

Creativity and the Academic Essay
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At Tuesday’s Early College Experience English Conference, Erick Piller and I ran a break-out session on the place of creative writing in the writing classroom. Erick (who deserves the credit here) asked the teachers to explain what makes an essay “creative.”

I wrote that what makes an essay creative is voice. It’s the difference between “good enough” writing and “intrepid” writing, to quote Lynn Bloom. It’s the difference between this: “Unethical behavior is common in the financial world. Bernie Madoff was one of the most unethical financiers ever. Madoff’s unethical behavior landed him in prison and led to his son’s suicide.” And this: “On December 11, 2010, exactly two years after his father Bernie confessed to running the largest Ponzi scheme in US history, Mike Madoff hanged himself in his apartment while his two-year old son slept in the next room.”

This example comes from some workshopping I was doing with my students last week. It’s not a word-for-word draft and revision from a student, but my remembered paraphrase. She’s writing about greed and *The Great Gatsby*.

As I explained to the student and to her classmates, there is nothing wrong with that first draft. It’s absolutely fine. Accurate. Clear. Grammatically correct. But exciting? No. It’s toast for breakfast. It’s an 8 PM bedtime. It’s just one small glass of wine with dinner.

I had a different student in my office this afternoon for a writing conference. She’s struggling with the same issue. Her writing is completely competent but we’re trying to get her beyond competent into something exciting, and she’s having a hard time giving herself permission. I shared with her a piece I read this morning in the *New York Times* on the troubling rise in adolescent anxiety.

Here’s a selection from the article: “Over the last decade, anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services. In its annual survey of students, the American College Health Association found a significant increase—to 62 percent in 2016 from 50

percent in 2011—of undergraduates reporting ‘overwhelming anxiety’ in the previous year. Surveys that look at symptoms related to anxiety are also telling. In 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at U.C.L.A. began asking incoming college freshmen if they ‘felt overwhelmed by all I had to do’ during the previous year. In 1985, 18 percent said they did. By 2010, that number had increased to 29 percent. Last year, it surged to 41 percent.

Those numbers—combined with a doubling of hospital admissions for suicidal teenagers over the last 10 years, with the highest rates occurring soon after they return to school each fall—come as little surprise to high school administrators across the country, who increasingly report a glut of anxious, overwhelmed students.”

This is excellent prose, but you’re probably thinking I’m undermining my own argument because it sounds more like the example I provided from the student’s first draft, and you’d be partly correct. The difference is that this section isn’t the lead for the article. It’s from roughly the middle of the eighth paragraph to the middle of the ninth.

Here’s the lead paragraph: “The disintegration of Jake’s life took him by surprise. It happened early in his junior year of high school, while he was taking three Advanced Placement classes, running on his school’s cross-country team and traveling to Model United Nations conferences. It was a lot to handle, but Jake—the likable, hard-working oldest sibling in a suburban North Carolina family—was the kind of teenager who handled things. Though he was not prone to boastfulness, the fact was he had never really failed at anything.”

I could provide many other examples, from news journalism but also from popular journals. And I’m not trying to bash academic writing here, per se, but perhaps I am bashing the way we teach academic writing or what we accept in academic writing. Really good academic writing should have voice, too.

So often we pride ourselves on moving away from the five-paragraph essay model when all we’ve really done is give students permission to write more paragraphs. The model exists in many other ways, like the formulaic lead I wrote about last week and critique here.

That formulaic, good enough stuff is not worthless. Those are reliable tools to have in your toolbox, to use Faulkner’s metaphor. But it’s going to take more than that to get anybody other than your English teacher—and maybe your mother—to read past the first paragraph.