

CHAPTER 3

Relationships and Language: The Power of Composing

It was a late summer evening and I was with my boyfriend, Dan, at a BBQ thrown on the lawn of one of our graduate school professors. Standing there, looking at the sun going down, I quickly realized that Dan and I should get married. Neither one of us believed in the virtue of marriage as a social construct at the time, but I remember standing on that green grass as the BBQ was winding down, staring at Dan laughing. I held a glass of wine in my hand; Dan was across the yard with a friend, talking with his hands, beer bottle waving around, and the sun was gently working its way below the roofline. I loved him. He loved me.

We walked home, through the main drag in town, decided to get a beer at a tavern that was perched on the canal. We made our way to the patio where boats crept by, headed for home.

“I want to get married,” I blurted.

Dan’s face was openly surprised; freckles jumped off his face, startled, and ran into the canal.

We fought about it, in public, on this lovely end-of-summer eve. The fight ended with me shouting, as I was preparing to stomp off, “Either you marry me or we have to break up.”

That isn’t even logical. And, more to the point, the words I was meaning were not the words I was saying.

Has this ever happened to you? You say something ridiculous, knowing it’s not exactly what you mean, but you cannot take it back and now the mending of your stupid words requires more words to mend it completely?

Have no fear—the mending will happen if and when you get your words back. When I mended this situation, Dan and I decided we would eventually get married. We had an important talk. And we did get married, about a year later.

Welcome to Composition I: the course that should teach you how to compose, communicate what you mean, and not do what I did.



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As we've already discussed, composing is working with pieces to make a new whole. This course is, yes, a writing course. I prefer to see it as a course about language, a course that privileges word choice as an intentional, thoughtful act of communication.

COMPOSITION means, throughout a project, identifying several key elements

FOCUS means what the thesis, anchor, or central idea of the work is

What is the center of the work? For me, when I write about demanding that Dan marry me, the center is just that: I foolishly misused my language and miscommunicated what I meant, which was that I wanted to spend my life with Dan. What is your primary goal with your work? If I keep writing about this scene with Dan, my goal is to prove that I loved Dan, and that sometimes, language gets screwy when we mean for it to be direct. Mixed messages cause consequences we have to work through. For you, whatever the focus is, make sure it appears in all areas of your work—all paragraphs, all images, all scenes. The focus is also seen as the **rhetorical nature of the work**, or its purpose. Find a deeper, more significant reason to create the work. This is where the **So What?** question emerges. Ask yourself why your work matters—it does, and have an answer. Mine is to show, with the BBQ and subsequent bar scenes, how language can be misused and why that's important in relationships. In your own work, have an answer about why your topic matters.

AUDIENCE means who will read, hear, or see the work

Identify very clearly who the work is for beyond the person grading it. If you write a speech for high school students, do you mean general high school students in America? Middle-class students in Georgia? What kind of student populations are you trying to reach? If you make a film for government officials about your city's recycling program, what do you want the officials to see and do? Get clear on your audience right away, because what you want your audience to know and do shapes how you create. My audience for writing about Dan is college-aged individuals and up, those who likely have experience with the complexities of romantic relationships and choices about marriage.

FORMAT or **MODE** means what type of document you will create now that you have identified the focus, audience, and rhetorical nature of the project

Like my student who made a digital narrative on film in chapter two, you may have a choice about the formats of your semester projects. You might have the choice to create a **multimodal work** (a work using more than one form, such as photographs paired with written research, or a film with narrative overlay) or a single-mode work (a work using one form, such as a written essay). Multimodality is common with technology available to us. Instead of writing a paper, consider, for example, filming your family and making a **digital narrative** out of it (a film rendition of a personal story), or a **photo essay** (a collected group of photographs and corresponding text). All the work here begins with the power of word choice and knowing what type of document will best accomplish your goal.

DETAILS means all the important main ideas, descriptions, and necessary information about the topic

What can you tell us, show us, describe to us, that is necessary for the purpose and focus of the work? Be specific. If your photo essay takes place in the Midwest, tell me if we're in Kansas or Missouri, etc. If your purpose is to persuade people in your town to adopt more animals from the Humane Society, give evidence to answer the So What question, and then explain all the steps to make the adoptions happen.

AUTONOMY means the ability to control your project

Economist Dan Pink calls autonomy one of the greatest motivators for success. If you have as much control as possible over all aspects of a project in this course, your work will be of exponentially higher quality because your choices have meaning to you.

You will also need **introductions** (beginnings) and **conclusions** (endings), but these will differ depending on the type of document you are creating. For example, if you are developing a concept in a photo essay, you may choose to forego a written introduction because you want the viewer to make inferences and discoveries about what the viewer is seeing in a gradual manner. Your choices about how to begin and how to end a text all come down to being able to know your focus, develop it, satisfy the audience’s expectations (and your own), and cover all your bases—leave no scene or example out when it helps the goal of the project.

Back to my own example. I started this chapter by describing a scene with images so you could see it. My hope is that my level of detail puts you into the moment, introduces Dan and me, and sets the scene to unfold. In the middle, I would develop more scenes to explain the fallout from my demand that Dan marry me or leave me. I would likely show you even more examples of when I kept using inarticulate language and suffered consequences for it, such as when I miscommunicated how I wanted my hair colored to my hair stylist the night before my first day of teaching began, and, to comfort me, Dan told me I looked like *The Blair Witch Project*, thinking this would soothe me. I would then conclude with how Dan and I resolved our disputes and got married, and how my hair color went back to normal.

Most students come into my class thinking that they will only be writing papers. Often, they are bored by writing prescriptive papers. I give guidelines for each unit project, and I also give options. In this way, the students’ autonomy is preserved and the guidelines are able to help structure, focus, and enrich the choices the students make.

Writing an Autonomous Project

When you are assigned an autonomous project, it’s common to feel overwhelmed. Instead, ground yourself by moving through these choices.

Participants: Will you work in a group? With a partner? Alone?

Topic: What will the topic be? Why? Answer the “So What” question. If you don’t have an answer, try talking it through. Okay. I want to write about that time when I told Dan he either had to marry me or he had to break up with me. So what? Well, it showed me that language matters, and so does logic, because he got really mad, and also confused. He didn’t think I wanted to get married. Aha. This is about language choices. That matters to everyone who has relationships and uses language in them because language affects the quality of our relationships.

Continued

Purpose: What is the purpose of the project? How will it be seen, read, heard? See the paragraph above. If you can determine why your topic matters, you have your purpose.

Mode: What format will this take?

Audience: Determine who should see or hear your project, and who will benefit from this project.

Outcome: What is your final goal, or outcome, with this project? Aim for this.

The point of composing is to learn that language and images are powerful. We know this emotionally from interacting with others. But bringing this power into a classroom is valuable work. For example, I hid my battle with anorexia when I was asked to write about how I connected to texts in English classes. I didn't disclose my history with anorexia until I was a senior in college, and, by then, my writing skills had developed in the range of analysis and evaluation of a subject—I had gotten good at masking true material by **intellectualizing**, or writing *around* my disorder, not *about* it. By the time I was challenged in a creative writing workshop to write a narrative nonfiction essay, it was like I was re-learning how to write. I was not asked to analyze the dysfunctional behavior of anorexics in general. I was charged with writing about my starvation and to describe, in detail, my ongoing disease. Had I tried this type of honest writing earlier in my college career, this experience would not have been so frightening. I finally wanted to explore these pieces of my life. I needed to figure out how and why.

Composing means communicating because when we select words to use, and put them in order, or when we select images and show these to an audience, we're attempting to connect to the audience. For example, when a student in class was exiting an abusive relationship, she realized that her persuasive writing and fact-based writing in class improved her ability to fill out the necessary forms for a restraining order, along with preparing her to compose a statement at a trial with her abuser. The more articulate she was, the safer she became.

The ways in which we compose, or write, think, show images, and make conclusions, have the opportunity to change lives. When I began writing about my life through narrative, I grew more confident in my ability to talk to others, particularly during job interviews. Once I saw that I could articulate my experiences and why they were meaningful, I was able to talk specifically about my skills, strengths, and weaknesses.

There are many ways in which your language shapes you, your experiences, and the power you have over or with these experiences. If, say, you need to ask for a day off at work, how will you compose this request? In person? In email? In a text? Which one is appropriate? It depends on the context of your relationship with the person who may or may not grant you permission for the day off.

If you're fighting with your friend, and you text her, and she wanted you to call her instead, your composition choice has missed its mark, and possibly done damage. How many of you have received a message in a less personal mode than you would have wanted? A Facebook message from a personal friend, voicing concern about you skipping classes? *Why didn't she talk to me*, you might think. A phone call from a friend you haven't seen since first grade? Is that welcome or uncomfortable? We make composition choices daily, and then we make language choices to make our messages as clear as possible.

Exercise

Try to discover some of your composing preferences, along with types of writing that come most naturally to you. Next to each subject below, name the mode (type) of communication you would use to communicate a message (such as a phone call, an email, a text, a letter, a paper, etc.) and jot down a brief message of what you would say or write.

Subject: Giving bad news to a good friend

Mode:

Message:

Subject: Asking a college professor for an extension on a major assignment

Mode:

Message:

Subject: Asking a relative for money

Mode:

Message:

Subject: Following up on a job application

Mode:

Message:

Subject: Having to create a capstone (final) academic project in your area of interest

Mode:

Message:

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Circle any mode that occurs more than once. What might this say about your choice of composing a message?

Next, choose one of the subjects that is, or could be, a true event in your current life, and write out what you would say. Actually compose this message to the chosen person.

Subject:

Mode:

Written Message:

Look at your sentences. Are your sentences long? Descriptive? Short? Terse? What kind of **tone**, or emotional value, are you displaying? Do you focus more on the issue, yourself, or the person? Do you stick to the present or bring up the past or future? Do you soften the message? Make the message direct? All these identifiers tell you a wealth of information about how and in what ways you are comfortable composing.

After moving through the work we do in a Composition I class, I hope you will have composed in ways that have challenged you and that have shown you where your written, rhetorical, and compositional skills are strongest. All this means is that you will be able to identify what type of writing fits any context, use your writing strengths, and anticipate what is necessary to fully communicate your message to a specific audience. This is where power comes in. How? By choosing the appropriate mode and message, you communicate powerfully. This helps you survive, gain employment, enrich relationships, save time, and advocate for yourself.

When I finally figured out how I wrote most powerfully, which was with honest narrative about my own experiences, my life became clearer to me. When I was able to write about my anorexia with clarity and direct, clear language that showed and disclosed my skeletal self, the world opened up for me. I was less fearful of being judged, and I was more fortified in my recovery. That's what I want for you in this course: to discover the ways in which composing and using language can shape your life in powerful ways, ways that fortify who you are and who you are capable of becoming, like saying, "I do," when you're ready and able to do so.



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SUGGESTED MATERIALS

Baile, Brian. “If You Don’t Believe that You’re Doing Some Good with the Work that You Do, then You Shouldn’t Be Doing It’: An Interview with Cindy Selfe.” *Composition Forum* 21, Spring 2010.

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Elliott, Stephen. “Where I Slept.” *The Rumpus.net*. 1 Apr. 2009.

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The New York Times. “One in Eight Million.” Digital Storytelling Site. 2014.

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Pink, Dan. “The Puzzle of Motivation.” TED Talk. Aug. 2009.

Link: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Trends/Pages/studentsatcommunitycolleges.aspx>

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