

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN THE TECHNICAL WRITING COURSE

MARK GELLIS

Kettering University

ABSTRACT

Professionals in the workplace are rarely asked to write autobiographical essays. Such essays, however, are an excellent tool for helping students explore their growth as professionals. This article explores the use of such essays in a technical writing class.

Some years ago, I was asked why I did not teach essays in my writing classes. At the time, because I was responsible for teaching only professional and technical writing, I was somewhat puzzled by the question. However, I began to think about it.

There is a perfectly good reason why essays are rarely taught in professional writing classes. Essays are not frequently used in the workplace. For the most part, this makes the essay a fairly useless genre to teach in a class oriented toward preparing students to communicate as professionals. At the same time, one might wonder why this is the case. The essay, after all, is a perfectly functional genre, flexible and seemingly well-suited to the informative and persuasive goals pursued by professionals communicating in their workplaces. This is, of course, not the case, but it is worth considering why this is so.

One partial answer is found in Kinneavy's *A Theory of Discourse* [1]. Briefly, Kinneavy reminds us that writing is situated and goal-directed behavior; we are rarely speaking in a vacuum; we are usually saying some *thing* to some *one* for some *reason*. Essays differ from reports and proposals because their discursive

goals are different and because they are responses to different kinds of situations. A report is generally written from one professional to another (or to non-experts who have a professional interest in the subject), and is often purely "referential," dealing purely with the subject in an objective and analytical manner. Further, reports and memos are not only written primarily to achieve a profession-related goal, but are usually written with the aim of achieving one specific profession-related goal. Once a report has reached its intended audience, it is often either filed away for future reference or is totally discarded. It is an entirely transactional piece of communication.

An essay, on the other hand, is written not only to explain, but often to record and reveal the author's personal interaction with the subject. More important, this individual focus is often central, making many essays a mixture of autobiography, literature, and informal informative reporting. (In other words, it mixes the Kinneavian referential aim with both the expressive and literary aims.) But the essay not only has the freedom to express and entertain while it informs, it often has the obligation to do so. It is an expectation of the genre that essays will do more than simply give us a set of observed facts and objective conclusions. Readers come to essays not only for the information they contain, but also for the insights of the individual author, to "visit with" an author whom the reader likes as an individual personality, and even to vicariously experience the process of gaining those insights. In short, it might be fair to say that reports are written for people who need the information, whether or not they want it, but essays are written for people who want the information, whether or not they need it.

Suffice that this personal and artistic approach is what often makes essays unsuitable (or at least too inefficient) for the American workplace. There is nothing "wrong" with the essay, but the traditional demands that readers have placed on the genre oblige writers to write them in a manner that is usually inappropriate for most kinds of professional writing. In effect, essays are inappropriate for the workplace because they are generally written for the kind of audience one would be unlikely to encounter in the workplace, an audience who is reading for pleasure, curiosity, and ongoing and open-ended personal development, as opposed to a professional who is reading the document for professional rather than personal reasons and who expects a document that is concerned with a particular job-related issue rather than personal observations, aesthetics, and the exploration of timeless truths about the human condition. Hence, and we already knew this but I hope that I have given people a better grasp of the underlying reasons why, essays are more appropriate for a general composition course than one focused on professional and technical communication.

There is, however, at least one situation in which one might use essays in technical and professional writing classes. Where the goals of the class are not simply to teach students the genres they will use in the workplace but to have them reflect on the nature of work and professionalism, the essay becomes an extremely useful genre.

The use of essays for such reflective writing, writing where the goal is not simply to communicate existing knowledge but to generate through the process of composition entirely new knowledge, has long been a staple of Freshman Composition classes. The textbooks themselves argue these points. One suggests that "Writing can give you an opportunity to think about your relationships. When you write, you can ask questions about your relationships; sort out experiences and characteristics; make connections between your relationships and larger cultural forces. Your relationships matter to others as well as to you, so writing to them can help strengthen your ties" [2, p. 13]. Another commonly used textbook points out that "writing can help you grow as an individual. Writing leads you to reflect deeply on your personal experience . . . can make you examine some of your most basic beliefs . . . [in some cases] requires that you think about what you value and how your values compare to those of others . . . [and sometimes even] confers authority on you . . . gives you confidence to assert your own ideas and feelings" [3, p. 2].

Many of the studies on expressive writing have focused on the personal benefits of expressive, autobiographical, or reflective writing. This is certainly one of the points made by Karpik [4]. Lepore and Greenberg even suggest that expressive writing has health benefits, that "the ability to freely express stress-related thoughts and feelings appears to reduce the negative mental and physical health effects of stressful life events . . . may be particularly useful for individuals who feel constrained in disclosing to members of their social network . . . [and] provides a convenient method for individuals to confront and work through unresolved feelings and thoughts related to stressful events" [5, p. 547].

More useful to our discussion are the studies that suggest expressive writing can foster professional development. Kate Rousmaniere makes this point, suggesting that by having teachers in graduate level education classes write about their own experiences as K-12 students, they can reflect on their experiences and develop more effective teaching methods. Of particular importance appears to be the realization by some writers that "bad" teachers were not those who had poor lesson plans but instead those who made "the classroom an anxious and fearful place" [6, p. 93]; often, what made pedagogy effective and memorable was that a lesson was "fun" [6, p. 95]. Also useful is the work of Freema Elbaz-Luwisch, who argues that "there is growing evidence that the process of telling and writing personal stories constitutes a powerful tool in fostering of teacher's professional growth" [7, p. 405]. She draws upon the extensive scholarly literature on writing as inquiry to point out that writing is a tool that can be used not only in the communication of meaning but "as a process of making meaning . . . bringing into being . . . ideas that were not there before being written, a method of coming to know" [7, p. 406]. Lynne Alvine addresses the issue even more explicitly, pointing out that "in the writing of these autobiographical narratives and in looking closely at them, each has articulated new insights about her early learning experiences. When those who plan to teach write about

their own early memories of learning, they bring forward their embedded understandings about teaching and learning. In making those understandings explicit, they make them available to themselves. . . . By testing current theory against their own lived experience as . . . learners, prospective teachers can bring together the external and the internal, the received and the intuited . . . [they] are better prepared to form their own beliefs about teaching and learning, beliefs that are grounded in their lived experience" [8, pp. 9-10]. The critical issue here is that what works for students who plan to become teachers should work equally well for students who plan to become engineers, scientists, and other professionals.

Kettering University, where I teach, is a co-op university where students are expected to spend several 3-month work terms employed as assistant engineers, scientists, etc. Normally, students alternate these 3-month work terms with 3-month academic terms. The result is they graduate with at least a year, and often 2 years, of relevant full-time work experience. They have had, in this period of time, a significant number of experiences as professionals-in-training that would make excellent material for further reflection, and which provide the sources of essays on becoming a professional.

For these reasons, I have incorporated an autobiographical essay into my junior-level professional writing classes. The remainder of this article includes descriptions of several student papers. Although all students whose papers are discussed here provided me with written permission to use their work for my research, to protect their privacy, I have changed both their names and the names of any individuals and organizations mentioned in their papers.

The assignment itself is fairly simple. I ask my students to write a short autobiographical essay about their co-op experiences or other work-related experiences. To give them some kind of general structure to organize their ideas, I rely on the commonly used "template" of the autobiographical essay appearing in Freshman Composition textbooks, to describe a part of their lives or an event or a relationship and to then discuss the significance of that experience. Their only requirement is that the essay must, in some way, be connected to the themes of work or professionalism. However, they have a wide range of options for the essay. The handout is included as Appendix 1.

Some choose to discuss their entire co-op experience. For example, Ellen began her essay by talking about her first few days at Kettering, about the loneliness and difficulties of adjusting to living away from home, very common themes in such expressive essays. However, she also uses the essay to address her general issue with shyness and how she found adults intimidating. In addition, she uses the essay to explore how each job taught her something new about herself and about life. At her first job, she learned how to deal with her shyness. At her second job, she learned something different:

My parents had been of the blue collar type their entire lives, but I had never gone to work with them to see the type of attitude that people held

at their jobs. F-bombs flew and vulgar jokes were told with no shame, but these men were not afraid of having fun on the job. I can say that I was disgusted a majority of the time . . . [but] these men were inspiring because they were not constantly trying to impress their boss for a raise . . . they only work to live, not live to work.

In short, she talks about how her experiences taught her to "prioritize. . . . I have been studying far too much and spending time on things that, in the long run, will not keep me happy. . . . I still study for tests and do homework . . . [but] I have saved more time for friends."

Steve wrote a similar essay. Written in chronological order, with specific dates given to divide specific episodes in the essay, he discusses how he has changed over the last 2 years. He starts with his first days in the dorms on campus, how he got and eventually grew dissatisfied with his first co-op job, and how he then found another, better job. At this second co-op, he "was given more work than [sic] I had received in one week" at his previous co-op. Engineers were asking him, on his first day, to "draft up their parts immediately," letting him use his skills and knowledge. This is in contrast to his experience at his previous co-op, where he was given only the lowest priority jobs and was even nicknamed "PP Boy" because he was the person everyone else came to when they needed a PowerPoint demonstration created. (In effect, Steve, an engineering co-op, was not allowed to work on engineering projects, only on the presentations that were made after the engineering, the "real work" he was supposed to be learning how to do, was done by others.) At the second co-op he is given a lot more responsibility. It is interesting that Steve often uses the words "happy" and "enjoyed" when he is talking about work at this second co-op, because it is work that is fulfilling. Back at Kettering, Steve now takes on leadership roles in his fraternity. Professionalism, to Steve, is not simply about making money or being "successful." The "success," the achievement of professional goals, is only a stepping stone. Meeting these challenges is what makes one "successful," but the real success is that by working hard and achieving goals, by solving a problem and being on some existential level useful, one gains personal satisfaction and happiness. It is the fact that he has grown into the kind of person who looks forward to challenges that marks him as someone who has become a professional.

At this point, it is worth mentioning one challenge of this kind of essay. When students try to sum up 2 or 3 years of their lives in five or six pages, it is easy to "go broad but not deep." As many of us know from teaching the expressive essay, the difference between a good one and an excellent one is often this depth of concrete detail, where students not only tell but show. In other words, development and tone often suffer in this form of broad autobiographical essay. However, once I point this out to students, most are able to avoid this potential pitfall. In fact, many of them avoid the problem entirely by focusing on one particular incident, individual, project, or group. I suggest this option frequently because it is often the best way to handle the assignment; within the limited

scope of such essays—usually only about 1,000 to 2,000 words—one is able to cover a more narrowly focused topic in far more depth.

Another aspect of the assignment is that students have had opportunities to experience situations where their expectations and values about professionalism will be challenged. Usually, this is not a matter of out-and-out illegal activity by sinister corporations, where students must make a heroic stand against corruption and greed. More often, co-op life channels *Dilbert* rather than Tom Clancy or John Grisham. What students do frequently encounter are people who are burned out, incompetent, selfish and dishonest and sneaky, or capable enough but miserable and/or lacking in social skills. (One might go so far as to suggest that co-op experience is excellent training for a life in academia, but I would never make such a claim myself.)

Furthermore, as we have already seen, students often write about the positive aspects of their co-op experiences. Many of their essays are concerned not so much with challenge but with inspiration. Frequently, they write about someone who has served as a mentor. For example, Dave wrote an essay about his mentor, Alan. Alan is praised in the essay for his professionalism in his attire and attitude, but also how his attention to detail and calm rationality made it possible for him to enter a meeting in which people were upset, take control of the situation, calm people down, and get back to the problem at hand.

Dave describes giving a presentation at work where one of the chief engineers "immediately interrupted me mid-sentence to announce that the findings were incorrect and could not be true. As a beginning co-op student in an uncomfortable situation, I had absolutely no idea how to respond to the abrupt and negative criticism." Dave's mentor comes to the rescue, providing enough supporting evidence that the chief engineer withdraws his objections, but what is more important, perhaps, is that "Although I listened to the closing summaries . . . I was distracted by what I had just learned from Alan. All my previous employers would have . . . become defensive. . . . I learned that in situations where you, or your work, are being attacked, it is important to remain calm and professional."

Another student, Mike, looked at the workplace from the perspective of a "salaried" worker during a strike. He provides a detailed portrait of the office during this tense time. Breaking the essay into hour-by-hour time slots, a common technique used for these essays, he shows how people view the strike and the "hourly guys" in the union. He comments on one of the workers:

Here's a guy with almost no education and who has done the same boring job for the last 30 years. But he's probably one of the best employees in the building, union or management. Every day for the last 30 years he's showed up on time and gone above and beyond what has been asked of him. He doesn't care who you are or where you come from. He treats everyone with the same respect whether they are a janitor or a vice president. He just wants to be able to show up to work every day, do his job, and go home. Why should he have to pay for the bickering and politics between the company and union?

As the strike is announced, Mike notices how "one of the union administrators . . . symbolically locked up the coffee machine under her desk. Clearly, they mean business." He also describes how Lori, the quality manager, makes it clear "she didn't hold anything against the union. Everyone has a vested interest in this going as smoothly as possible. I like Lori." In the end, Mike argues, everyone is ". . . the same. We all want to have a stable job and be able to support our family." He is able to explore a complex issue, transcending choosing between a "good boss, bad union" or "good union, bad boss" mentality and suggesting that in actual, everyday life things are simultaneously both more complicated and more simple.

One of the options I offered students was to write about non-work experience, as long as it was somehow related to the issue of professionalism. Frank wrote about his experiences as a volunteer in Haiti, helping to build a school. His essay, not surprisingly, focuses on the irony that in building a school that others will use for learning, he gains an education of his own. Frank demonstrates some genuine sophistication in his writing. Knowing that his essay is, in many ways, simply a short story about people and events that happen to be real rather than fictional, he incorporates a fair amount of dialogue and a variety of concrete details such as what Haiti smells like and the surreal experience of waking up to the sight of chickens running past his head. There is, however, a second, more subtle irony in the essay. It begins with Frank, a typical American university student, in the middle of his Christmas break, with no responsibilities and free to enjoy all the riches of his society, and totally bored out of his skull. It is not until he volunteers and engages in physical labor for the sake of others amid the squalor of Haiti that he feels interested in what he is doing.

Other "literary" elements appeared in many of the essays. Richard, for example, wrote a good essay explaining how he helped identify a problem with the radiator cores being developed by his co-op employer. The essay includes a strong development of a persona; in this case, one gets a sense of Richard as a guy with a quiet, but witty disdain for bureaucratic idiocy. A large number of parts are being rejected by a customer, a major automobile manufacturer. He starts testing the design. The tests all say the parts are good. He then deliberately sabotages a part, ruining it, making it something that must fail, but, according to the test, it is still a perfectly good part; at this point, he knows the test itself is flawed and figures out what is going on. He also takes time to explain how no one noticed this before; the reason is simply that, to save money, his co-op employer had used temporary workers who were unfamiliar with the normal failure rate of the parts (in many production processes, it is not uncommon for some parts to be flawed; the important thing is that such parts are spotted and rejected before they are used in products such as automobiles or refrigerators). Had the co-op employer taken the time to properly train the temporary workers, the problem would have been spotted earlier and the employer would

not now have to replace the parts and explain to its quality-conscious customer what had happened.

It is worth noting that many of the insights students describe are quite commonplace, the sort that one might find in many autobiographical essays. However, we must be wary of becoming jaded. One purpose of an autobiographical essay is not simply to communicate one's insights to others but, through the process of reflecting on one's experiences and writing the essay, to generate these insights in the first place. No matter how many times we see a particular insight (e.g., "I learned I have to balance work and my personal life"), and in some cases we may see the same insight many, many times, articulated by many, many students, it is important to remember that with each student it may be the very first time he or she has genuinely reflected on that idea and how it relates to his or her life.

My experience is that students do quite well with this assignment. While there are a number of C-range papers, often because the student is still struggling with aspects of writing like development and punctuation, most are in the B-range or A-range, with students writing fairly polished pieces that not only successfully describe the experience but which reveal the voice and personality of the writer. The latter aspect is, of course, a major change from most reports and proposals, where the writer is supposed to suppress personal and subjective elements. This was actually one reason why I came up with the assignment. Instead of telling students that professional and technical writing relies on a certain kind of style, almost an invisible style because its goal is to not draw attention to itself, as opposed to the styles used in other kinds of writing, I let them learn by grappling with these differences themselves.

I would add at this point that I think this kind of expressive essay may be even more useful at the junior level than at the freshmen level, where it is traditionally taught. While the average 18-year-old certainly has had a wealth of experiences, and has the intelligence to explore and comment on those experiences, juniors and seniors have usually had an additional 2 or 3 years to mature, and are usually capable of more sophisticated judgments. I have found that their essays are often richer in content and style than those of freshmen, and I suspect that some older students get greater personal and professional benefit out of writing autobiographical essays at this stage of their college career.

Students generally like this assignment. I always ask students to provide a written assessment of their writing process, and one of the questions I ask students to respond to is what feedback they have for me. Three main themes appeared in their responses. Students frequently remarked that they found the project "enjoyable" or "fun," that it was an interesting shift from the reports and proposals that they wrote earlier in the term. They also reflected on the fact that they felt it was a challenge to try out an entirely new kind of writing; some felt they had learned more about writing by having to shift gears this way. Finally, students remarked that the assignment had "educational value," that by requiring them to look back at and reflect on their experiences about professionals that

they had learned more about being a professional. This was, of course, one of the stated goals of the assignment. Of course, written responses of this kind are suspect; there is always the possibility that students are simply telling the teacher what they believe he or she wants to hear. However, the fact that a large number of students have made rather similar comments, stressing that the assignment was enjoyable, that it made them think about writing, and that it made them think about their experiences, may be significant.

What lessons have we learned from this assignment? First, while essays are not frequently used in the workplace, and should probably not be taught as a genre of the workplace, they may have a place in the professional and technical writing class. The scholarly literature supports the notion that expressive, autobiographical writing is not only useful for developing writing and critical thinking skills, but may have applications to personal and professional development. The assignment can draw upon existing models for such essays described in Freshman Composition textbooks. Finally, students appear to enjoy and learn from writing about their experiences in the workplace. This is, of course, not an ending but a beginning, as I hope this discussion will spark further research in our scholarly and pedagogical communities.

APPENDIX 1:

The Autobiographical Essay Project Handout

Basic Concepts

You should write an autobiographical essay about an event or individual that influenced your development as a professional. In most cases, this will involve your experiences as a co-op, but other relevant experiences (other work, community service, living in a fraternity or sorority, etc.) are acceptable. You should describe the event or the individual and then describe its (or his or her) significance. The expected length is 1,000 to 1,500 words (4 to 6 double-spaced pages), but it may be longer, if necessary.

Possible Topics

- A situation involving a serious failure or important victory, either one that you were responsible for or one experienced by a team or organization to which you belong(ed).
- A person (supervisor, co-worker, etc.) who has contributed in a significant way to your growth as a professional (this will require you to explain how they have contributed to this development).
- A person or event that stands out in your mind as a negative example of professionalism, someone or something that has helped you define yourself by showing you what you never want to become or be like.

- Your first day or first week on the job and what you learned from it.
- A "typical day" or "typical week" that somehow sums up your experience as a co-op.
- A situation where you had to make an ethical choice, and the consequences of that choice.
- An examination of how you have developed because of the entire co-op experience, of the most important changes you see in yourself compared to who you were and how you acted before you came to Kettering (this is an acceptable variation on "event").

Some Tips for Success

- Unlike most of the assignments for this class, you can use a more creative and artistic style; of course, while you are free to experiment and take risks, you are still obliged to clearly communicate your ideas to your audience.
- Unlike most of the assignments for this class, you should focus on your own opinions, views, and feelings.
- An autobiographical essay should give a sense not only of what happened and why it is important, but who the author really is; a good way of thinking about an essay like this is that it should let someone know you, even if they never actually get a chance to meet you; as you review your drafts, ask yourself if you create a sense of who you are and what you stand for, if what some scholars call your "authentic voice" can be heard.
- This kind of essay is almost always improved by providing concrete details to illustrate ideas.
- Consider who your audience is and why you are writing to them—high school students who want to know what the co-op experience is like, other students who want your insights, co-op managers interested in your experiences and how to improve the co-op program, people at work whom you wish to thank, apologize to, etc.
- One way of thinking about this essay is to treat it like a "short story," with such literary elements as plot, description, characterization, dialogue between characters, and comments from the person who is telling the story. After all, an autobiography is a story; it just happens to be about real events and real people.

REFERENCES

1. J. Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1971.
2. J. M. Lauer, A. Lundsford, J. Atwill, T. Clemens, W. Hart-Davidson, D. Jacobs, L. Langstraat, L. Miles, T. Peeples, and N. Uber-Kellogg, *Four Worlds of Writing: Inquiry and Action in Context* (4th Edition), Addison Wesley Longman/Pearson Custom Publishing, Boston, Massachusetts, 2000.

3. R. B. Axelrod and C. R. Cooper, *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (8th Edition), Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, Massachusetts, 2008.
4. I. Karpiak, Writing Our Life: Adult Learning and Teaching Through Autobiography, *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 26:1, pp. 31-50, 2000.
5. S. J. Lepore and M. A. Greenberg, Mending Broken Hearts: Effects of Expressive Writing on Mood, Cognitive Processing, Social Adjustment and Health Following a Relationship Breakup, *Psychology and Health*, 17:5, pp. 547-560, 2002.
6. K. Rousmaniere, From Memory to Curriculum, *Teaching Education*, 11:1, pp. 87-98, 2000.
7. F. Elbaz-Luwisch, Writing as Inquiry: Storying the Teaching Self in Writing Workshops, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32, pp. 403-428, 2002.
8. L. Alvine, Shaping the Teaching Self Through Autobiographical Narrative, *The High School Journal*, 84:3, pp. 5-12, 2001.

Other Articles On Communication By This Author

- Gellis, M., Elements of Morality and Monstrosity in *Halloween*. *New Myth* 1, pp. 43-52, 2009.
- Gellis, M., Literary and Rhetorical Analysis of Role-Playing Game Supplements, in *Playing the Universe: Games and Gaming in Science Fiction*, D. Mead and P. Frelik (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lubin, Poland, 2007.
- Gellis, M., Teaching Research, Teaching Speech, in *Selections from the Speech Communication Teacher, 1999-2002*, S. E. Lucas (ed.), McGraw-Hill, Boston, Massachusetts, 2004.

Direct reprint requests to:

Mark Gellis
Kettering University
1700 University Ave.
Flint, MI 48504
e-mail: mgellis@kettering.edu