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Close Writing Practices in the Post-Secondary Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores a suite of close writing practices and exercises that ask students to attend closely to language at the level of morpheme, word, line, sentence, or stanza. Close writing aims to move students beyond a conception of reading as mere transaction and technology, while pushing writing pedagogy beyond the development of expository prose, as is common in post-secondary contexts. Instead, the pedagogies presented in this inquiry frame writing as an analytic practice which aids both students’ capacities as writers and, importantly, their development as critical readers. Such pedagogies, we believe, reflect a less-didactic approach to teaching reading, writing, and literature. We argue that close writing positions students in an exploratory, experimental stance in relation to composition, one that allows for the analytic aims of close reading in addition to different kinds of learning.

*Keywords:* close writing, close reading, creative writing, classroom exercises, post-secondary education, mimetic writing, erasure, writing pedagogy.
Close Writing Practices in the Post-Secondary Classroom

Write a 3-word refrain that could be used as a chant to tear the shroud of normalcy. [...] In couplets, describe the opening shot of a movie you would make to depict the events of the past year. [...] End with a line that snaps like a turnstile at your back, that closes like an iron gate behind you.

— Susan Briante

The epigraph above is from “Further Exercises, a poem Briante published in the March of 2020 issue of the *The Brooklyn Rail*. Briante’s poem takes the form of a series of politically-charged writing prompts, instructions that ask writer (and reader) to channel precarity through lyric composition, bending form towards an ethical and political reckoning. The conceit suggests that creative writing exercises might do something more than provide practice at preparing for a career as a professional poet. Instead Briante opens the writer-reader divide to new orientations, towards life and lives around them through an invitation into the kind of closely-wrought language play that poetry affords. The nine prompts which comprise ‘Further Exercises’ offer particularly poignant, if somewhat satirical, examples of the *close writing practices* we discuss in this article.

We use the term ‘close writing practices’ herein to refer to writing exercises, creative and otherwise, that ask students to attend closely to language at the level of morpheme, word, line, sentence, or stanza. The promise of close writing is that it can move students beyond a conception of writing pedagogy as the development of expository prose and reading as mere transaction (Rosenblatt, 1994), as is common in some post-secondary contexts. In our work as writing instructors at large public universities in the US, we’re directed to focus our curricula around expository forms in keeping with a transactional approach assumed to be best suited for
preparing students for their future careers. (For a detailed history of the rise and rise of neoliberal policy in US K-12 and post-secondary writing courses, charting the Reagan administration’s initial manufacture of a national school crisis, accountability-focused reforms exemplified in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and recent widespread adoption of the business-focused Common Core State Standards, see Branson’s *Policy Regimes: College Writing and Public Education Policy in the United States* [2022]). For example, Scott teaches in the First Year Writing program at his institution, where the program’s mission echoes the Common Core State Standards’ language: “The first-year writing curriculum is designed to prepare students for the critical thinking, reading, and writing expected of them throughout their academic and professional careers.” This stated approach manifests in the actual classroom in a variety of ways: in course assignments, pedagogical activities, grading practices, etc. Perhaps most telling is the instructor handbook’s directive that “literary texts [fiction and nonfiction] are not appropriate”. The general writing requirement at Michael’s institution similarly emphasizes an instrumental approach to field-specific curriculum that largely excludes creative purposes for writing:

Subject matter of assignments should be central, rather than peripheral, to the concerns of the field, thus ensuring majors will gain additional exposure to characteristic ideas, points-of-view, and problems, as well as the typical forms of scholarly communication associated with the discipline or academic field (e.g., case-studies, agency reports, monographic studies, journal articles, book reviews).

The pedagogies presented in this inquiry frame writing as both a creative and analytic practice which aids students’ capacities as writers and their development as critical readers. Such pedagogies, we believe, reflect a less-didactic approach to teaching reading, writing, and literature (as an aside, we use “pedagogies” and “teaching practices” interchangeably in this piece, likewise with “exercises” and “activities”). We argue that close writing positions students
in an exploratory, experimental stance in relation to composition, one that allows for different kinds of learning to occur (Rosenblatt, 1995).

In a sense this paper is a return for us. Before taking up our current faculty positions, we both previously published articles in Changing English as doctoral students, pieces we look back on now as perhaps a bit brash. But the premises of both pieces are ones we still believe in. Here, we turn back to close attention to the text (Lockett 2010) and curricular play with creative writing (Jarvie and Beymer 2019) as foundational practices. We continue to think about the theories and methods which moved us then and build upon them in our current teaching contexts and herein. Like our past work, this inquiry was informed by literature on close reading and writing pedagogy in post-secondary curricular contexts (Gallop 2000, 10). We considered analytical techniques, not theoretical stances, developed by New Criticism, primarily Vanderbilt’s Fugitive Camp (Brooks and Warren 1960). In turn, we updated this framework to include a basis for situated approaches to close writing exercises, focusing on how they can prompt student recognition of textual features (Lodge 1992; Kress 2003; Jewitt 2003).

We explored works on composition practices and reader response theories (Luce-Kapler 2006; Rosenblatt 2005) in relation to Slattery et al.’s (2007) survey of hermeneutics and aesthetics, and then used these texts as a frame for identifying and critiquing our own classroom practices. In doing so, we analyzed past syllabi, lecture notes, and lesson plans as means of locating both compositional and analytic textual practices (Davis and Womack 2002, Author B). We also tried to identify points in our lived curriculum when we intentionally ‘resist[ed] the instrumentalism that [turns] the teaching of English into the mere transmission of some amoral technical ability’ (Gallop 2000, 10). We argue that coupling close reading with close writing exercises can deepen analytical attention. This is not a new stance in the context of graduate or
upper-year undergraduate seminars in creative writing. Students in those curricula have often already accumulated analytic experience and expressed an interest in not just studying but writing literature. What we are proposing here is the adaptation of similar forms of compositional play in contexts where students are being introduced to forms of rhetorical and literary analysis.

Some first-year writing and introductory literary classrooms frame compositional practices in technocratic terms. Reading becomes a transactional practice and writing, in turn, a means of assessing a student’s ability to extract (Rosenblatt, 1994). And although the kinds of texts students encounter may differ between composition and literary courses, the genre of assessment is often limited to short or long form expository prose. Conversely, in the United States, most creative writing seminars, implicitly or explicitly, couple the analytical with the compositional. Students remix and tinker and experiment with literary practices. And they critique assigned readings, their classmates’ work, and their own. In doing so, they engage in a kind of cycle of analysis and creation; they examine not just works of literature but works-in-progress and process itself. Which is to say by watching their peers’ experimentation while they conduct their own, students come to see literature not as static text but as works refined over time. They come to see craft as a process replete with much collaboration, frustration, and revision.

Carmine Starnino emphasises the importance of this perspective in his introduction to *Lazy Bastardism: Essays and Reviews on Contemporary Poetry*; he writes (2012, 19):

Stephen Burt has a wonderful line about how poets ‘accept on purpose what they have created by accident,’ and you have to wonder how many of the ‘perfect poems we use as touchstones of excellence — poems academics take apart, analyze, diagram and reassemble — were shotgunned into existence.
The knowledge that admired works are products of revision compounded by a bit of serendipity does much to reposition the reader as fellow writer. Put another way, a reader who has also experienced creative frustration and experimentation recognises the provisionality of process.

On this Starnino writes (2012, 20):

> I finish a poem, and immediately forget how I was able to do it. Of course, I know very well how I did it: the hard way. Twenty drafts to realise number nine was actually the way in (and then backtracking and lighting out again in full knowledge I’ve probably ducked down another blind alley). Or thirty drafts — endless late-night stitching and unstitching — to figure out ‘no, this is stupid, give it up.’ Except I don’t. I stick with it, frantically trying to keep things alive until something, anything, catches fire and the language takes over, surging ahead of me. Knock on wood, I hope I never lose the knack for inviting such dumb luck into my life.

By prompting this perspective experientially, the student, as reader-writer, comes to a different understanding of craft, one rooted in critical balance and an appreciation of difficulty. And through this counterbalancing of scholar and writer, the student comes to see the language games of literature differently, as though they are now playing both sides of a chess board. Sumara, in this regard, reflecting on Gadamer’s work, writes:

> Whereas non-literary forms of writing are meant to instrumentally convey a truth that has some verifiable correspondence, the literary fiction does not. Instead, it invites the reader into an experience of reading which is like the playing of a game (1996, 30).

For Sumara, the ideal reader is one who has succumbed to a subjunctive, as-if state: a kind of attention where possibilities are considered over certainties, where additional or alternative literary moves emerge and, in turn, elucidate the text at hand.

This space, Sumara argues, depends less on linguistic knowledge and experience and more on literary imagination and play. Which is to say, one way to understand such games is to sit outside the game, observe, and explicate its rules. Another way is to join the play. To illustrate what this means in practice, we will share and analyze/examine/explicate a couple sample exercises. These examples intentionally couple analytical attention with compositional
play. Of course there are countless ways to engage in this kind of textual classroom play and we share these examples not because they are exemplary but simply because they are close at hand.

Mimetic Play (Michael)

Mimetic exercises ask students to expand on extant work. They ask students to attend closely to a writer’s style and technique, and then add an extra stanza to a poem, or write a side-story for a major character, or an alternative ending for a play. But instead of infusing the original with one’s own voice or vision, the objective is verisimilitude.

I experienced this first example as an undergraduate student. I was enrolled in a fourth-year seminar on Milton. We spent the entire semester studying *Paradise Lost*, basically a book per week. In lieu of a standard final paper, we had a creative writing option. The challenge was to write 100 lines of Miltonic verse that could be inserted at some point within the poem. You then had to write a critical reflection on your lines: where does it work, where does it sound like Milton, where does it not, how did you approach the challenge, and so on. I chose to write a portion that could be shoe-horned within *Book II*, specifically the part where Satan first arrives in Hell. Oddly, Milton doesn’t use much space there to describe what Satan sees:

A universe of death, which God by curse
Created evil, for evil only good,
Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,
Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,
Abominable, inutterable, and worse
Than fables yet have feigned or fear conceiv’d,
Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimæras dire.

(Ln 41-48)

I wanted more gore and ghouls so I wrote 100 decasyllabic lines about the monstrous things one might encounter in Hell plus a three-page companion piece about technique, close reading my own lines in relation to Milton (where the metrics were Miltonic, where they slipped intentionally or sloppily, what kinds of devices I borrowed from elsewhere in the poem, and so
The important part, of course, was not about writing good Miltonic verse but rather playing with Milton, about learning his game and his gameplay, not solely by reading his work and works about his work, but by experimenting with his voice and technique.

A couple decades later, that is one of the only papers I can recall from that era, to the point that I still remember fine details about the writing experience: where I worked (Killam Library, 4th Floor), what the weather was like (an unseasonably warm Haligonian spring) and what I was listening to while I wrote (Tool’s *Lateralus* [2001]). It was a kind of aesthetic experience I rarely had with an assessment task, and I remember feeling a distinct pivot towards a different kind of proximity with the author. Coincidentally, it also bolstered basic and fundamental aims of that kind of curriculum; it prompted etymological and allusive inquiry, development of new vocabulary, and intentional yet experimental play with syntax.

Now that I teach my own undergraduate course on close reading at Michigan State University, I include something similar in the curriculum: a major summative assessment prefaced by ongoing low- or no-stakes formative assessments (Bolden and DeLuca, 2016). With regard to the former, I ask students to remix a course reading of their choice. If they select a poem, they compose additional stanzas, added at the beginning or end or interspersed throughout. If they select a short story, they might compose a new beginning or toss out the final couple pages and write an alternative conclusion. Regardless of the genre, they also write a critical review and reflection. Through that companion piece they demonstrate close readings of the original work plus their own additions and deletions. Here is the full assignment description:

**ENG 210 003, Assignment 2: Close Writing**

*Description:*
This assignment is an opportunity to conduct a detailed analysis of a writer’s technique and style through a close writing challenge and corresponding critical review. Select a
text from our assigned readings and expand the piece with your own original writing. Your addition should adhere to the original work’s mechanics, technique, and voice(s).

Your addition can be positioned at the beginning, end, or middle of the assigned reading. For example, if you choose a work of short fiction, you could write additional pages that carry the story beyond its conclusion, or interject somewhere in the middle for a narrative detour, or provide a new introduction to the piece. The same holds for poetry with an additional option of writing expansions for more than one text (you could compose a long expansion for one poem, or shorter expansions for two or more poems). Please include a small portion of the adjacent text from the original piece(s) to cue the reader (for example, if you’re expanding the end of a work of prose, begin with the final few sentences from the original).

After completing your addition to the assigned reading, compose a two-page critical review. This corresponding document should provide some details about your writing process. It should also analyze the original text in relation to your addition. Your close reading of the two texts should identify the stylistic and literary elements you observed in the original and how they were carried over into your composition. Try to balance your criticism by pointing to specific places where your addition coheres with the original and places where it diverges (either intentionally or accidentally).

It is important to note that this summative assessment is prefaced by short in-class exercises, described below, that work across multiple genres (Wilder and Yagelski, 2018). These introductory exercises help prepare students for the larger task. Furthermore the grading criteria does not focus on the calibre or verisimilitude of their mimetic writing, but rather on the student’s critical analysis of their work and the source text. I mention this because I have colleagues who express a reluctance to include creative writing in their curricula as they ‘don’t know how to grade it.’ Which is to say tasks like this steer the assessment framework towards more commonplace criteria like depth of analysis and clarity of prose and so on.

Because that major assignment is less orthodox, I counterbalance it with more conventional assessment tasks (a major expository paper, plus short close reading challenges on a take-home exam). I also introduce similar, albeit shorter mimetic writing exercises throughout the semester. These challenges are graded for completion only, as part of a participation grade.
For example, this semester we are studying Wallace Stevens’ ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,’ a poem with thirteen stanzas, each including the word, ‘blackbird.’ As a warm-up exercise, I ask students to write a fourteenth stanza in a style reminiscent of Stevens. Like those from the original, their stanzas have to have at least two but no more than five lines. And they have to include the word, ‘blackbird’ (I borrowed this step from an exercise I experienced as an undergraduate student in a creative writing course taught by Dr. Andrew Wainwright at Dalhousie University). Then, in groups of three or four, students are asked to add their stanzas to the poem and cut the corresponding number of original stanzas, so the remixed poem will have exactly thirteen. Finally, they rearrange the order of stanzas, shuffling their new work into the old in a way that makes some kind of sense to the group. Through the exercise and corresponding discussion, students attend closely to the poem and address why specific stanzas were excised and how they ordered the poem otherwise. This kind of recombinatory and mimetic play provides a way to explore aspects of the poem indirectly, a kind of detour around line-by-line explication (Luce-Kapler, 2004). And because Stevens’ poetry can be difficult to explicate, for both students and teachers, this makes the text and the accompanying discursive experience more accessible.

**Excision and Erasure (Scott)**

Excisitional writing reverses the typical process: writers start not with a blank page to fill but instead a full page of text from which to excise words, whittling language down to a new (yet deeply dependent) piece of writing. Erasure poetry is one of my favorite exercises in this regard. Students provide, or are provided with, a source text – we’ve used pages from favorite novels, policy documents, university advertising materials, or old *New Yorker* articles I’ve had lying around – and then strike through most of the words, erasing them to leave behind a poem in its
stead. Sometimes I provide examples, drawing on newspaper blackout erasures from Austin Kleon’s (2021) website or passing around my copy of *A Humument* (Phillips 2012), a Victorian novel illuminated with elaborately-painted erasure poetry. Sometimes not. If I want to direct their thoughts towards a particular topic, I might provide a prompt like ‘write a poem about the teacher you aspire to be.’ If I can get away with not doing any of that, though, it’s usually better: the intellectual demand of working without a template, and instead imagining and enacting the whole poem, is that much greater, making the activity that much more meaningful as an educational experience. Unprompted, students also tend to craft more unusual and enchanting combinations of language.

I’ve found this useful in a variety of pedagogical contexts. It’s an exercise I’ve used with teacher candidates in English methods courses, with undergraduate elementary education majors in my children’s literature class, and most recently with first-year San Jose State students in an introduction-to-college-writing course. It’s also one I’ve experienced as a student myself, in a poetry writing course and an English methods one more than a decade ago. Consistently, the activity is fun, providing students with a different kind of tactile experience as they work their way through a text, writing by not writing. Fun is an easy to overlook pedagogical aim, and one we don’t want to dismiss here. It does things affectively in a classroom — it can reorient students towards the curriculum in ways that prompt imagination and creative inquiry.

But fun is not the sole benefit of this exercise. As a close writing practice, the creation of erasure poetry fosters textual analysis through the attention it demands. In crafting the poem, writers consider the problem of how to write backwards: where does one start? Is it best to read through the poem, selecting words as one goes? To write with a heuristic, looking for certain kinds of words (nouns for a list, or verbs to bring together ideas in sentences)? Or to search out
words with a theme in mind? To strikethrough with a pen, making cuts permanent? Or draft erasures in pencil?

The activity helps students think about the interplay of content and form in the text, including the sometimes overlooked role of materiality. Further, the exercise foregrounds the limitations of a text, bounding students to a particular page with only so many words, while also demonstrating the multitudes of possible meaning embedded within those limits. There’s a kind of magic in that realization: when the activity is over, and students share aloud, we are all surprised by what we can make of the text in front of us – by what language can do.

One of the more remarkable things I’ve seen come from this exercise involves the ethics of language. In attending closely to the text they’re erasing, students have a useful opportunity to consider how the presence and absence of language can both include and exclude. For example, a student in my course this past semester shared how the poem made them think about the ways language can be harmful in its limitations: how the presence or not of specific pronouns necessarily excluded particular identities and experiences in the text. Despite increasing attention on nametags and email signatures, the use of pronouns in text often remains ordinarily ubiquitous, and so, (cishetero)normal(ised). Close writing in this way called attention to their presence, and for this student invited consideration of language’s ethical implications.

Other poets have found in erasure poetry an opportunity to speak back to the harm of political documents, and the regimes they represent, through transformative erasure. Former U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith (2018), for example, used the Declaration of Independence as a source text for her erasure poem ‘Declaration’. The activity provided Smith the opportunity to reimagine the text, finding within it what otherwise goes unsaid: that slavery was constitutive of the States from its inception, and despite resistance, ‘repeated / petitions have been answered
only by repeated injury.’ (11-12) Nicole Sealey (2020), in ‘Pages 5-8 (An excerpt from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure)’, similarly finds in the practice of erasure poetry an opportunity for social intervention; below is an excerpt from the text (Figure 1):

In this erasure, Sealey excises language from the US Department of Justice’s investigation into unlawful conduct in the Ferguson (Missouri) Police Department, revealing instead a poem that articulates the lyricality and vulnerability of Black experience amidst racist policing. Both Sealey and Smith reveal the use of such writing practice as not merely academic exercise or creative expression but as affording ethically useful modes of engagement.

Conclusions

There are countless ways to play with close writing in the classroom. What we found through our experience with the above and similar approaches can be organised into a few specific claims:

1) Close writing exercises are useful for developing students’ writing. They help students, for example, adapt their language to suit a particular audience, provide compelling evidence to support claims, and produce more compelling and readable work.

2) We find that the exercises facilitate students’ capacities for textual analysis. Through these methods students conduct independent close readings that demonstrate a nuanced understanding of localised or microscopic textual features. This occurs at the morphemic level, as when an exercise in crafting neologisms offered opportunities for students to consider textual meaning of morphemes and etymologies. And it occurs at the syntactic level, when one student rewrote passages to differing lengths in order to explore competing purposes for texts. Encouragingly, students communicated the utility of such
writing practices in service to the kinds of textual analysis typical of post-secondary classrooms through their midterm and summative course evaluations.

3) Close writing can thwart apathy and apprehension. We feel this is no minor claim but rather one of the boons of this work. Our students often reported that the exercises generated enthusiasm in their post-secondary classrooms and greater engagement in lessons. By pivoting from didactic approaches to close reading and writing pedagogy towards exploratory and experimental close writing exercises, students are participating directly in literary play. No longer spectators reading from the sidelines, they are invited to alter, tinker, and recompose text. By including their own texts in discussion of original texts, students are more invested in the discourse and more attentive to the effects of small, localised edits. Furthermore, because this work is positioned as play, students also express a sense of enjoyment in analytical discussion and activity.

4) Finally, educators committed to justice will find value in the ways this inquiry explores post-secondary writing practices that resist the reproduction of inequitable structures. Close writing provides a way for instructors to frame and prompt students’ interrogation of normative grammatical structures while simultaneously directing students’ critical attention to the politics of language and inequities embedded in received and expressed language. More than two decades ago, Jane Gallop (2000) theorized “not just an ethics for reading, a way to read more ethically, but a reading for ethics, close reading as a means to a more just treatment of others.” (17) The hope is that our conceptualizing here points writing pedagogy in a similar direction.

In pointing to the value of close writing in facilitating the work of reading, this inquiry reframes existing understandings of textual English and possibilities for curricular engagement of students
with texts in classrooms. We end with a requisite caveat about efficacy: of course these exercises, in this study and our educational experience with them, did not reach all students, nor did they generate the kinds of epiphanies we dreamed they would. Briante’s “Further Exercises” points to the ethical considerations of this work. It is hard not to feel a discomfiting tension at the prospect of composing “a list of words that sound like shots being fired on a residential street” or that “sound like children being herded into cages.” Doing so we confront the limits of representation: how crassly inadequate language can be in expressing trauma, especially that of others. While we have not taught Briante’s poem in our classrooms, we are nevertheless wary of the stakes whenever we put pressure on language to directly convey life. In that way writing, like “everything[,] is dangerous.” (Foucault 1983, 231). And yet to acknowledge this danger is also to acknowledge writing’s capacity to – indirectly, but no less meaningfully – matter. This is because we believe, like Saunders (2021), that words are “central to how we think, which, in turn, determines how well (how lovingly, how fully) we live.” (para. 7) At their best, close writing pedagogies proceed with this in mind, finding careful and creative composition possibilities for learning and living with literature.
References


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