

Thursday, February 24, 2022

Dear [six specific participant names redacted] and other participants of the PEN Project,

While time only afforded the opportunity to read words from six of you, I want to begin by thanking all of you. Thank you for sharing your work with those of us at Arizona State University, for reading our feedback, and for reading these letters.

Thank you for being teachable and for teaching us—for teaching me.

While I have enjoyed reading your submissions, these have also helped me see how resilient you are. You are finding and using the positive opportunities available to you, opportunities that will help you grow as individuals. I commend you and thank you.

I have also seen how much talent you have. I have long heard from colleagues who teach undergraduate and graduate courses in prisons about how dedicated their students are, but seeing it firsthand has been educational. You are all exceptional writers—you really are. In other words, you are all creators and thinkers, artists and visionaries, and historians, even, as shown in your writings.

Thank you for teaching me some about your life. While your works aren't necessarily a reflection of your personal experiences and thoughts, your poetry and essays and short stories and other words are a kind of mirror to your own hopes and fears—regardless of whether the tangible hopes and fears in your stories belong to yourself, to your narrator, to friends, or to individuals entirely created for purposes of art.

I also learned and internalized how writing without a computer—or typewriter—poses additional challenges. I am often blind to the luxury that is having my laptop that catches most spelling mistakes automatically and that makes lowercase and uppercase letters completely without ambiguity. Given that my job as a professor and my “job” as a student is 100 percent on the computer, my messy handwriting is something almost no one knows about anymore. Thank you for reminding me that not everyone has access to such contemporary technologies.

On the note, I also learned that transcribing is hard work! It's more challenging and time-consuming than it might look, but it's also something that I enjoyed doing. While I had some initial doubts, it really did prove to be a great way of getting into the mindset of your works and learning about your words in ways otherwise impossible.

I also learned about poetry. Indeed, part of why I decided to get an additional graduate degree—this one in English—is because my background has been lacking when it comes to the literary. Your poems helped me appreciate rhyme, image, the prose poem, effective uses of stanzas, and the short story/memoir.

I've also learned and grown to appreciate more how much we all have in common. We are all writers. We are all students. We are all learners. We are all educators. We are all doing the best we can. We are all trying to make sense of this thing called life. We all want bonds with others.

I mentioned that in addition to being a student/intern in this class, I am a professor. Because of this, I have a lot of experience writing and publishing. So, if you don't mind, I also wanted to share some—unsolicited, albeit—advice with you. These are things I've learned over the years and think might be helpful for you, too.

Always remember you are the author. Your name is on the piece. Make sure it says what *you* want it to say. The same exact piece can be both loved and hated by many, so it's best to satisfy yourself first. Audiences for any given piece always exist.

That said, when it comes to publishing, as I know many of you have interest in, there is almost always some negotiation with the editor and/or publication involved. I have written hundreds of articles, including for places like *The Washington Post*, and every article has at least a word or a sentence for which I have objections. This is because editors each have their own preferences and ideas about what is effective. Sometimes, it's worth insisting that a specific structure or word or sentence remain as is. Other times, it's worth it to have a larger audience. Alternatively, sometimes, you might have to pull an article because of diverging visions.

Bottom line, your name is on it, so make sure you stand by it.

That said, when you put your work out there, every reader will interpret it in different ways and will interpret it from their experiences. This is sometimes called “the death of the author” in literary theory. You will like some of these ways. They will open your eyes to your own work. You will also dislike many of the interpretations readers get.

One more note about editors: When it comes to titles! My goodness! The publication almost always overrules authors. (I'm also a publisher, and I also overrule authors on titles in most cases. It's about getting a title that will attract readers and that fits the general publication's established conventions.)

As you are doing, always look for advice and mentors. I have trusted friends who I can trust with writing that is “not ready for human eyes.” Writing that is a sloppy, nonsensically disaster. Writing that needs something that I can't see. Find people like this. People you can trust. People who will be honest with you. We all need people who will always say “this is an excellent article.” We also all need people who will be brutally honest.

On this note, please, remember that writing is always in-progress. A “finished poem” or “finished essay” does not exist. Room for further revision always exists. (Have you ever noticed how sometimes a singer will change a few of the lyrics in a song over time? Same thing.) This is both the “blessing and curse” of writing. Room always remains to further think about any piece, but at some point, you have to declare it “finished enough.”

Always keep learning. Try new things with your writing—try new forms or new preparation patterns. For a long time, I would write and write and stop in a good place. I read a suggestion for an alternative practice that I have found very effective: Stop in a bad place. Yes, *a bad place*.

Stop when the ideas are flowing in the middle of a paragraph or in the middle of a sentence because then you can pick right back up later and continue the momentum much easier.

Be sure to read often, too, as time and resources allow. Reading—any kind of reading and as many different types of genres/modes as possible—helps us grow as writers because we unconsciously absorb words, structures, histories, and other ideas from these texts. It helps you find what works and what doesn't work, even if for you only, in published writing.

That's all of the advice I have for now!

In closing, these seven-week semesters sure go by quickly. I wish I could see how your pieces as they continue to develop, especially those I've seen this term.

Thank you, a final time, for sharing your work with us at Arizona State University. There is a powerful bond of trust—more so given we are all anonymous to each other—between writer and commenter. Thank you for trusting us—me—with your work.

I wish you all the best.

And remember when you write, you have those words and ideas forever.

Sincerely,

[project pseudonym redacted]