

There and Back Again: A Writer's Tale, by a Repeat Student

By Mark Ballou

When I was around eight years old, my favorite things to do in life were playing video games, and watching TV. I wish I could say that I was more intellectual than your average kid, but in actuality I was pretty typical in that sense. Fortunately for me, I had a Dad who understood the importance of a strong background in reading. So, at the age of eight, my Dad made a deal with me; I could watch one hour of T.V. for every one hour worth of reading I did, and I could play half an hour's worth of video games for every one hour of reading I did. At the beginning of this deal, I actually hated reading so much, I would sit down with a book in my lap and pretend to read for the required amount of time, without actually glancing at a single word on the page. This turned out to be a futile effort, as my Dad would thwart this tactic by asking me to summarize what I read to him. It was because of this pop quiz at the end of all my reading periods, that I begrudgingly would spend time reading.

I don't remember how long exactly it took me to begin to enjoy reading more than I enjoyed watching T.V. or playing *Super Sonic The Hedgehog* on Sega Genesis, but it wasn't long before I had a favorite book, *Once Upon a Time on a Plantation* by Nancy Rhyne. It was a story inspired by actual events in the pre-American Civil War era, about two boys, one black, one white, living on a plantation in the deep south. The writing was fairly simplistic, but I remember the stories were told so vividly, and the settings described in such detail, that I felt completely enraptured in the narrative. I must have read that book dozens of times during my childhood before I discovered *Harry Potter* at the age of 11, and the rest is history.

Believe it or not, I remember my first real triumph in writing when I was only ten years old. Oddly enough, this bit of writing was in my science class. I had to write a story about the process water goes through before becoming rain. The paper was supposed to be one page long, and the only criteria was for me to describe the process water goes through from evaporation, to rain drops. My paper was six pages long, and told a detailed story about a water droplet with friends and family, who then became a gas, lived a life in the clouds, and eventually returned to his home in a lake via the route of a winding river. My paper was so good, it was submitted into the young writer's club in my city, and won second place for all literature written for 5th grade and under. I attribute this early success, to my mimicry of books like *Once Upon a Time on a Plantation*. In Mike Bunn's essay "How to Read Like a Writer", he says to "carefully examine the things you read, looking at the writerly techniques in the text in order to decide if you might want to adopt similar (or the same) techniques in your own writing" (Bunn 72). When I wrote the story of the water droplet, I thought about the things I loved about my favorite book, and tried to write in the same way. I tried to be as descriptive as possible when describing the settings, and spent paragraphs describing the relationships the main character had with those around him. It was my hope that by doing this, anyone reading my story would get the same enjoyment reading my writing, as I got from reading Nancy Rhyne.

I can't thank my Dad enough for forcing me to read as a child. Growing up, I noticed that I was able to read through complex instructions and texts quicker and more effectively than my peers, I was more well-spoken, and writing assignments came a little easier to me. I don't believe it would be much of a leap, logically, for me to assume that I would never have gotten the job I held for nearly the last decade without such a strict childhood reading policy.

For the last nine years, I have been a Counterintelligence Agent for the U.S. Army. This occupation has some of the most stringent pre-requisites and qualifications of any position in the U.S. military. Chief among these abilities, is the ability to write quickly, and effectively. If you've ever seen *NCIS* on television, you've seen the show that follows the Navy equivalent of Army Counterintelligence. My peers and I used to laugh at that show, because for every one hour of cool things they do, they ignore the subsequent five hours of report writing that would be necessary in our position. Needless to say, having the pre-existing ability to write relatively effectively was a huge feather in my cap while attending the six-month course to train me to be in my job.

I attended the Counterintelligence Special Agent Course in July of 2008. This course was split into two main subjects. Both subjects had operational hands on applications, but all of these things would have a great deal of report writing immediately afterward. The tricky part, was the reports for these two subjects, were completely different in audience, and therefore style. The reports for the first subject, would be sent to the Counterintelligence Coordinating Authority in Washington D.C. These reports would have to have a strict adherence to a very particular writing guide. This was due to the fact that these reports we wrote could potentially be scrutinized by defense attorneys in criminal trials. Therefore, everything we wrote had to be meticulous, structured, un-biased, and without any sense of your own personal voice coming through in your text. This was difficult for me, because up until this point, I had always been encouraged by my Mother (an English teacher) to write creatively. Writing creatively was a simple task for me, because, as I did in my childhood, I would base my style of writing on some of my favorite authors, like J.R.R. Tolkien and R.A. Salvatore. I enjoyed the way these authors spent paragraphs describing certain scenes/sequences in their stories. It was that level of embellishment and descriptiveness that made me feel like I was actually in their story.

The second subject, differed entirely from the first in writing style. These reports would be submitted digitally to the entire intelligence community, and would be an account of information that one obtained first-hand from intelligence sources. This style of writing, while encouraged to be simplistic, and therefore easy to read, was also less strict, and was allowed to have your own voice in it. This was a little easier and more fun for me, but it was a challenge in that I had to completely change my writing styles to fit two separate audiences. This was the first time I ever had to write anything to anyone apart from an English teacher, and the growing pains were prevalent. In order to excel in this course, I had to adopt a very fluid and adaptive style of writing. In Lennie Irvin's essay, "What is 'Academic' Writing?" Irvin stresses the importance of adaptive writing when he says "You need to develop the skill of a seasoned traveler who can be dropped in any city around the world and get by. Each writing assignment asks you to navigate through a

new terrain of information, so you must develop ways for grasping new subject matter in order, then, to use it in your writing” (Irvin 9). It was this exact methodology that I had to learn at this stage in my writing experience. I had to learn to write in two entirely different ways, for two different audiences. Up until this point, I had only written the way I liked to write, and it had never failed me before. Now, I had to completely adjust my writing style based on the information given to me, and who I was submitting my paper to. To be honest, it was a bit disappointing, as it felt like I was no longer writing in the way that I enjoyed.

After graduating the course, I went to my first duty station in South Korea, and I quickly noticed how far ahead of my peers I was in my ability to produce quality reports at a relatively fast pace. After getting to know my peers better, I discovered that not a single one of them ever took the time to read unless they had to, and had never read out of the sheer enjoyment of doing so. I attributed my success in writing to the fact that, as someone who read quite a bit growing up, I simply had a wider pool of indexes to draw from during my writing. Part of the way being an avid reader helps in my writing ability, is by having certain writing styles in my head when I write things down in my own words. While I know I will likely never be as good a writer as some of my favorite authors growing up, I can still refer to the way they wrote stylistically, and incorporate that into my own writing to make things a bit simpler for me. It’s almost like having to write a speech full of motivational passages and already having a list of idioms in your head that you can draw on.

Even as I glance back over this paper, as I write it, I notice some of the same writing patterns I’ve displayed since I was writing as a child. For example, I can get overly wordy, and embellish on sentences unnecessarily, probably out of an effort to sound more intelligent. I remember my Mom would always give me a hard time about that very fact, and would encourage me to write in a way that I would normally speak. Unfortunately, her directives backfired, and my speech just became more convoluted in an effort to pair the way I conversed, with my style of writing. In an effort to fix this, I would often try to insert a bit of humor into my writing. I don’t know how exactly to describe the mental effect this had on my writing, but having a joke in my head while I wrote, tended to keep my writing more relatable when reading it back.

For example, between the years of 2014 and 2015, every one of my intelligence reports in South Korea had the word “nefarious” in it. I noticed that a lot of people in my job field really enjoyed using the word “nefarious” so I made sure that it was in every one of my reports. Having this little inside joke with myself made me stay a bit more personable in my writing style, like I was having a conversation with someone and trying to subtly let them in on my private joke. It wasn’t until January of 2015, that a report reviewer finally commented on one of my reports regarding my continued use of the word that I switched to the word “abreast” in all my proceeding reports.

I don’t mean to imply that a Special Agent in the United States military performing classified intelligence operations in southeast Asia wasn’t taking his job seriously. I will bring up one of my reports as an example of my writing proficiency, and will hopefully make the reader of this text feel a little better about where their tax dollars are going in relation to our military budget. Several



of my reports collected multiple accolades from the intelligence community, but there was one in particular that was very well received. I had collected information regarding terrorist activity; however what made this report so important was not just the facts in the information, but the implication of those facts. Unfortunately, the implications of this information were based in conjecture, and not outright facts. In essence, I was trying to ensure the reader understood the importance of this information, despite it being largely speculative in nature. This was a bit of a tall order to achieve that type of inference in reports that were required to have just a “Who, What, Where, When, How.” I spent hours on this report trying to make sure that the gravity of the information I collected was understood, while still ensuring an unbiased and non-opinionated product. In Kathleen Yancey’s essay “Reflection in the Writing Classroom”, Yancey discusses the importance of reflection, in terms of writing. In the essay, Yancey discusses the process of reflection. “When we reflect, we call upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive, putting these into play with each other: to help us understand how something completed looks later, how it compares with what has come before, how it meets stated or implicit criteria, our own, those of others” (Yancey 120) While I was writing this report, I was juggling all the things Yancey mentions in the above passage. I was comparing this report to what had worked for me in past reports, as well as trying to adapt to a new situation, while ensuring it continued to meet the required criteria. This was a test that I was able to pass successfully, as my report received accolades from multiple intelligence agencies, including the upper echelons of the Central Intelligence Agency. Because of my success with this report, I started to incorporate some of the things I learned while writing it into the way I wrote all my future reports.

I have noticed, since returning to a field in which writing is encouraged to be more individualized, and less militarized, that my style of writing is not the same as it was before I joined the Army. Writing in a style that is supposed to be more succinct and efficient, than creative and expressive, for nearly a decade, will undoubtedly have an impact on the way you write. For me, I am happy to be returning to an environment where your own voice is encouraged to come out in your writing, and I don’t have to put hidden words in my reports, just to make sure a piece of my personality exists in it.

Mark is an IT Major who lives in Boston, Massachusetts. Mark credits his parents for his life-long love of reading, and at a young age he loved writers, like J.R.R. Tolkien and R.A. Salvatore, who “in addition to having abbreviations for their first names, share an affinity for spending pages and pages describing the visuals in their books.” Mark is an Army veteran with nine years of service, and he has spent most of his adult life writing as a Counterintelligence Agent for the US Army, employing his meticulous style into his written work. In this essay for his Composition I class, Mark was asked to write more creatively than he had in the past, and it enabled him to revitalize his love of writing and his desire to “include my own unique voice in my writing.” Mark has lived in 8 different states and 4 different countries while serving in the Army over the last decade, but he has deep roots in New England and hopes to settle down here after finishing his degree.



Works Cited

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