

## Words... and Words... and Words...

When I ask myself on occasion why I love reading like I do, I never really know how to answer that. The answer that feels right to me currently is that I love story; I love experiencing life through another's eyes and through that coming to have a deeper understanding of our shared world and what it means to navigate it well. But I've loved reading for as long as I can remember, and much as I'd like to be able to boast that I had such philosophical motivations as a six-year-old... honestly, at that point I pretty much just thought it was fun. And at other times in my life, I've read for much more selfish and even outright unhealthy reasons—losing yourself in other people's problems can be a pretty good way to block out ever having to think about your own...

But besides all that, it isn't just stories that I love, either. I grew up reading encyclopedias and winning spelling bees. I read obsessively, anything and everything, even while walking around the house or brushing my teeth (...I still do sometimes...). If I didn't have a book beside me at the breakfast table, I would read the cereal box—never mind that my mom was a bit of a health nut and tended to buy “adult” cereals with less exciting labels... I'd read the nutrition facts. I can come up with plenty of explanations for why I'm fascinated by each of these different aspects of language, but ultimately, the reality is that I'm fascinated by *all* of them to an extent that demands something more satisfying than just a patchwork of disjointed reasons. Yet that's all I have. I can point to reasons why I like some individual thing at this particular time, but beyond that... I'm just a word person. I am and always have been a logophile beyond any rhyme or reason.

I don't know if that was inevitable or remarkable given my childhood. On the one hand, I was raised in a house with probably thousands of books. I was the oldest child of two crazy

smart highly motivated people who had all the time in the world to worry over how quickly I was learning things and who made sure that I could read by age 4. I had a classical education that emphasized reading “real books” over textbooks and lectures (my history classes were 80% just assigned reading lists). I had heavily limited screen time and short school days that left me with hours every day to entertain myself. At the same time, though, I was the child of two electrical engineers who had given up artistic dreams because they worried about money and were now so busy raising a family that they rarely read for their own benefit or pleasure. I had five younger siblings who never particularly valued literature growing up—my three oldest brothers practically never read *anything* voluntarily for most of their childhoods (and my two youngest siblings hadn’t yet learned to read when I moved out). When I started looking at college majors, my parents seemed to find it hard to believe that I didn’t have *any* non-literary interests I might pursue as my career while continuing to love books as a hobby (like both of them had done with music), and pushed me hard to find something else to major in.

Regardless of the reasons behind it, this passion is obviously what brought me to what I’m doing now at the CommLab. A combination of reading constantly (I read nearly a hundred books a year when I started tracking it in high school—at which point my reading had *slowed* a bit due to increased responsibilities) and intensive grammar education from 3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade led me to have a very strong understanding of language conventions both intuitively and intellectually. Talking about language has long been one of my favorite things and getting paid to talk about language in a context where I would also be able to help people use it better and love it more... sounded pretty amazing to me.

It turned out it was amazing, but it was also somewhat more complicated of a transition than I had initially anticipated. I like how reading and writing leave me in control of the

situation—I can go at my own pace; I can go back and repeat an entire section; I can lose myself entirely in my activity and not worry about what anyone else is doing or thinking because in that moment, no one else is involved. Consulting, however, is a very different thing. I have to process questions within a few seconds, skim complex papers, and rapidly match each situation with something in my mental bank of “how to communicate” before my student concludes that I’m either completely incompetent or paying no attention to them. When I first started consulting, I often found myself hesitant when faced with this combination of necessary speed and my own uncertainty of how to engage with certain types of appointments.

Gradually, I realized the problem was that while I knew how to communicate well myself in most of the communication genres my students were working with, I didn’t know the genre of consulting in its own right. To help with this, I started doing a lot of reading about teaching and tutoring during the portions of my shifts when I wasn’t actively with a student. I also read about specific genres that I was less confident in—often I could *produce* work in those genres that represented my own personal style, but didn’t know how to explain the underlying principles or what real-world audiences were actually looking for. Reading the “rules” gave me a framework from which to share the intuition that experience had given me while also building up an even sturdier intuition from my new experiences.

I now have appointments all the time where I know a couple years ago my advice would have stayed fairly surface level and too specific to the project at hand for the student to really do much with it moving forward, but where I’m now able to ask questions that allow me to get closer to the heart of what the student needs and do more than just say, “I think you should make this change right here.” I find myself almost automatically doing the rapid processing tasks that were initially such a challenge, and not only while actually working in the center but throughout

my life—teaching at a camp this past summer, leading a Bible study at my church, or even just giving advice to a friend.

I still have room to grow, I know. Right now I'm particularly working on how to explain grammar and language issues without being prescriptive but while still giving useful information and context. This in itself is a huge step forward, though—when I first came in, I considered this one of my strongest areas of expertise. The fact that I've strengthened my formerly weak areas enough for this one (which I know I haven't gotten *worse* at) to have fallen behind is actually exciting.

That's one of the fun things about language—or, I guess, about education and even the world in general. There's always something more to learn, somewhere further to go. I'm seeing this a lot right now as I search for a full-time job. I'm not sure what exactly it is that I want to do or what the next phase of this story is going to look like, but I do know that there's a whole world of possibilities—and I know that the things I've learned at the CommLab will be part of the story that brought me there.