

Creative Writing in the Writing Center:

Is There a Difference Between Personal and Academic Writing?

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As an English major at Trinity College, I have three different areas of focus to choose from: Literary Studies, Creative Writing, and Literature and Film. Before making my decision, I wanted to test which area appealed to me most academically. So, I took the introduction to both of the concentrations I was interested in: ENG 260 (Intro Literary Studies), and ENG 270 (Intro Creative Writing). The classes possessed many of similarities, for both I needed to read from selected texts, critique and analyze readings, and produce writing. However, there was one significant difference I noted- if I needed help in ENG 260, I would go to the Writing Center. In ENG 270, I am much more hesitant to bring my work to the Writing Center. And now as a Writing Associate myself, I find this pattern continues. In the three months I have been a Writing Associate, I haven't seen a single creative writing assignment, while I would identify most of the sessions I have had as English related. In my curiosity, I reviewed the Writing Center Appointment Log, and discovered that this is not a problem unique to me. On the whole, the Writing Center receives far less appointments from the Creative Writing department as opposed to Literary Studies. This struck me as odd; as one of the only majors at Trinity that specifically caters to writers, it seems as though creative writing students should be pouring into the Writing Center. On our website it reads, "If you write, you belong here." Then why aren't Trinity's most passionate writers coming to the Writing Center?

I posit the reason for this is a long withstanding separation between personal and academic writing. Professors, students, and scholars of all types identify a stark difference

between the technical and structure focused elements of traditional academic writing and the looser, more artistically driven work done in creative writing classes. Critic and interviewer Gregory Light affirms my beliefs in his article, titled “From the Personal to the Public: Conceptions of Creative Writing in Higher Education.” Light notes that most scholars divide the two types of writing by identifying that academic writing is more reliant on “reproducing conceptions in which a student ‘uses meaning’, memorizes and reproduces material,” and creative writing exercises “transforming conceptions in which the student ‘makes meaning’, understands, and transforms material (Light 258).” Light seems to believe that there are inherent differences between what “regular” writers do and what creative writers do. I argue the opposite. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the difference between academic and creative writing is largely a manufactured idea that seeks to separate personal perspective from scholarly ideas and ignores how our personal viewpoints affect all of our writing. And in erasing these figurative lines between disciplines, I hope to illuminate how creative writers, like all writers at Trinity College, have a place in our Writing Center, and our Writing Associates are already equipped with the tools to help them.

In his review of his interviewees, Gregory Light recognizes what could be seen as a larger pattern that exists amongst academia. If there were any doubts to whether this claim was accredited or not, all one needs to do is review the System Statistics on Trinity’s Writing Center website, mywconline.com. In order to validate on Light’s theory, I looked at the current staff in both the Literary Studies Department, and professors or artists in residence of Creative Writing. Of the twenty-two staff members listed in the English departments staff, the Trinity website identifies only four professors who fit the latter category, and those are Professors Ciaran M. Barry, Lucy Ferris, Elizabeth Libbey, and Clare Rossini. The director of the Creative Writing

program is Professor Barry, and if one looks at the log of appointments, it appears that in the eleven years Barry has been on staff, only twenty-five students have come to the Writing Center with one of his assignments. Compare this to Professor Katherine L. Bergren, who has been a staff member at Trinity for only seven years and has accumulated 283 appointments to her name. Such a discrepancy is not a mere coincidence. Similar statistics can be seen across the rest of the department, with some Literary Studies professors having nearly three hundred appointments attributed to them. Meanwhile, the four current Creative Writing staff average roughly 18 appointments per professor.

Why is this the case? Professor of English at Ithaca Harriet Malinowitz believes that most English students, teachers, and academics view the two disciplines as completely separate, and beyond that, dependent on a different set of skills and ideals. “Depending on our own kind [of discipline],” Malinowitz writes in her article, *Business, Pleasure, and the Personal Essay*, “we may have radically different ideas on the purposes and promises of humanistic educations (Malinowitz 308).” She writes of her experiences as an English major, and how she herself fell victim to the notion that there was a separation of writing for passion and writing for academia. Malinowitz understood from a young age that the things she was personally interested in, like politics and activism, did not have a place in her schoolwork. She believed, at first, like so many others do, that an English degree is “self-indulgent work that was of no benefit to humanity (Malinowitz 305).” Now, as an adult with a PhD in English, Malinowitz discovers herself on the other side of the argument. Still finding herself with some residual guilt surrounding the choice of English as a degree, Malinowitz ponders why there is such a separation between what she considers “real writing” (namely fiction), and the writing she did to earn her degree.

Malinowitz believes that the crux of the argument lies here:

“Age old battles among the disciplines fragments are...colored by the same sort of dichotomous thinking about questions of use and value, noble toil and bourgeois decadence, livelihood and career, security and fulfillment that long plagued me. According to composition lore...the literature people have historically played the role of... ‘effete snobs’, while compositionists have been on the side of angels...takes us back to the poles of business and pleasure (Malinowitz 312).”

There is a fundamental difference between how a student who studies the safer, more economic, and well-intentioned route of what would be in Trinity’s rolodex, Literary Studies, and the free-spirited, hedonists that would major in Creative Writing. While this stereotype may not actually be accurate anymore, the foundation of these ideas affects how both groups interact with each other in an academic sense.

In his work, Gregory Light charts this very relationship, as well as the development of the study of Creative Writing, and its journey to carving its own niche in English academia.

“Historically,” Light writes, “it [creative writing] has not been regulated as suitable for study in higher education...resistance to its move into universities has traditionally surfaced in the form of arguments that creative writing is not serious and encourages self-indulgence (Light 260).”

From both Malinowitz and Light’s points of view, it’s clear to see that scholars’ view on creative writing is that it’s entirely separate from what they deem more ‘legitimate’ writing.

How does this relate to the Writing Center? At Trinity College, the Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric defines its mission on the school website: “our goal is to help students improve their writing skills. To that end, Writing Associates will help you identify significant issues with content or recurring patterns of error in your writing, and explain how to fix them rather than editing or rewriting your draft.” Based on this description, as well as my personal

experience as a Writing Associate, the Writing Center is a welcoming environment for passionate writers and diligent students across all disciplines. Then why are our numbers so lacking for creative writers? While we have addressed teachers and academics' perspectives as to why, Light posits that creative writers, majors or simply the causal class taker, view creative writing differently as a student as well. He theorizes at the base of this is "the assumption that creative talent is personal, natural, and instinctive: something that is neither taught, nor learned, nor adequately assessed (Light 260)." The mere presence of Creative Writing courses such as Creative Nonfiction and Advanced Creative Writing: Poetry negate this claim in some sense; at least at Trinity, Creative Writing is taught at several levels, with prerequisites for higher level courses, which then means it's safe to assume that students within the discipline are learning and developing skills. But the mentality Light writes about likely still persists amongst the student body, even subconsciously. In my creative writing class this semester, it was easy to see which students were taking the work seriously and which were truly gifted with the medium. This distinction, to my untrained eye, looked to be merely those with talent, and those without. I used to agree that those with skill in creative writing simply did not need the assistance of a Writing Associate, especially if that Writing Associate wasn't a Creative Writing major. I now realize that by that logic, I wouldn't be able to help any student with any work, unless they were bringing me solely literary analyses or papers on the Classical era of history.

After having read several lab reports during my brief time as a Writing Associate, I feel as though I had the skills to help any student from the get-go; it was only my internalized sense of intellectual inferiority towards STEM majors that had me underselling my abilities. The same reasoning should apply to all Writing Associates toward creative writing pieces. We are already armed with the skills we need to help a creative writing student. Because while creative writing

seems to bare the most of the author's inner thoughts, really all writing retains these perspectives. The hand of the author demands to be felt. Malinowitz shares her thoughts on the topic, writing, "the personal essay is also a form to which language and style- or what some would even dare to call "art" or "literariness"- are as crucially important as are logic and subject matter (Malinowitz 317)." She asserts that despite identifying the greatest difference between personal essays and response-driven papers is stylistic and artistic choices, the fundamental skills of theme, language, and voice are present in every piece of creative writing. And these, as indicated by the client report forms Writing Associates fill out after every appointment, are things we must be cognizant of, no matter the work we are reviewing.

After an appointment is completed through the Writing Center, Writing Associates complete the client report form, where we are asked to note what we discussed in our appointments: clarity of ideas, punctuation, grammar, and various other components of essay writing that are integral to any successful essay. A piece of creative non-fiction must have correct punctuation. A piece of fiction must have consistent use of tense. Admittedly, poetry can play with these rules more than any other style of creative writing- but depending on the form the poem is taking (sonnet, haiku, villanelle, etc.) the poem may have to abide by certain rules. I outlined several leading questions and elements to consider when tutoring each one of these three types of creative writing in the pamphlet I created, referencing sample questions from the Creative Writing textbook, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of the Craft*.

I do not expect creative writers to suddenly rush into the Writing Center. But I do believe if we start changing out attitudes towards creative writing appointments in general, we will slowly see a shift in the viewpoint of students on campus. Undoing long-held beliefs on what constitutes academic writing is an ongoing battle in many progressive educational and

pedagogical movements, and removing the dividing lines preventing voices from being heard is important work that all Writing Centers need to be an active part of. That means opening our doors and minds to types of writing that is more vulnerable and less comfortable for Writing Associates to read. Hopefully, we can keep encouraging more and more students to come to the Writing Center, and we can continue to cultivate a community of passionate and engaged writers at Trinity College.

Works Cited

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