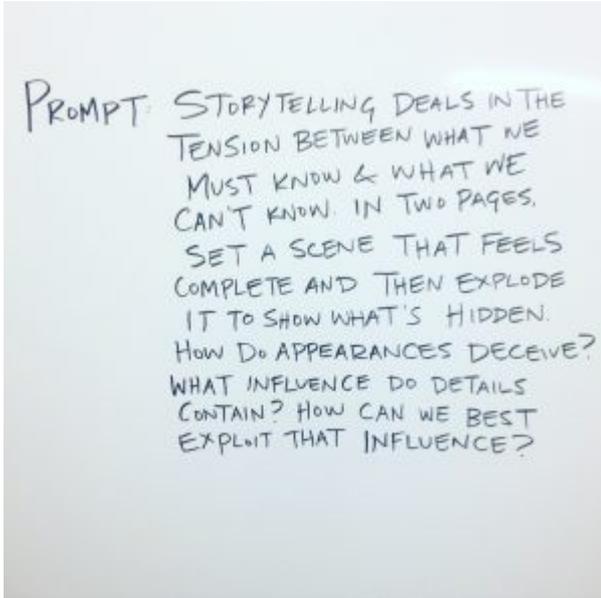


Where to Begin: A Literacy Narrative

written by Guest Contributor | January 5, 2018



When people ask how I started teaching, I tell the story in a single sentence. I say that a regular from my day job recommended me as his replacement and his boss was desperate enough to hire someone who looks as much like a carnie as I do. It's fast: one statement, multiple locations and characters, point A to point B without any interstitial punctuation or interjecting clauses. The real story is much longer, but this single sentence is a good place to begin.

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You never really know who you're talking to, standing at a register, swiping debit cards. A regular of mine, Andy (pour over coffee, the occasional pastry), told me he was moving to Queens to teach. "It's kind of sudden," he explained. We chatted about packing up an entire life for a long-distance move, the stress, what might break or disappear on the way to starting over. Before coffee, I worked at a dive bar, and before that, I was in a cubicle at a moving company. I gave him what advice I could remember from my cubicle days. *Pack the books in smaller boxes. Don't make any big life decisions until the dust settles. Save your back if you can.*

"You teach too, right?" he asked. I had, kind of. In college, and on tour. One-off workshops based on what I was reading or what I wanted to read.

"They're looking for someone to replace me at the Center for Adult Ed, if you're interested." I took down an email address, wrote a cover letter, expected not to hear back. But my query about the position got a response, so I send in my resume and a writing sample, set up an interview. I walk across the Longfellow Bridge post-shift, entirely too caffeinated and deeply self-

conscious about my sea foam green hair and latest hand tattoo. The program director, Tom, and I shake hands at the front desk and he takes me upstairs to one of the empty classrooms so we can talk more. He asks me about college, what I liked and didn't like there, why I write, what I'm reading.

He tells me he's spent time with some of my poetry since we've been corresponding and that he likes the intensity there. I am young and still too embarrassed to lead with my art. I downplay the poems in question, try to steer the conversation towards the job: how much of a time commitment is it, how many students on average, what's the money like?

Tom breezes past my questions, wants to talk more about books. "I just finished this book *How Should a Person Be*, Sheila Heti, maybe you've heard of it." I had. There were reviews for it everywhere at the time. I think one of them called it something along the lines of exaggerated pseudo-memoir as if written by Miranda July. Another compared the author to Lena Dunham for flattening her real-life friends in characters for a fictionalized "true" story from a deeply narrow slice of the world as she saw it. To be honest, every review of the book I read offended me. They all seemed convinced Heti was somehow unoriginal in her earnestness. As if any woman with an odd-"normal" narrative voice must be a matroynska doll composed solely of her influences and contemporaries.

"I really don't know how I feel about it," Tom said. I hadn't read the book, but I asked him questions about it anyway. Was is the narrator? The subject matter? Why was he walking away with an odd taste in his mouth? He said he didn't know. I promised to buy a copy and maybe we could talk about it once I finished.

"Maybe next week, when you're here for class," he said, smiling as he left the room. I had gotten the job.

I left the interview and bought the book immediately, devoured it in two sittings. Everyone in was my age and arguing about what art means. If it means anything at all. Why it's necessary. If that necessity can matter beyond the impulse to make or the intended audience. Some of the artists in it were purely selfish, some of them were aiming at pure selflessness. Most of them fell somewhere on a spectrum where self-awareness informed why and what they made. There were parts of the writing that felt so purely distilled I read them six times in a row without stopping, trying to internalize the structure. There were also paragraphs that made me so angry I threw the book across the room only to walk over and pick it back up so I could see if the writing talked its way back out of what had made me so mad.

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I'm not sure if Tom was using the book to Jedi mind trick me into proving I was ready to teach, but it worked. I walked into leading my first workshop

sure of very little beyond the importance of literature that asks questions, writing that begs us to interrogate it back. The process is simple. The students get a prompt and a page limit. They can use the prompt or not, but the page limit is firm. Everything is typed, prose gets double-spaced, and there have to be enough photocopies of each workshop piece for everyone to have their own to refer to and mark up. The author reads their work aloud, or if they're too nervous to do so, I read it for them. Then we start questioning. What's working? What's not quite there yet? Where do we want to know more? Are there places we could do with less? What happens after the piece ends? How do we find the right place to stop even when it's not necessarily the ending?

There's a four-page-long passage from an early chapter in *How Should a Person Be* that I often bring to the first class to read out loud and use as a prop for how we talk about bias, pivoting from broader experience to the personal, and how to compress the passage of time in our own work. Heti's narrator plows through a decade in these four pages. She also passes from a detached, pseudo-omniscient style of delivering information about an artist embroiled in scandal to a personal friend's experience with said artist. I ask my students to notice the compression of time, the hard turn from seemingly-universal newsy information to a more personal, anecdotal style of speech. I ask them to point to the moments when the narrator falters in her omniscience and betrays herself as a character in her own story even as she resists fully participating in what she describes. I tell them about Tom tricking me into teaching by asking me to read this book, about the trapdoor to understanding ourselves better in everything we read, how it is our job to locate it and then ask as many questions as possible about how it functions and why.

I want my students to ask me their writing questions no matter when or how they arise, and I interrogate them in return. Where did you want to get with your draft that you couldn't because of the page limit or time limit or lack of knowledge or fear of being wrong? How can you write towards that fear? If the piece scares you, how can you walk around that fear—give it boundaries and a name to make it less terrifying?

Finding the questions that help us make our own writing cleaner, sharper, more effective, is a difficult process for all of us who write, no matter how practiced we are at the discipline. I came from a classroom tradition of workshops where the author wasn't allowed to speak about intent or clarify any points of confusion for the audience after reading their piece aloud. Discussion about your work happened around you and you only got to interject if you wanted someone to repeat what they'd said or clarify their meaning. Everyone took notes on the draft in question and then handed papers back to the author once the discussion closed.

Now that I'm the leader, I ask the authors to only speak if they have questions for the questions being asked of them. I push people to ask each other questions because I want them to circle back to their own work with the same kinds of questions. Why did you land your argument on that sentence? Are your verbs active? Can they do more work? Who in the piece do we most want to understand? Why not somebody else? Are we hearing enough voices? Can more of them be out loud? Do we believe what's happening to these people? What more

do we require to be convinced? Where do we go from here?

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In high school, I worked at a different coffee shop. A regular of mine with a career in film (cinematography, I think), who threw barbecues where he'd project some classic in 35 mm on the side of his parents' old colonial, overheard me talking about a school project about film noir. The assignment dictated that I had to watch a movie in the genre and analyze how it got the tropes right or else departed from them. My family had no Blockbuster card and waiting around for a movie like this to show up on antenna TV without warning could take months. I was stuck. I had nothing to write my paper on. I didn't even know where to start looking.

This guy, let's call him George, offered to bring me movies. "You just have to promise not to steal them." I promised. He showed up the next day with a stack of VHS tapes: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Chinatown*, *Double Indemnity*, and *A Touch of Evil*. I watched everything on offer, took notes, then gave the movies back to George. It was one of the first times I felt empowered to complete a class assignment on my own terms, certainly the first time I found a trapdoor into close study of something I loved but didn't yet understand. The way I remember it, everyone else in the class wrote their papers on the movies we'd already watched in class. A lot of high school homework, or any homework for that matter, feels like busy work that changes nothing for the student completing it. But because of the way my assignment played out, I started asking people to bring me the stories they felt strongly about.

George and I talked about the movies some, but he didn't lend them to me as a means to talk to me longer. The exchange wasn't a trapdoor into something else. Showing someone something that moves you is a risk, and one I'm mindful of now that I'm George to a lot of people. When I show someone a story or poem that resonates with them, the best part is knowing they'll notice details about it that I've missed. I try to be George about it, to let them work out what's happening there on their own. George wasn't interested in convincing me of how to feel about what he'd given me. He just wanted me to see what he had seen.

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I never enter my own classroom with a rigid plan. But I do arrive on time. Early, even. Sometimes by fifteen minutes, sometimes by two hours. The building is always open. The classroom is usually unoccupied. I write on the board as soon as I'm in the room. The class title, my name, my email address, a prompt that speaks to the readings and lands on a question or three that

the students can take home and use to get started on something new of their own. I check my accordion file of readings. How many copies of this poem / are the longer stories stapled / is everything labeled with title and author and name of the collection it's pulled from? Every student gets a list of my five rules when we meet for the first class:

1. Be on time.
2. Be respectful.
3. Be willing to make messes.
4. Be curious.
5. Be yourself.

I make a lot of promises during that first session. I say, "We're going to go around the room and say our names, what our experience with writing has been, and what we want to take away from this room." I start. I'm Emily. I've been teaching this class since I was twenty-three. I write poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. My work is published and I'm also a performer. My first book came out in 2015. I have been rejected from graduate school three years running.

I want to make everyone in the room feel safe bringing rough drafts to class, to let them know I don't expect perfection, but I do expect effort. We will spend two hours every week trying to make those drafts better by changing the way they think about what they read, what they write, and also how they live their own stories.

When I started teaching in seriousness, I was the kind of artist who believes wholeheartedly in talent as the most important aspect of endeavoring to write and being successful at it. As far as I was concerned at the time, having an ear for the ideal line cannot be taught. Feeling as though people have inborn limits to what they can accomplish took the pressure off of me; it gave me permission to believe that there were students who would fail only because of themselves and their lack of ability, and not because I'd failed to give them access to the tools they needed to succeed at what they wanted to accomplish. After my first year of teaching, I was angry at myself for believing any of this. It was arrogant to think talent and success have a straight line between them, one I couldn't alter through intervention. I come from a very different school now, one where actively honing a set of skills is paramount.

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My dad was a storyteller. He embellished anything that passed through him and found the correct pace to keep people engaged in even the most half-formed stories. He had an ear for what skirted the line between outlandish and absolute, and he used it to keep people close to him. I grew up listening to him talk about all kinds of things that couldn't possibly be true in a way that made it seem foolish to question him. He was the definition of an unreliable narrator, and he was beloved for it.

There's an essay I teach frequently from Zadie Smith's collection, *Changing My Mind*, called "Dead Man Laughing." In it, she talks through humor as a survival mechanism in the face of class struggle. How her family was bonded by few things, but how laughter bridged the considerable gaps between them. I teach this essay because it lays out the power of storytelling in that trapdoor way, where as a reader it's easy to ignore the connection between Smith's informal education in pace and wit as one of the chief reasons her voice as an author is so magnetic.

The essay helps me have a necessary conversation with my students about identifying what tools we already have at our disposal to make the art we feel driven to make. It may feel important to write like our literary idols, but it's certainly more important to write like ourselves, a task no one but us can accomplish. There is more to being a writer than strong sentences, a compelling plot, more to craft than raw talent can provide. A lot of what drives us to tell stories is absorbed from our environment. I write because of my dad. I write because he told stories that moved without visible effort through a space where their veracity didn't matter in the slightest. The only thing that mattered is what was coming next. Watching him interact with a captive audience is the thing I miss most now that he's gone, and the times I feel closest to him are when I'm on stage and everyone is silent, listening intently, or when I'm in the classroom and exploding a piece of writing into the smallest parts I can still name, or when I reread a draft to myself out loud and feel tugged forward past the last words because there will always be more to say.

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The fabrication of a narrative goes through so many stages the reader doesn't get to see. No matter how much we study an author we can't know how long it took them to make what they made beyond the story they tell about how it was born. Stevie Nicks wrote the lyrics for "Rhiannon" in five minutes, or so somebody told me. Doesn't that make you believe she's the witch we all already know her to be? That song is perfect and to make something so perfect in such a small amount of time is astonishing. But to say "Rhiannon" was written in five minutes discounts the life lived up to that moment, and how many songs were written and scrapped before that song was born.

It feels inarguable to say that Stevie Nicks has spent her entire life learning how to write songs from every song that's ever touched her. This is how we learn to make what we make. This is why I don't believe in inborn talent anymore. It's truly impossible to say that someone grew up in a vacuum, that they came to art with no influences or teachers until they actively seek those kinds of examples out.

There was a time when I wasn't able to identify the link between my compulsion to tell stories and the way my father was always fantastically lying wherever he wanted. Now that I've realized it, it's impossible to

separate his storytelling from my own. I write because of my dad's stories. Because of how believable he made untruth. I wouldn't call myself talented because where I am now as a writer is more about close study than anything. But even when we think we aren't actively pursuing our craft, even before we've identified what drives us towards fabricating narratives, there's information being embedded in us about what stories are successful and why. Just because the skills weren't acquired intentionally doesn't mean we don't come by them honestly. And though our inherent skills are rarely the ones we wish we were given, they are ours.

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I didn't enter this essay with a plan for involving my father but thinking I can talk about my work without talking about him is an unconvincing lie. Like him, I stumble into opportunities because it's hard for me not to want to keep people close. Andy got me a job because I'd told him stories about teaching, about how much I love language. The stories I told him made him feel close enough to me to remember what I found important. My students show up to class every week not because they want a good grade (I'm not grading them at all), but because of what we're able to talk about in the classroom that it feels impossible to talk about anywhere else.

At the beginning of each new session, as we go around the table introducing ourselves, I ask people to tell me their experience with writing. If they've taken classes in the past and at what level, if they have a regular writing practice or if this is their first time attempting to write at all. It helps me to set my own expectations for what our six weeks together will be like, but it also helps them to frame themselves as writers in their own minds, work that even I have trouble doing for myself. I also ask them what they're looking to accomplish with the class. Many of them panic when asked to define this in just one sentence, but in the face of panic, they whittle down their fears and come up with a single goal. That goal is important because it provides them each with their own point of reference that'll help them see how far they've come by the end of our time together. But the end of our time together is another kind of starting point, a good enough place as any for their story to begin.



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If writing defies "common sense," if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we're allowed to reinvent ourselves. That's what I'm looking at with the literacy narrative, the coming-into-language story. I want to hear yours: when you first "clicked" with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote "poetry," but looked at it again and called it "lyric essay." I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more literacy narratives from [yours truly and others](#).