

Autoethnography

For this assignment, you will examine yourself and your own writing processes and write an autoethnography in which you describe them. Your method will be to record (preferably with video and audio) your complete writing process as you complete a writing assignment for a class. Your purpose is to try to learn some things about your actual writing practices that you might not be aware of and to reflect on what you learn using the terms and concepts you've read about in this class.

Object of Study and Collecting Data

To make this assignment as useful as possible, you need to plan ahead, so figure out what you will be writing for this or other classes in the next few weeks, and make a decision about what you will study. Consider the following:

- What kinds of assignments are easiest or most difficult for you to write?
- What kinds of assignments would be the most useful to examine yourself writing?

Before beginning your project, make sure that you know how to use your computer or other device's audio and/or video recording systems.

As you write the assignment that you will study, record yourself every time that you work on it – this includes even times when you are thinking and planning for it, or when you are revising. Keep the following in mind:

- You may not be near your recording device(s) when you are planning; if that is the case, then keep a log in which you note your thoughts about the assignment.
- When you sit down to type the paper, think out loud the entire time. This will feel strange, and it will take some effort. Do your best.

- Try to externalize everything you are thinking.

When you have completely finished writing the assignment whose writing process you're studying, listen to or view the recording of yourself and transcribe it. This means typing everything that you said on the tape, even the "ums" and "ahs." It will be helpful to double space (or even triple space) the transcript so that you can make notes on it.

Analyzing Your Data

Alone or with some classmates, come up with a code to help you study your transcript. To consider what categories or elements of writing process you might want to include in your code, look back through the readings you've done in this class. What did our various authors choose to study about people's writing processes? Some suggestions for things you might include would be notes about context (where and when you wrote, what distractions you faced, your attitude, any deadlines, etc.), codes for planning, brainstorming, large-scale revision, small-scale revision, pausing, and so on.

What you want is a code that will help you understand what's happening when you write. Beware of the following potential pitfalls:

- If the code is too vague, you won't learn anything at all.
- If the code is too detailed, you might never get done coding.

We recommend coming up with a code with some classmates, and then trying to use that code on a practice transcript that your instructor provides (please ask him for one). This will help you see if the code is useful.

Once you have settled on a code, use it to analyze your transcript.

- You might get a box of highlighters of different colors, and use each color to highlight the parts of the text that correspond to parts of the code (for example, pink is for planning).
- You could simply underline parts of the transcript and label them in shorthand (P = planning).
- If you used a computer, you could search for key phrases in the text and mark each occurrence by using the software's "reviewing" feature to insert a comment in the margin.
- You could use free or low-cost coding and data analysis software such as Dedoose to upload your transcript and label different parts of it with codes you input, which allows you to generate helpful visualizations of how your various codes interact with the data.

Once you have coded the transcript, go back and consider these questions:

- What is interesting about what you found? What immediately jumps out at you?
- Did you do some things a lot, and other things rarely or never? Which codes do you see frequently or little at all?

Like some of the authors in this class, you might make some charts or tables for yourself in order to visually explore what percentage of time you spent on various activities.

Planning and Drafting

What are you going to write about? You don't need to go into excruciating detail about everything you coded. Instead, you should decide what you want to claim about what you found. For example:

- How would you describe your writing process?

- What are the most important take-home points from your analysis?
- Are there aspects of your process that are definitely impacted by technologies like instant messaging, social networking, Skype, or even word-processing?

Based on the patterns that emerge from your analysis of data, decide what your claims will be and then return to your analysis to select data that give evidence of those claims.

By now, from discussions in class and with your instructor you should have a sense of what genre you'll write your report in, and in deciding that, you should know your audience, purpose, and exigence as well. Will you write about your findings in an informal reflective essay in which you discuss your process and compare yourself to some of the writers in this class, or write a more formal, researched argument, using an intro/background/methods/analysis/discussion structure? Or will you write in some other genre?

You'll definitely want to plan your genre before you begin drafting, since your drafting processes will vary by genre. If you are writing the reflective essay, you are most likely writing for yourself (writing to learn) and to share what you learn with fellow student writers and your instructor, for the purpose of improving your writing processes and abilities. Such reflection is often best "drafted toward" by knowing the main claims you want to make and striking out on your writing, understanding that you'll be discovering and learning along the way and will probably revise extensively in order to reach a consistent message from beginning to ending of your piece.

If you will be writing a more scholarly research article, you might begin by outlining the various sections of your paper: In your introduction, what other research will you cite? Whose work provides important background information for your study? What is the gap or niche that your study fills? How will you describe your research methods? What are the main claims you

want to make in the findings? One trick that some writers use is to write headings for each section, with main claims underneath. Then the writer can go back and write one section at a time in order to break up the writing.

Once you have a “shitty first draft,” revise it to make it a little more coherent. Then share it with some classmates, being sure to tell them what genre you wrote and what concerns or issues you’d like them to read for.

What Makes It Good?

The purpose of this assignment is for you to try to learn some things about your actual writing practices that you might not have been aware of, and to reflect on what you learned using the terms and concepts you’ve read about in this class. Does your paper demonstrate that this purpose was achieved? In addition, your readers will want to learn something from having read your paper. Does your finished text clearly convey your insights and findings?

A caveat: We have found that some students just go through the motions when they complete this assignment, but don’t make an attempt to learn something about themselves as writers. When those students write their papers, they have very little to say about “results” or “insights.” They tend to say pretty clichéd things like “I am distracted when I write. I should try to write with fewer distractions.” In general, if the “insights” of the paper were obvious to you before you ever conducted the autoethnography, then you have not fully engaged in the project and are unlikely to receive a good grade on it.

Alternative Assignment

Instead of studying yourself writing one assignment, compare yourself writing two very different kinds of texts (maybe in school and out of school, or humanities and science) and analyze them to see whether – or how – your process changes depending on what you write.