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Inquiry into the use of autobiographical writing in the college composition

Carol Ann Miter

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INQUIRY INTO THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Carol Anne Miter
August 1991
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Approved by:

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August 5, 1991

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, composition theory has revolved around the writing process and composition specialists have paid close attention to its particular elements. Because of this, the study of individual rhetorical discourse modes has been somewhat de-emphasised. Meantime, the value and role of each mode becomes a critical issue as the demographics of our nation's institutions of higher learning change significantly. In this eleventh hour of the twentieth century, pedagogical practices need to be influenced by the affective and cognitive factors which will encourage and facilitate students in composition courses.

The mode of autobiographical discourse is a component of many college composition courses, but often instructors have given little credence to its importance. Instructors need to be aware and understand the definition of this mode in order to incorporate it properly. Many composition specialists, such as Don Murray and Lynn Bloom, recognize that students find an easier access to writing, a natural voice, and as well they discover new ways of learning knowledge and understanding concepts when given permission to write in the autobiographical discourse mode. In addition, this mode of writing promotes a smooth transition into other modes of discourse.
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The creation, production, and presentation of a thesis is an experience involving more people than the writer or the researchers whose work informed the writing. Many others contribute—some as advisors, others as cohorts, several as cheerleaders, and a rare few who do all of the above. My husband, Tom, is one of those rare few. For him I am most grateful; I could not have done it without him. Twenty-six years ago he married a high school dropout—the years have brought quite a change. When I open my dictionary to the term "soul mate" his photograph is displayed. The ancient prophet aptly described Tom when he wrote, "Your friend who is as your own soul . . . " (Deuteronomy 13:6). At the moment when all others become distracted, disillusioned, or disinterested in my journey, Tom's endurance to cheer perfectly aligns with my energy to continue pursuing a path seldom traveled. So now it's time for me to cheer for him.

I am also grateful to my advisory committee, Margaret Doane, Carol Haviland, and Susan Meisenhelder, who gave expertise and support during summer hours that had been reserved for leisure. Margaret Doane assisted me three years ago as I entered the university and has now guided me over the final slippery miles to the exit that is really an entrance. Throughout my graduate studies, Carol Haviland, has been an example of what the Proverb writer meant when
he wrote, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (27:17). My thanks, also, to Greg Gilbert, who is the epitome of a cohort. Together we have traversed the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful of my first year of teaching. Also, thank you to Michael Montano, for encouraging me through the dilemma of math at RCC and verbalizing belief that I would return there as a colleague; September will bring reality to his belief. I am also grateful to all of my professors at CSUSB and RCC; my success story is partially attributed to each one. Reenie McConahay has cheered for six years, thanks. Finally, I thank God, Whose "still small voice" speaks to me no matter what discourse community I am in.

What is a thesis? It's a tandem bicycle gathering dust as my husband rides solo, in hopes that I will someday ride again. It is the sweet little therapeutic giggles of two 2 year-old granddaughters and the redheaded one scribbling with Crayolas at the other end of my desk, jabbering, "Bom-ma, I luv you." To my grown children, Shawn and Dede, it is a change in our family history; another ribbon of legacy; it is also proof that they too can change their worlds. Most of all, it is a tangible symbol of closure on another chapter in my life.

Clean white pages are waiting for me; I look forward to the next chapter. And finally, I need to say, "It doesn't get any better than this, and then it does!"
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page ............................................. i
Signature Page ...................................... ii
Abstract ............................................. iii
Acknowledgements ................................. iv
Table of Contents ................................. vi
Chapter 1: Definition and Introduction ......... 1
Chapter 2: Private Writing and Personal Writing . 13
Chapter 3: Composition: Freshman and Advanced .. 26
Chapter 4: Implications and Conclusion ........... 41
Works Cited ......................................... 47
CHAPTER 1
DEFINITION AND INTRODUCTION

It is no great perception to say that we disagree about why we teach writing and what kinds of writing we should teach and how we should go about it: in short, the discipline is in disarray.

Gordon Taylor

Within academia, the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is a main objective of administrators, faculty, and students. Because of this objective, it is vital for educators to acknowledge that there is a diverse population and a variety of learning styles represented within the body of students inhabiting America's institutions of higher learning. The need for all students to receive equal access to knowledge requires instructors to be creative in their courses. Like teaching in all disciplines, composition teachers need to be aware of the changing American demographics. In the 1990s, gender, ethnicity, age, and re-entering are increasingly important factors influencing pedagogical practices. In regard to teaching composition, Linda Peterson has noted, "We need to be conscious that assigning only one kind of essay in a writing course may give a grade advantage to some students, even if we cannot identify the specific reasons for this
advantage..." (173). Also of importance is that the students within our institutions not only arrive with great diversity, they also face divergent audiences because of their various personal and professional goals (Agatucci 138). Because of this diversity, and in order to assist and equip students to meet their goals, it is important that composition specialists recognize the necessity of offering a wealth of choices in writing programs, and classroom teachers need to acknowledge and offer a wide range of written exercises and assignments. Therefore, educational institutions that value the scope of diversity represented in the student body will include autobiographical discourse as a part of the composition curriculum.

Nonfiction is embodied in college composition courses. While the expository and argumentative modes of writing are the mainstays of the curriculum, professionals recognize a full gamut of potential for written expression. William Zinsser believes that "the various forms that nonfiction can take [are] the interview, travel writing, science writing, business writing, sports, criticism, humor, memoir, and all the hybrid species that can result from mixing them together" (60). In the most recent edition of his book, On Writing Well, Zinsser discusses the issue of defining literature and reminds his readers that our national literary desires have changed considerably since
the nineteenth century, and that "the great preponderance of what writers now write and sell, what book and magazine publishers publish, and what readers demand is nonfiction" (54). He refers to nonfiction as "New literature" (57). In this third edition of his book, he also devotes a new chapter entirely to autobiographical writing.

The range of writing within composition courses should offer students opportunities to become familiar with and possibly excel in writing forms that will be expected throughout their academic endeavors and lifetimes. In fact, Agatucci asserts that because educators value both the future success of their students and the experience these students bring with them to the institution, autobiographical writing must take a legitimate place in education (138). When instructors withhold personal experience as an option, what do students have left to write about that they are familiar with? DiPardo insists, "Writers must perceive continuity between the people they have been and those they are becoming... how can this happen if these students' stories are not shared and considered--if their experiences outside of school are not seen as places from which to build." (45)

Agatucci adds that the autobiographical discourse mode offers students creative "ways of writing and learning in the academy... [and gives] students new formal and
substantive choices" (138).

Learning to write autobiographical discourse also provides an opportunity for self-analysis. Freshmen have the potential, when writing about their personal worlds, to see academic importance there as well. When the freshman composition course is defined as a "service" to the rest of the academy to instruct students in the rigors of expository and argumentive writing, students are deprived of learning an important discourse. Agatucci states, "It negates the value of private, personal, or informal writing as literature and as legitimate and important ways of learning in the academy" (Lecture 4). DiPardo elaborates, asserting that it is liberating for some students to realize "that expository, essayist prose does not constitute the supreme accomplishment of the human mind and spirit" (50). Initially for freshmen, the act of writing can be inhibited by the need to do library research for content material or by having to reveal opinions or beliefs in order to convince the reader in an argumentative/persuasive essay. When students begin writing with depersonalized content, instructors often reap the havoc of this prose when, as DiPardo graphically describes, the experience of reading their essays is "comparable to a summer's stroll in the Sahara" (46).

Private writing, personal expression, personal experience essays, first-hand biography, autobiography, and
memoir are just some of the terms collected in the sieve of autobiographical writing in the college composition course. Some scholars question whether there is any writing that is not autobiographical. Some think not. Don Murray recently articulated this view: "I have my own peculiar way of looking at the world and my own way of using language to communicate what I see. . . . All writing, in many different ways, is autobiographical" (67).

However, in most college writing courses, autobiographical discourse is dealt with as one particular rhetorical mode of writing. Occasionally, and possibly more often in recent years, elective courses have been offered in autobiographical writing, but it is usually one section or unit in the quarter- or semester-long writing course. There have been many opinions, debates, and arguments voiced over this particular mode of writing. The discussions involve the whole of autobiographical writing as well as the parts that comprise the whole. The definition and value of this discourse needs to be clarified, examined, and determined in order for coherent discussion to ensue. The role of individual portions of this discourse mode will be explored in later portions of this thesis.

The term "autobiographical" is often equated in the mind of the listener or reader with "autobiography." The blurring of these terms has diminished the importance of
this discourse mode because the world of autobiographical discourse contains many ways for authors to express themselves. This discourse is not restricted to "autobiography," which is the linear telling of one's life history. When the door to autobiographical discourse is opened, the opportunity to write takes many shapes and forms. David Bleich claims that "to write is not a single identifiable thing;" (10) that is certainly true in reference to autobiographical writing.

Identifying at least six definite forms within the mode of autobiographical discourse is possible and then each form can be individually improvised. Private writing is one form in the multi-faceted discourse, and it is as its name proclaims, not for public consumption. And at least one university professor thought its value worthy of a course specifically designed to study such things as writing in the margins of books, checkbook registers, calendars, letters, and diaries (Hilligoss 124). A second mode, personal expression (at least for this study), refers to the writing composed in journals, notebooks, reaction sheets, and evaluative analyses. The majority of this writing is only occasionally observed by others. A third variation, the personal experience essay, is the reflective narrative story often required for composition courses. This type of student essay often contains the story of a significant memorable event such as a school graduation,
wedding ceremony, moving to a new location, being fired from a job, a serious accident, a divorce, or a death. Another form, first-hand biographies, is also often written to fulfill composition course requirements; these are essays about a person or people the author is or has been closely associated with. The subjects of this type of writing usually are a parent, grandparent, sibling, mate, a former teacher, coach, boss, or significant other. In these first-hand accounts, "the narrator's presence is understated but continuous; although the ostensible subject is another person, the piece is very much 'about' the author." (Waugh 147). Finally, autobiography and memoir are both longer collections of writing. These two types of expression have begun constituting larger areas of floor space and economic gain in the bookstore and publishing market because of the growing popularity of nonfiction. Some people cannot delineate the difference in these two forms of writing, and others blur them, but some publishing experts denote a distinguishable difference between the two. However, Zinsser, simply defines autobiography as a story that spans the author's entire life (211). It is a chronological telling of a person's lifetime. Memoirs, on the other hand, are not necessarily in chronological order. Zinsser favors memoir when he states explicitly in the introduction of his book that it
is "one of nonfiction's most appealing forms" (xii). He explains that "the memoir writer takes us back to some corner of his or her past . . . it's an act of writing frozen in a unique time and place . . . it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition" (212). Therefore, the organization of a memoir is for emphasis, rather than for chronology.

So autobiographical writing offers multiple options to a community of writers, and this vast variety should be considered for college composition courses. The choice of forms is complemented by the fact that teachers of basic, freshman, advanced, and elective composition courses have explored and found benefits in teaching this discourse. Anne DiPardo, who teaches in a two-year community college, suggests, "As subjective meaning is most often contained in student's stories, we need to know more about the style and substance of these stories and about the process by which they can come to inform academic discourse" (51). For the past decade or more, a central issue in the composition field has been the juxtaposition of the languages of autobiographical and academic discourse. Peter Elbow has justly defined academic discourse as "the discourse that academics use when they publish for other academics. . . . [Students] will need it for the papers and reports and exams they'll have to write . . . throughout their college career. . . ." (Reflections 135). Many teachers of
composition believe it benefits the students when the
dichotomy of autobiographical and academic discourse is
diminished and amalgamation is encouraged. The composite
then creates a language that is neither formal or informal,
but a pleasant blending of both, as in this thesis.

In her 1990 Conference on College Composition and
Communication presentation, Cora Agatucci suggested,
"Autobiographical writing presented as a creative mode may
help many of our students find public voices and develop
effective writing processes." Because academic language is
new and difficult for many students, a primary goal for
educators should be to provide access for students into
that mode. Elbow asserts, "the best test of whether a
student understands something is if she can translate it
out of the discourse of the textbook and the discipline
into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms" (Reflections
137). Many practitioners believe autobiographical
discourse is able to provide an entrance, ease the
difficulty, and accelerate students' use of academic
language and increase their knowledge of subject matter
"because we find in the reflective or familiar essay a
model for bridging the gap between experience and
abstraction, the personal and the public voice" (Anderson
14). This "model" puts tremendous value on autobiogra-
phical writing and its role in shortening the distance the
learner must travel from discourse mode to discourse mode.
More teachers are giving credence to autobiographical writing because of the strength displayed in public essays. This can be partially attributed to the extra effort many students put forth because of the self-revealing nature of the composition. Professionals in the field claim there is a historical trend moving toward the favoring of personal experience writing and that the trend has been reaffirmed by composition specialists: The examples of good writing chosen by leading teachers for the volume What Makes Writing Good, for example, turn out to be—in over 75% of the cases—versions of the personal-experience essay... (Peterson 170)

As well, students recognize and proclaim improvement in their written assignments because of their private and less-public forms of journal writing (Agatucci 139).

If composition teachers believe that writing is a way of learning, a way of making meaning, then ascribing to a pedagogical goal that would serve students beyond their years of formal education is critical. By teaching autobiographical discourse, writing instructors further prepare students for their life beyond the boundaries of academia. Helping a student achieve a high grade level while writing within the educational institution is commendable, but as Elbow so aptly states, "Life is long and college is short" (Reflections 136). Autobiographical
discourse allows students numerous opportunities to connect with audiences because many essays are "likely to resonate in the experience of any reader, further increasing its power. . ." (Waugh 146). Because of this power, the discourse is attracting attention and gaining advocates who are writers and others who are readers; it is also a mode of writing that has the duality of offering entrance to the beginning writer and at the same time inviting the advanced writer to look further and deal with the complexity that comes with "reliance on memory . . . [offering] us the only prose situation in which writing and speaking jostle each other for equal space and attention" (Dickerson 139). So then, when composition instructors lead students through the threshold and into the mode of autobiographical discourse, the diversity of its components has the potential to stretch and strengthen writers.

This thesis will explore and explain the private, personal, and public writing elements of autobiographical discourse. In addition, the possible ways to incorporate the different varieties of autobiographical discourse in freshman and advanced composition courses will be discussed. For the beginning or freshman writer, autobiographical discourse seems to be a world of its own, as do expository and argumentative/persuasive discourses. However, as students become acquainted, experienced, and comfortable with autobiographical writing they discover
that they do have something to write about. As well, they realize an ability and skill to create their own natural voices, rather than the sterile, artificial language students often begin with. This naturalness helps usher and ease the student writers into further writing and other discourse modes. Thus, autobiographical discourse is essential for improving students' writing abilities. At a complex level, advanced students use autobiographical writing to infiltrate and mesh with other discourse modes. The advanced students then can utilize its integrative quality to enhance their writing in all modes of discourse.

The definitions posited in this thesis should eliminate the blurring that so often happens between "autobiographical discourse" and an element of that mode referred to as "autobiography." Finally, it should be noted that all writing instructors may not want to use every aspect of autobiographical discourse, but assimilating a portion of this discourse into their course content will be advocated in this thesis.
CHAPTER 2
PRIVATE WRITING AND PERSONAL WRITING

Sometimes you get a line, a phrase, sometimes you're crying, or it's the curve of a chair that hurts you and you don't know why, or sometimes you just want to write a poem, and you don't know what it's about. I will fool around on the typewriter. It might take me ten pages of nothing, of terrible writing, and then I'll get a line, and I'll think, "That's what I mean!" What you're doing is hunting for what you mean, what you're trying to say. You don't know when you start.

Anne Sexton

Having introduced and defined autobiographical writing as a whole, it is now necessary to examine the parts separately. Doing this will demonstrate that the parts do constitute more than the whole and the role and value of each member will become apparent with the exploration and inspection. Diary and journal writing are choices many students make on their own; on the other hand, many students never use these avenues of writing and are not even familiar with them. Composition teachers who believe that education is a lifelong process of self-discovery, a process of personal growth and change that continues after
students leave the classroom, are remiss if they do not acquaint and assign their students this form of autobiographical discourse.

Providing explanation and information for students about private and personal writing is suggested in many rhetoric textbooks, and it is the instructor's choice whether to spend class time to deal with it or not. Numerous composition specialists insist that its use as a portion of the course requirement is essential. James Moffett's words should be heeded, "'Learning and learning how to' result in very different kinds of knowledge" (3). Students who are fearful of writing and believe they have nothing to say or contribute have had their thinking and their performances transformed by the process of diary and journal writing. "Freeing," "productive," and "self-teaching," are terms attached to students' analyses of their progress after experimenting with private and personal writing. One student referred to her private composing as the "key" in her progress toward creating and completing her final course project (Agatucci 139-40). That is specifically the result sought when teachers assign one or the other of these forms of writing. Instructors want students to realize the flow of thoughts and words that can occur when letter grades are not assigned to a project. Also, teachers realize that diaries and journals are one way for students to experience understanding a
concept, to be "free to toy with . . . facts, since the
writer may be most disciplined when . . . most playful,
teasing a meaning out of evidence which once seemed
irrelevant or contradictory" (Murray 118). This experience
accompanies the act of diary and journal writing when it is
practiced habitually and becomes a regular part of the
students' writing personalities.

In the academic setting, the label, "private writing"
may be the most ambiguous of composition terms. Private
writing is seldom, if ever, dealt with in the course of a
writing class. However, the dividends of analyzing this
form has proven worthwhile. Some researchers posit "a rich
set of purposes for private writing" (Hilligoss 130). The
term private writing most often conjures thoughts of diary
writing, but seldom do composition teachers give much
mental energy, not to mention classroom examination and
analysis, to the practice of writing personal letters, date
books or desk calendars, checkbook registers, marginal
notes in textbooks, and composing course notebooks. These
written functions, along with private diaries and journals,
are the focus of a university course created and taught by
Susan Hilligoss. Advanced Expository Writing, intended for
liberal arts juniors, fulfills the university's advanced
communication requirement and includes the items mentioned
above in its category plus numerous "ephemeral texts such
as lists and personal messages. . . . and other self-
initiated writing" (Hilligoss 125-27).

Distinguishing between private and personal writing, Hilligoss explains, "Personal narrative, memoir, and autobiography are recognized public genres" (126). Writing formal notes, collaborating on a project, and journal writing are typical for an advanced expository composition course, but unique to this course is the quest to

Connect private and public writing. . . . We explored many types of connections between public and private writing. Using ordinary texts as evidence, we tried to identify our individual writing traditions, bring them to academic discussion, explore the interpretive communities in which they were produced, and place them in a public tradition of inquiry in the humanities. To recognize that not all writing has an academic end . . . became the most important personal inquiry. (Hilligoss 127-28)

As these students study their graded academic writing and compare it with voluntary writing (some written years earlier), they acknowledge a "more tenuous relation [in academic writing] to what some call their 'true selves' [in the private forms]" (Hilligoss 132). The students are able to place value on their private writing (seldom acknowledged as writing), and they are able to recognize patterns within their lives and detect authentic voice
qualities. Hilligoss reports,

Examining the texts in their lives prompted reminiscence, but also analysis. . . . All students took credit for discovering patterns, . . . a writer . . . learned from her calendars that she was now less organized than she had been as a high school senior. . . . [Terry's letters] were a moving but analytic examination of intensely personal materials. Humor also crept in: a check register reminded John of 'the countless numbers of pizzas' that he had eaten. (130-31)

Their instructor discusses a variety of discoveries that students made, and she also comments on several months of classroom conversation and analysis. One student reported that her margin writing transferred over to pages of journal writing and self-knowledge: "I didn't change the world . . . and although my thoughts were incomplete and underdeveloped, I did show myself that I do have the ability to be a independent thinker" (Hilligoss 131). "We can show," Hilligoss notes, "that texts construct us and impel not only further writing but action" (133). Private writing is the essence of writer-based text and is used as a tool for thinking. When the reader is also the writer, the process is explained as "I write to understand what I mean" (Bodmer 10).
So private writing can become an answer when instructors ask, "How can I help students learn, grow, and change?" If the diverse population of the university is a concern of individual composition teachers, some may agree with Maimon's practice that "the opportunity to do unshaped autobiographical writing [diaries and journals] may be more useful . . . than the assignment of autobiographical [essay] themes" (133). Private writing provides opportunity for writers to understand themselves. This is important for all students, but as Hilligoss notes, "Critical for those who are studying liberal arts, particularly the humanities with their traditional concern for self and identity" (125). As a text created voluntarily, private writing is an excellent source for self-analysis, self-teaching, and recognizing personal potential through one's writing.

Interestingly, another form of private writing that is not commonplace in the composition course, but has played a significant role in American history, is the diary, usually a form of very private journaling. Students involved with the practice of private writing might enjoy knowing that scholars in the humanities have restored and edited private writings belonging to a single life or a number of lives as textual artifacts (Hilligoss 126). These private writings are now published literary treasures valued by larger discourse communities. "Whitman, Thoreau, and Adams wrote
themselves into the landscape of American literature," according to Zinsser, "by daring to use the most intimate forms--journals, diaries, letters . . ." (215). And likewise, the women who traveled the twenty-four hundred miles of the Overland Trail by covered wagon wrote not only their own stories, but American history. Lillian Schlissel writes in the introduction to her book, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*:

> These were ordinary women who were caught up in a momentous event in history. . . . Women knew they were engaged in . . . extending American possession of the continent from ocean to ocean. . . . Young people and even children kept diaries and felt that their lives, briefly, had become part of history. The mundane events of each day--the accidents and the mishaps and the small victories--had grown significant. In the case of women, suddenly, because of their diaries, their daily lives became accessible, where so much of the life of nineteenth-century women has disappeared from view. . . . In reading their diaries we come closer to understanding how historical drama translates into human experience. Through the eyes of women we . . . see history as . . . daily struggle. (10-16)

There are many versions of the private diary. The
most common is a day-to-day recording of a person's life; special-event diaries are used to record longer periods of history but focus in on certain occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and seasonal celebrations; travel diaries are used to record the daily events of extended holidays and vacations--making a permanent record of the trip's significance; relationship diaries are used to register the developments between two or several people. A desperation diary is the method of written expression Peter Elbow used to endure a decade of turmoil and struggle in his life (Toward 43). He explains:

"This was very private writing. There were all kinds of writing jumbled up in these hundreds of single-spaced typed pages. Anyone who has kept a diary in hard times can imagine what's there. For me the characteristic move was to start from feelings and seek relief in trying to figure things out . . . in desperation I ranted and raved. . . . I was using this private writing to allow myself kinds of discourse or register I couldn't otherwise allow myself. . . . I was willing to write things I couldn't tell others and, didn't want to tell myself--in hopes that it would make things more bearable. (Toward 43-46)"

He believes it was through this personal desperation writing that he discovered the "use of something like
freewriting" (Toward 43). This type of expression for survival was therapeutic for him, and he now believes it caused writing to become a deep part of his life (45).

So, private writing is writer-based. Even though there seems to be an invisible line between private writing and personal writing, it is necessary to distinguish the separate categories. The two are different in purpose, but they vary only slightly in form. Elaine Maimon has noted that composition teachers "blur the distinction between private and public writing, to the detriment of both forms" (132). Personal writing begins to make the move into the public arena because it has an occasional audience or another person who will be an observer. Often the immediate audience is limited to only an instructor. These journals can have a very personal quality wherein the writers are gaining understanding of themselves, but at the same time they can have a continuous dialogue because of the one- or two-person audience.

Like diaries, journals too have many forms. A journal is different from a diary in that it is used to record ideas rather than events. The writer jots down ideas to play with them on paper--to sort out these thoughts and wander through them--to make sense of them--to develop and expand or exhaust an idea. Don Murray writes, "[It is the writer's] business to design ideas into thoughts" (118). It is one way of saving an idea before it vanishes to never
again be recovered. Often in composition classes, writers are required to keep daily journals. Instructors have reported that their students' journal writing was an initial step in a process that helped them "begin writing without knowing what they would say . . . [it] seemed a necessary precondition for attempting to write at all" (Agatucci 140).

One particular form, reading journals, are written documents often required of students as part of their assignments in courses in all disciplines. These are not only used to record what the student is reading in a particular textbook but also to do analysis and discovery writing from the reading. In "The Reader's Notebook: A Tool for Thinking," Paul Bodmer explains, "I want students to find what I have found, that if I engage myself with the text whatever the text--I will find it interesting . . . informal writing [lets] my students discover that" (10).

Reading journals can take on a variety of forms. One style is referred to as dialectical. The student-readers divide the blank paper (preferably in a notebook) lengthwise to form a left and right column. In the right hand column, students record quotes and information learned as the text is read. Then at a later time, the students use the other column to analyze and explore the notes that they wrote previously while reading the text. In other words, the students have a written conversation with the
notes they wrote earlier.

Bodmer uses another variety of reading journal. He has his students compose a type of informal freewriting in a reading journal and then asks them to write in their journals after reading a story and before coming to class (10). In class "they share what they wrote, . . . ask questions . . . form tentative ideas" (11). Then they write several more times before and after each class discussion. He goes on to say,

The student is . . . sure of her reaction and is ready to become engaged in a discussion of the text. . . . Another benefit . . . we really see the students engaging their minds with the text. . . . They become active readers. The key is to show them how. . . . It takes two or three class periods of time, but overall the time is well spent. (12-14)

Another type, learning journals, are used to deal specifically with a particular topic, subject, or course of study students are enrolled in. Writers document new concepts that are being surveyed and develop exploration and analysis of the learning that is or is not happening in the material being covered. Teachers claim that when students can rewrite a subject into personal language and remove it from the vernacular of that discipline, they may discover concepts that had previously been hidden. Elbow
points out, "We may be unsatisfied unless students can write about what they are learning in the professional discourse." He then insists, "We should be equally unsatisfied unless they can write about it not using the lingo of the discipline" (Reflections 137). Dissecting the knowledge in one's own vocabulary and even explaining it in a journal produces meaningful definitions and puts handles on concepts not comprehensible before that written analysis was performed.

What is finally valuable about the private and personal forms of autobiographical discourse is the productive process each student engages in with this type of writing. Both forms are tools that assist students in the process of composing and developing written communication. For many students, it is the most anxiety-free method for starting to write. In Learning by Teaching, Murray claims:

You can't learn to write by reading before the fact, by discussion before the fact, by critical analysis after the fact, or by lecture before or after the fact of writing. These are all valid teaching techniques, part of the writing teacher's arsenal. But the emphasis in the course must be on what the student is doing, for writing simply can not be taught theoretically, in the abstract. Writing must be experienced to
Writing is an activity that requires participation. It is not a spectator event. Professionals believe and have demonstrated that the private and personal forms of autobiographical discourse can be the catalyst to other forms of writing. In chapter three, the public forms of autobiographical writing will be examined.
Suppressing students' stories means suppressing personal and cultural diversity; . . . For those who embrace a vision of education which encompasses the whole person's richly tangled cognitive, spiritual and emotional growth, the mission of our schools becomes far more than assuring that we all emerge from a common melting pot.

Anne DiPardo

Composition instructors are reporting numerous reasons for including autobiographical discourse in their course content. Donald Murray says, among other things, autobiographical writing is "therapeutic" (Expecting 185); Peter Elbow explains that "if we teach only academic discourse we will surely fail at this most important goal of helping students use writing by choice in their lives" (Reflections 136). Stephen Judy asserts, "Humans have an intrinsic need to sort through and understand their experiences, and . . . they need to share their perceptions with others" (38). "To write in the first person--"I," "me," "we," "us"--is the most natural way of talking to someone else on paper," claims William Zinsser (237). Writing is abundant, rich, and enhanced with human
qualities when the student writers bring the full extent of their lives into the context of the course and classroom writing assignments.

Autobiographical writing allows writers, beginning and advanced, to communicate on paper because every student has stories, vivid memories, that can be rendered into the dimensions required for a personal experience essay assignment. Students' histories are validated, as well as linked to the future, during the sections of composition courses that involve autobiographical writing. Students begin to make connections between their previous experiences and the knowledge they are gaining in their education through autobiographical writing, and they sense continuity rather than the dichotomy that often accompanies academic life. Freshman and advanced composition courses have numerous similarities, but at the same time they differ considerably, and therefore they each need to be addressed specifically.

Personal experience writing is a good vehicle for beginning students to discover they can write—students have a multitude of experiences to draw from, and consequently they do have something to say. Freshmen come to our community colleges and universities with individual histories and life experiences, and Sommers and McQuade claim, "For most first-year students, personal essays seem easier to write because they focus on what [they] think
[they] know best" (644). Personal writing allows students to compose from the comfort zone of knowing about the subject--whether the subject is the actual author or a person or event in the author's life. And while students may be authorities about their experiences, they quickly recognize that knowing the experience and communicating it in writing are not the same. These freshman authors move swiftly from not knowing what to say to the issues of how to begin, how to organize, how to revise, how to edit, and so forth.

Another valuable feature acknowledged by Susan Waugh is that, "Not only does autobiographical writing allow students to write about subjects that they know well and that interest them, but in telling their own stories they are most likely to find their own authentic voices" (144). When students write reflective narratives, they create a writing voice they recognize and they come closer to meeting personal and professional goals. Composing personal experience essays provides freshmen opportunities to experiment with a natural, informal style voice that is difficult to acquire, if not impossible, in the formal tone of expository and persuasive writing.

DiPardo believes instructors help their students by exposing them to personal expression before requiring them to write reports, persuasion, or research, and that teachers should not expect them to "leap into the world of
abstract ideas without some sort of experiential grounding" (47). William Wright illustrates this further when he points out, "We have all had that disheartening experience of writing to an audience that knows more about our subject than we do and will always know more about our subject than we do. These papers cease being essays and become exercises..." (107). Some assignments can purge this detrimental experience.

For example, one assignment that produces good results with freshman writers and resembles a miniature memoir is an essay that explains three aspects of the author's life. The instructor specifies the need to compose writing that is clearly autobiographical, but at the same time it is not the writer's life history, beginning at birth and proceeding to the current. While this sounds easy to negotiate, students usually struggle with this limitation. They are required to do invention writing in order to locate three ideas and to focus and narrow the theme that will be developed into meaningful prose. The process of drafting and redrafting and collaborating in peer workshops allows students to assist each other with audience awareness and, at the same time, create a community environment as the students reveal themselves and portions of their private worlds to their classmates.

Another effective essay project is the first-hand biography. This assignment can be located in several
rhetoric textbooks. This writing strategy also causes writers to narrow their focus. The St. Martin's Guide to Writing informs students that the "aim will usually be not only to portray the person as an individual but also to indicate how the person has been significant" (57). Many students can narrate the history of a relationship, but vividly describing the person and conveying the importance of the relationship, so that the audience can experience it, is often difficult for freshmen. Memory is utilized throughout the assignment and especially when writing dialogue.

A third writing task is the personal experience essay. This requires students to select a single moment in their histories and cultivate compositions that reflect and reveal the highlights or negative features of the event. The writers strive to communicate the importance of the moment. Students are encouraged to describe the event rather than just tell the history. Memory is necessary, and Wiener recommends "instruction in the use of detail" (95). He advises starting "on the most basic levels of language awareness. . . . Learning a sensitivity to words. . . . A study of groups that move from general to specific is highly productive" (95). He provides an example of this with these four nouns: food, meat, steak, and sirloin (95). Learning this sensitivity helps students to create word-pictures so the audience can visualize particular places,
hear certain sounds, and experience stories with their emotions and senses.

These assignments allow students to deal with subjects they know, and while it can be liberating to have a pool of knowledge and memory to write from, it also serves to convince students of their need for further instruction in order to communicate their messages and to develop and refine their writing skills. The desire to communicate their topics produces interest in writing and in learning the writing process that is taught in composition classes. This need to "know how" creates the enthusiastic and attentive students that contribute to productive and successful composition courses.

Seeing themselves as authorities on a subject can provide encouragement, motivation, and the power student writers need to produce effective, meaningful essays. Empowering students is important, and instructors need to be cautious not to give language preeminence over writers. Elbow warns, "Many academics seem . . . nervous about changes in discourse. . . . They won't let themselves or their students write in language tainted with the ordinary or with the presence and feelings of the writer" (Reflections 152). In a composition class that advocates autobiographical writing, teachers need to be prepared to discuss and examine the changes in language that beginning students might introduce in their expressive texts. Nancy
Mack has suggested,

Changes in language initiated by the masses should not be condemned wholesale but rather examined for their material basis. Language changes can become the text for learning about social class for the students and even more importantly for teacher. . . . Rejecting the language of our students is a refusal to examine the material basis for their lives. What we label as slang phrases cannot gain popularity unless they voice the concrete needs of a particular group. (161)

Language uniformity is an important issue that tends to surface whenever personal discourse is being explored. This corollary puts writing instructors on the front line when the language of any social group intersects and/or collides with the language of the academy. Mack paraphrases Bakhtin's definition of "a living language [as] one that views the vital, contradictory forces of change as a process of becoming, while a dead language treats language as a perfected . . . thing . . . handed down from one generation to another" (162). Mack voices a strong argument for a living language and asserts,

The academy should not overlook important sources of vital language, the material life of the street. . . . We could find ways to adopt useful
features of street language into academic language. Composition teachers need to show students how to precipitate these language changes through their appropriation of language. (162-63)

Instructors should assist students in discovering that language can empower them. Writing teachers have the dual role of succoring students with a new language from the academy, while simultaneously introducing colleagues in the institution to the language of the students. Writing expressive, experiential prose and using elements of their social language gives students a sense that maybe they can write too.

This sense of being able to write then connects with the feeling of authorship, and each student thereby acknowledges personal investment. That investment is one reason attributed to the high quality of autobiographical writing some instructors are receiving from their student writers. This type of writing has the added incentive of inducing students to do thorough work and prepare good papers because they view it as a presentation of self—whether it is directly about them or about the world they live in away from the institution. Because this form of writing can be so personally revealing, writers anticipate readers' responses. This may be the first time many student writers become serious about audience awareness.

Composition teachers should especially note that many
uses of autobiographical writing perceived to be for the freshman level can be improvised to provide valuable instruction for advanced writers. Jean Fox has recorded one unusual and pertinent element of autobiographical writing that caught the enthusiastic attention of her students (146). This was the written communication students needed to create in order to secure employment. Often this type of writing is relegated to a career counseling course or business class. However, composition instructors can incorporate this beneficial and practical experience into the autobiographical section of a beginning or an advanced writing course. Especially in the advanced course, students view this project as essential and mandatory. Is there anything more autobiographical than writing an application letter for a scholarship, a cover letter to a prospective employer, or a job resume? Writing such information-based material requires students to consider the rhetorical strategies of purpose and audience and all the elements of the writing process. Students find that it is necessary to do invention writing, drafting, redrafting, editing, and proofreading. Fox explains how she handled a particular situation as her students began this assignment (it should be noted that this behavior also surfaces when students approach the personal experience essay):

The biggest stumbling block for students ... is
their belief that they have done almost nothing worth recording. One day I began a class by simply speaking to them on the value of their own lives, their own experiences, and the worth of just about every positive thing they had ever done, whether or not they had been paid to do it. I had their complete attention. (147)

In a workshop/brainstorming format students began to recall the "variety of . . . paid and unpaid work, their volunteer activities, their hobbies and pastimes" (147). While trying to discover who they were, what they were qualified to do, and the best way to put "the story of one's own life in outline," these students had a need and expressed concern for the tedious, usually neglected, aspects of "spelling, parallel structure, or the niceties of punctuation" (Fox 147). Taking the autobiographical mode one step further the instructor concluded:

Success can be measured only by the degree to which I am willing to expose myself, to reveal that I too have groped through the process of putting myself on paper. . . . I recall my own struggles. . . . when a friend . . . taught me what a resume is all about: a picture of worthwhile, wonderful, employable me in outline form. This is the picture of themselves I try to help my students create--now, while they're
young, when they need to be told this, and when
they need to tell it to themselves. (Fox 151)

Writing instructors teach skills that will help students
advance in their future careers; helping them write their
autobiographical resumes and cover letters for the job
market is an excellent assignment for the composition
course.

On the other hand, advanced students have already
dealt with written communication throughout their college
career, so autobiographical discourse, at this phase,
provides them an opportunity to examine language from new
perspectives. Regarding advanced writing, Hilligoss
posits,

Far from being a genre suited mainly for
beginning writers, autobiography, as it is
interpreted by members of academic communities,
carries sophisticated assumptions about
strategies, subjects, purposes, and readership. .
. . The terms "expressive," "personal,"
"autobiography," and "private" are not
synonymous. (126-27)

Some specialists and professionals believe that only a few
writers ever become skilled enough to polish and produce
personal experience essays that qualify for public
exposure. Elaine Maimon asserts, "Literary autobiography
is a genre that only a few can create. [Professional]
writers have the artist's gift of distance and can impose this distance even on their most personal experiences" (131). Advanced composition students, who have been to the center of their education and will soon exit, have the opportunity through advanced writing instruction to enhance and hone their written communication abilities, even if they do not become professional autobiographical writers.

In contrast to Maimon's assertion, Mary Jane Dickerson proposes, "Autobiography is a sophisticated form of composing, one particularly appropriate ... for the advanced composition classroom" (135). She looks in depth at this discourse and suggests that "the intricate interrelationships" it incorporates as material for advanced students to analyze and examine as well as produce (135). She asserts,

Writing autobiography can offer mature student writers a unique experience in textuality as an exercise of critical consciousness. Since autobiography makes us listen carefully to ourselves as writers speaking while writing, the writer simultaneously becomes protagonist, narrator, and author. (139-40)

Advanced students, at this later stage of development, can be challenged to use their own experiences to gain expertise with language. Patricia Hampl refers to this as "the intersection of narration and reflection of story—
telling and essay writing. [This act of writing] can present its story and reflect and consider the meaning of the story" (1012). While writing their personal experience essays, advanced students can be assigned the additional research of noting and recording historical events that occurred simultaneously with their personal events, and they can thereby incorporate larger world issues into their essays enhancing the reflective narratives they are composing (Dickerson 143). This requirement affords students the extra benefit of using the library and at the same time learning the technicalities of integrating their micro worlds with the macro society they live in.

Advanced students, according to Lynn Bloom, can learn a great deal about their own writing techniques from "comparing, analyzing, and editing parallel autobiographical texts by skilled and unskilled writers" (120). She illustrates the effectiveness of this process by using published and unpublished diaries and journals with her students. Quickly they recognize the significance of audience concern; they see material that lacks interpretation and understand the need to introduce characters when analyzing these pieces (126-29). They question the significance of the life or event that has been recorded. And possibly most importantly, they can distinguish "the development of a self-critical facility as one mark of a professional writer. . . . This involves
... a willingness to delete" (125). Bloom gives her students the opportunity to practice deleting with hands-on-training. She provides her students with:

- pages of the original typescript,
- student readers-turned-editors... vigorously delete what they find boring or unnecessary, and from their texts usually emerge the same themes... as a professional editor... This enables the students to develop working principles that discriminate between the important and the unimportant, the interesting and the dull, and the memorable and the forgettable. (125-26)

Bloom's use of the material of other writers appears to be a painless classroom exercise for students who can benefit from this procedure, but seldom can endure exposing their own writing to this public critical adjustment. The students' writing showed improvement caused by the "close textual examining, editing, and rewriting of actual autobiographical texts, published and unpublished" (130). This is a excellent example of helping advanced students deal with the differences between writer-oriented and reader-oriented prose by allowing them to take the complex role of being the writer, the reader, and the editor.

While writing autobiographical essays, students discover confidence and the knowledge that with practice they can produce written communication. One student
measured the worth of his composition course with the tangible product of a job (Fox 150). Peter Elbow has an appropriate last word for this chapter's examination and discussion: "The best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives" (Reflections 136).
Ultimately every writer must follow the path that feels most comfortable. For most people who are learning to write, that path is nonfiction. It enables them to write about what they know or can observe or can find out. This is especially true of young people. They will write far more willing about situations that have reality—experiences that touch their own lives—or subjects that they have an aptitude for.

Motivation is at the heart of writing.

William Zinsser

Autobiographical discourse is a distinguishable mode of writing. Students who write autobiographically engage in an exploration that seeks knowledge, and they discover new knowledge and grasp difficult concepts through a personal, natural language. In its fullest sense, this discourse allows writers access to learning in all disciplines because autobiographical discourse has the power to diminish language boundaries that limit written communication. "We need to encourage students to approach autobiographical writing as a way to synthesize the reading and writing of words and the reading and writing of the world," says Dickerson "with themselves as the agents for
transformation and education as they voice themselves into being" (143). Autobiographical writing activates connections between writers and the words they use to interpret the realities of who they are. Writing as a way of thinking suggests that students hone their thoughts by the very words and sentences they use to express them.

Once autobiographical discourse is learned, it can facilitate the transition into other discourse modes. It is a language that has permeated the ivory tower, the corporate industry, and the streets of every community. Wong-Fillmore and Valadez note that the academic potential of students is at stake and "has the best chance of being realized when their . . . social and cultural experiences, and their knowledge of the world are affirmed in school. . . ." (654). Students experience affirmation as a natural by-product when writing autobiographical discourse. Cora Agatucci puts it this way: "Personal and private writing has a legitimate place in a re-visioned education which values the full range of private and public experience, discourse forms and educational modes" (Lecture 6).

If college students received instruction only in the how to's of writing personal experience essays, their educations would be shortchanged and their writing would be limited. However, the antithesis of this scenario is equally discouraging. Practicing and producing only expository and argumentative prose limits student writers
rather than expands and develops their skills, abilities, and vision. Expository, argumentative, research, and autobiographical discourse modes each have advocates and adversaries, but rather than creating a hierarchy it is useful to recognize that the instruction, knowledge, and experience of each discourse mode enhances its use. All writing is difficult to some degree. Selecting a topic can cause blockage for some students; others freeze at the process of getting started. Developing meaningful content—having something to say—frightens certain students, and then of course, learning how to close a piece of writing is problematic for many writers. Each of these dimensions of the writing process is pertinent to all forms of written discourse. Becoming fluent in one mode of written discourse activates the ability to create in another mode and assists student writers as they learn fluency. One example of this is Elaine Maimon’s suggestion:

Instructors might have more success in teaching analysis and exposition—public forms of writing—if the autobiographical writing of undergraduates were viewed primarily as a private way to find ideas. . . . When we encourage students to write expressively for themselves, not for a reader, we are helping them to expand the limits of their world. (313-32)
When students realize that elements of each discourse can work cooperatively, and that often these discourses mingle within a composition to strengthen the contents, causing what Joe Harris refers to as "a kind of polyphony" (17), then students will become aware of the value of having experience in each form. They will be able to discern the diversity in written discourse modes as richness rather than dissonance. Composition teachers can help students with the essential features of each discourse mode and encourage learners to be receptive toward all the modes. The attitude of instructors toward the individual discourse modes is crucial, because classifying and ranking modes causes energy and creativity to be spent defending particular modes and not developing expertise in using them.

Writing instructors can help students realize that problems in written expression can be solved, that meaning can be uncovered and even explained, and that writing is always a discovery of what the writer intended to say. Students learn in composition courses that writing rarely proceeds in an orderly fashion and that the mode of discourse selected does not mean one assignment will be easier than another. Sommers and McQuade explain,

It is not meant to suggest that expository and argumentative essays are somehow 'better' or more 'advanced' forms than personal-experience essays.
We do not want to imply, in effect, either that one essay form is preferable to another or that there is some unannounced hierarchy of essay forms. (645)

Instructors can teach the process of writing and at their discretion select particular discourses to explain and model. But if students create anemic, truncated, immature prose, instructors should consider instructing their students in autobiographical discourse. This will grant students permission to discover and use their natural voices, the authentic language they are comfortable with, and it will provide them with familiar topics. William Zinsser describes the situation this way:

a blanket of timidity has settled over the country, paralyzing writers of all ages.
Students feel that they have to write what the teacher wants; writers feel that they have to write what the editor wants. None of them will give themselves permission to write what they want to write—to use their own lives as material. This . . . is a national writing problem and a national teaching problem. (xii)

Students who are afforded the luxury of being human in their attempts at writing effective communication will learn what all writers know, that in spite of the difficulties and the exhaustion, the overriding feeling of
participating in the creation and presentation of written communication is satisfying. Perhaps that is why Susan Waugh recommends:

There should be special college writing classes in autobiography—as there are in other exalted forms—for both sex-segregated and mixed groups. Such classes may have much to teach composition and creative teachers about how well students can write when content—including ideas and emotions as well as facts—is emphasized more than modes, structures, or forms. (152)

Waugh's recommendation certainly is legitimate, for autobiographical writing can stand nobly along with all forms of writing, for example persuasive, research, expository, imaginative and poetry writing. However, whether autobiographical writing is taught as a separate course or is infused into all writing-intensive courses is less important than that it become a valued element in the written experiences of all college students.
WORKS CITED


