

Lesson 5: **(Getting to) Your first draft**

by Nestor Walters

So you've done some homework, scribbled a couple practice pages, and now you're wondering how to turn it into a riveting essay. I have good news and bad news.

The good news is there's this thing called the first draft. Writers use it all the time. What it basically means is, you write whatever you feel like writing about, let it breathe for a few days or weeks, then come back to it later to revise, edit, cut, paste, crop, chop.

The truth (that you wouldn't know this unless you're nerdy about writing) is that very, very few works of literature were written end-to-end and then sent out. Mark Twain, for example, sat on a half-finished *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for five years before completing it.

With that in mind, I encourage you to start by writing volume and then condense. Even if you don't know exactly what your essay will be "about," start with one of the threads from the previous lessons, or come up with a new one, and tug on it until you have a few pages of dribble.

Look at it this way: your first draft is a jalopy you bought at the junkyard. Later, you'll replace the fenders, give it a paint job, maybe replace the alternator, cooling hose, etc. But for now, all you care about is that it runs well enough to drive off the lot.

That's what makes the difference between notes and a first draft: a first draft has a beginning, middle, and end. Even if it's not everything you'd like it to be, it will drive off the lot. It is a complete (no matter how cringey)

essay. We can work with that. Sometimes one or two lines per page will stand out, and that will be a jump-off point to a whole new, more meaningful essay.

Notes, on the other hand, are a bunch of (sometimes useful) spare parts.

Next, I'll go over two drafts of the same essay. In the first one, look for bits of concrete storytelling and overarching theme. Ask yourself, as a reader, what is interesting about this essay? What ideas or bits of story would you want explored further? What could you do without?

Note: in the video lesson, I highlighted the jump-off points and greyed out the parts that were cut. If you haven't watched it yet, try reading it without the colors first.

Sample short essay: "You Can Learn Anything"

Prompt: The Stanford community is deeply curious and driven to learn in and out of the classroom. Reflect on an idea or experience that makes you genuinely excited about learning.

First draft (ignore grammatical errors):

My personal age of enlightenment began when I was exposed to *Cosmos*. I was sitting in the tiny cabin of the boat I had recently started calling home. There, from my beat-up laptop, Neil DeGrasse Tyson's mellifluous narration unveiled secrets of the universe; secrets, which, I humbly concede, have been common knowledge for quite some time. Stephen Presfield, in *Do the Work* says: "I didn't have a single thought until I was about thirty. Everything up until then was just noise". On that otherwise humdrum, humid, Hawaiian evening, I felt like I had my first few thoughts. I was mesmerised, riveted to my seat, and became determined to learn more.

As I prepare to transition from the Navy into civilian life, career counselors and concerned individuals ask me what I want to "do." The truth is I don't know

yet. I just know that I want to learn. One of my Navy buddies, himself an engineer, said it best though: “You don’t go into STEM to boost your career, you go into it because you have no other choice. It calls you and you just can’t ignore it.”

Notice how scattered it is. *Cosmos*, boat in Hawaii, Stephen Presfield, Navy buddies: all of them could be their own stories, but not all of them together. Not in 250 words. Luckily, I had friends who critiqued and commented on it and helped me get it to a version that was more expressive of my truth (except for some big words that I’ll probably never use again.)

After about 17 revisions: (Prompt reminder: *Reflect on an idea or experience that makes you genuinely excited about learning*)

I didn’t learn about evolution until I was twenty-five.

I grew up in Greece, where History class was based on the Biblical seven days of Creation, and Biology class taught evolution as “a ridiculous theory.” It wasn’t until I was 25 and stumbled across Neil DeGrasse Tyson’s “Cosmos” that, for the first time ever, I was learning the processes of natural selection, mutation, and abiogenesis.

This initial spark of knowledge made me wonder what else I had been missing, and what else I could understand about our universe. I came across Khan Academy, whose video “You Can Learn Anything” convinced me that intelligence was not the elusive privilege of a select few, but a muscle that could be trained. I utilized the website to teach myself Calculus, and am continuing my quest for knowledge by pursuing a degree in Computer Science from Hawaii Pacific University. Inspired to help others along their journeys, I volunteered to translate Khan Academy content from English to Greek. (continued next page)

Rather than carry frustration for the maculated education of my youth, I am grateful that it birthed a passion in me to continually push the boundaries of my knowledge. Math and biology may not be my majors, but they will always fascinate me and permeate any academic endeavor I pursue.

Remember at the beginning I said there was bad news? Here it is: it can take many, many redrafts to get your essay to a version that expresses you. But even that comes with a kernel of goodness: no matter how bad you (or your trusted reader/reviewer) think it sucks this time, there can always be a next time. And another after that. And another.

See you next lesson.