

Hi Jessica,

Thoughts, yes; models, perhaps in due course. But first a disclaimer -- my views about academic writing are a bit idiosyncratic. I think a lot of successful academic writing stinks and in recent tenure reviews and the like I find that my judgments about quality and value diverge significantly from the majority of my colleagues. As far as my own work is concerned, I have been able to do it my way and still manage to succeed reasonably well, but I have been fortunate in my timing, starting out under conditions far more favorable to independence than conditions are now. But, what goes around, comes around, as they say. So, here are my views.

You speak of the problem of forming "an appropriate or interesting topic for this particular discipline." You might question the preposition, *for*, and meditate on the concept of discipline. We find ourselves living and working in the midst of innumerable reifications, one of which besetting academics is "the discipline," and its variants, "the field," "specialty," and so on. Our real matters of concern involve this or that aspect of experience, and we think and write about those using a variety of intellectual tools -- logic, language, grammar, statistics, and a mix of disciplines that constrain and empower our thinking. Unfortunately the fruits of these efforts have been divvied up and organized and objectified as this or that discipline to which we become obeisant, not writing with it, but writing for it. In this way, most academic work has become deeply alienated labor. Let's put writing *for* a discipline, or a course, or a professor, aside. Your problem is to select among your many ideas to set yourself a topic that will integrate productively with your larger interests.

We are, it is important to recognize, surrounded by myriads of potential models. We have read numerous, differently styled essays in this course alone, and each of us has a wealth of other reading and experience to draw from. The problem is selecting out an actual model from all the potential ones. For that, in my view, you need a good intuition of the thought you want to develop through your writing. What is it that you anticipate that you have to say? Who do you believe should attend to what you anticipate you have to say? What are the resources for developing what you anticipate saying are available to you and which of those are ones to which your intended listeners are likely to respond in the way you anticipate? As you begin to have answers to these questions, you will begin to select models, or better to construct your mental model for the work in question from the myriad of potential ones about you.

I have used *anticipate* heavily here. It is a fair, and very difficult question to ask how do we anticipate what it is we have to say. We anticipate saying what we have to say in spontaneous speech all the time, but it always has a risky, surprising quality because the anticipation is not the same as the spoken speech. I think that one of the big variables in writing involves the degree of risk that you will permit yourself to take. The mechanics of writing make it possible to work across a wide spectrum, defined at one pole by the spontaneous flow of words and at the other by fully planned composition, and recomposition, according to a preset outline.

Personally, I have a strong preference for the essay, which I would characterize as a high risk form of writing in that writing an essay often begins with a general intent, the intimation of a beginning, but no clear sense of where or how the work will end. It is often hard to get the right beginning of an essay, one that allows you to move on in pursuit of a thought with reasonable confidence that it will not carry you into an abyss or a *cul-de-sac*. An essay may also take much

revision in order to fill out its possibilities, but if it starts well and pursues an interesting idea, it will keep a good deal of the spontaneity that commands interest in the same way that extemporaneous speech, however muddled, will generally command more intelligent attention than does a labored manuscript read aloud.

We invite you to contribute an essay. If you want to do something else, that is fine. We invite you to write an essay, not because we think it is the right or best way to do get ahead in the world of academe. It may not be good for that. We would argue, nevertheless, that it has pedagogic value, helping to pull your thinking into new concerns. We need to nurture in ourselves the capacity to start from confusion and uncertainty and to elicit from them coherence and confidence.

Regards,

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