

We've Gone Around the Sun Again—A Reflection on A Semester Well Spent

By Ethan Zillinger

The last semester has been very different for me, in terms of what you would call an “English” class. I’ve had classes that concentrate on essay writing, reading material, and being able to persuade an audience, but not a class where you actually sit down and think about what you’re doing. You don’t just get a grade on your papers, with large red pen marks carving out “DO BETTER” at the top of your page. You get constructive criticism and pointers on where your logic and arguments have trouble, not only from your professor, but from your fellow students. In reflection, I think it was very, very weird. In my writing style, though, I believe I’ve gained more than just a better ability to write and compose my thoughts, I gained the courage to write what I truly believe, and express it in the best way possible, and I believe I’ve learned from this semester that the most important thing in an essay is to stand for what you believe.

I have bad memories of paper one, so it will not appear in this portfolio. Paper two included a lot more of what I actually feel, and paper three came out sounding pretty good near the end, so you will see both of those, as well as the fourth paper, which I think also is a good paper. Paper two was the starting block for me, though: I hadn’t put much thought or effort into the first paper, so this second one was where I really wanted to shine. It was good, yes, but reflecting, it wasn’t formal or logical enough to suffice for the cause that I wanted it to defend. I remember my final paragraph was very deep, delving even into my religious beliefs, which made most of the critics that read it say that I was stretching the thesis into an entirely different ballpark. In truth, I was trying to maintain my same thesis; I was just using my faith to defend it. Instead of making sense of it, though, I completely removed the section, gutting my paper of one

of its key arguments. I felt guilty about it later, and I've implemented a bit of it back in, but I realized then that I'd made a mistake with my paper.

With my third paper, I got the rough draft back and saw that my defense in the last paragraph was being attacked again by many of the reviewers, which was where I contained another key argument. This time, I remember feeling a tingling of rebellion, anger towards the critics that didn't understand what I meant. This time I didn't back down. I took my point and drove full speed ahead with it, showing the Biblical and Platonic correlations with my paper. This paper received the first A on an essay that I've seen in years, and even before I had it handed back I felt a renewed confidence, like I had been awakened from a comfortable sleep of doing half-done work to actually writing how I wanted to write, how I wanted the paper to be. If they wanted my true opinions, I thought, I won't hold them back anymore, and I felt great after it. My fear of grades had been controlling my work for almost three years, and I finally was able to beat past it. This paper, probably my favorite of the three, stands in my portfolio as a testament to how I finally gained the courage to stand by my own words.

The fourth paper is like the third, except that, until now, it was unfinished, and still needed some polish and a paragraph or two before it was ready to really shine. The fourth displays, at least in my perspective, some of the changed spirit that came from the second draft of the third paper. The deep-seated belief in the thesis that "any effort to better society . . . can be make the same difference in others' lives" is carried all the way throughout the essay, never relenting to allow skepticism or cause logical discrepancies. I looked at it after it was completed, and realized this is how I want papers to be in the future: bold, uncompromising, without undermining what I believe in.

The essays aren't perfect, nor will I claim they're even close. Mostly, my errors lie in the realm of grammar and correct wording. My argument may be strong enough to convince many, but with the large number of grammatical errors my reviewers and I caught during this semester, it seems to detract quite a bit from the appeal of the essays. There were mistakes that I'd even miss on the second draft, and it took me until this portfolio draft to revise. Even now, I'm uncertain that it flows just how I'd like it, so I'd like to continue working on this into next semester. If I can make my arguments sound better, they can convince people of the thesis with less difficulty, and help people understand my position without having to trip over my poor choice of words. On the optimistic side, I am definitely improving in this area, making each paper easier to read than the last. I also had some problems earlier on in this semester with making illogical connections, especially when I tried to reword it and it continued to sound wrong. I trained myself to watch for arguments that could possibly be taken wrong, and I've been able to recover from a lot of the errors, but some of them still need to be explained. I often think that people will be able to make the same connections I make automatically, which is very self-centered, I've come to realize.

Whoever reads this portfolio, be it my professor or a fellow student, understand that I stand behind everything written here, at this point in my life. I can't go back from here and change what I've said, but I can stand in the surety that I believe in something right here and now. I had the ability to stand and say what I actually meant, no longer letting a good grade guide my thoughts on paper: I simply knew I was doing something right for once. What does it matter if you gain grades, reputation, or anything else, but lose what you believe in by not standing for it? You can lose all of those in a moment, snatched away by some unexpected event. What would happen if your dad died tomorrow, or if your financial aid gets cut and you have to

transfer to another school? Your life will be changed forever, and that half-baked effort you put on page will be all your professors will remember you by. If you can't stand for what you believe in an essay with a limited audience, how will you stand for what you believe when you have real life situations that challenge you? This is not a joke anymore, this is not a game, and it is not even practice, this is college. You learn how to do your job here, because in your occupation and life, you will be confronted with many of these same difficult issues. The only way to be ready for the world is to have answers at hand that you actually believe in and can defend readily.