

Kiley Forsythe

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Dr. Rich Raymond

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Malvolio and the Writing Process: A Lesson Learned with Shakespeare

Let's just face it, Shakespeare is everywhere. Not only do we read his plays in almost every level of literature (seventh grade to doctoral dissertation), we watch cheesy re-makes of *Much Ado*, and quote the bard in varying situations of appropriateness. Everyone knows Shakespeare, everyone has read Shakespeare, and it often feels as if there is nothing left to write about Shakespeare. However, as every deadline pressed graduate student knows, there just has to be something else to say about the English language's most prolific author, especially when it has to be said in a seminar paper worth eighty percent of your grade. These were my exact thoughts just last semester, and this was the first time I ever thought I might not be able to make a deadline. However, after talking to my professor and taking his advice, I was able to produce an original essay on Malvolio from *Twelfth Night*, although my writing process was drastically different; through careful pre-writing, conferences, and drafting, I was able to successfully complete an academic paper with more clarity than I ever have before.

To begin, I think I should describe my writing process pre-Shakespeare paper. The first step in my writing process is to research as much as I can; typically, I skim at least twenty articles before deciding where I want to situate my own thesis. The next step is to develop a thesis. Usually, this takes place on a piece of loose notebook paper with a variety of colored pens; I write the original thesis in black and make changes in color, and then I rewrite a finalized thesis in black. Once the color-coding is finished, I begin writing. Really, there isn't much

process involved because I write my essay from start to finish and only change minor issues once I am finished writing. I don't usually outline or list quotes I want to use; I just write and then proof, although the attention given to proofing varies with my level of stress. I always know what I want to write before I begin typing, so there has never been a need for extensive pre-writing.

However, grad school, specifically last semester, made it clear that my process was not going to produce the type of writing I needed to produce. Moreover, Shakespeare papers would require much more thought than any type of paper I had written before due to the sheer volume of preceding critical response. So, with only a month left in the semester, I began my Malvolio paper the only way I knew how: research.

When I begin a paper, I always start with research, and I began my Shakespeare paper the same way that I would any paper. Although I have modified the way I approach papers, this is one practice that I will not be able to change. The first step in any paper is gathering sources; I need to know what was written before so that I will not write it again. This research method stems both from my time as an undergraduate and my first seminar in grad school; both said, in terms not so dissimilar, look before you leap; do not spend time writing a paper that has already been written. So, I don't. I still skim articles written about characters, novels, or themes I want to explore because I hate the thought of deleting hard work. In the case of my paper on Malvolio, all I knew I wanted to write about the steward because his stint in the 'dark house' intrigued me. Did he deserve this? What did other critics think? So, before talking to my professor, I sent for and printed off at least twenty-five articles on Malvolio and began my research.

Needless to say, I read a lot. I read articles for a solid week, but in the end, I only knew that I thought Malvolio was a jerk and that Malvolio is a jerk was not a valid topic for a seminar

paper. With three weeks left, I broke down and went to my professor and explained I had no idea what I was going to write about, but I had twenty-five journal articles at my disposal. He chuckled and asked me what I thought about Malvolio, so I told him Malvolio was a jerk and I agreed with at least two-thirds of the critics I'd read who said Malvolio got what he deserved; my research had at least helped me form an opinion, but my professor questioned me on reasons. Why did Malvolio deserve this? Was his desire for Olivia his own? Brought about by others? Harmless or harmful? I answered every question: Malvolio forced himself onto Olivia and it was a harming attention; however, Malvolio only pursued Olivia after being tipped off by Maria's letter. Professor X smiled and told me to bring him a list of quotes that supported that theory the next day. I went home, found the quotes, and explained the evidence. He smiled again and told me to email a thesis to him by the following Sunday so we could talk about it Monday.

After much whining and many sheets of loose leaf paper blotched over with ink of every color, I had a thesis. The next day, I gathered my quotes and walked with my head down to his office; I'd written the thesis, but I knew it sucked. I wasn't necessarily wrong, but I wasn't completely right either. We talked about it, the rights and the wrongs. Eventually, he was able to help me see the way to a better thesis by asking questions and offering wording suggestions, and I was able to write: "Through a close reading of Malvolio throughout the entirety of *Twelfth Night*, this essay hopes to prove that Malvolio's tyrannical disposition, narcissism, and poor abilities as a hermeneutist are indicators of the steward's embodiment of the negative phallus throughout the entirety of the play and not just in the final act." This was my start; my way in. But, because I have taken many classes with Professor X and he knew my writing style, he insisted that, when I began my body, that I remove my "scaffolding" of literary criticism. He said, "Use endnotes and don't try to hide behind other critics. You're a good enough writer to

stand in the front, not in the back.” With this advice in mind, I began writing my research paper, but more differently than I had ever done before.

In “Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product,” Donald Murray offers ten implications of teaching writing in this manner, and most of the implications stipulate that the student is the generator of the content, language, and individualized writing process (4-6). With my Shakespeare paper, the second and fourth of Murray’s implications became true for my writing process. Professor X did not offer the class a prompt; rather, he allowed each of us to test theories and ideas on our own before writing the paper. I was allowed to come to Malvolio on my own with no prodding from my professor, but when I needed help focusing on what I thought about Malvolio, Professor X offered guiding questions that were in alignment with Murray’s second implement: “The teacher supports but does not direct this expedition to the student’s own truth” (5). Moreover, Professor X gave me the opportunity to construct a series of mini-drafts which eventually became the most crucial elements of my final paper. These mini-drafts fall under Murray’s fourth stipulation: “The student should have the opportunity to write all the drafts necessary for him to discover what he has to say” (5-6). However, while none of the components of my drafting could be counted as individual papers, each component became a crucial element of my final product, so while Professor X did not follow Murray’s fourth stipulation to the letter, he did offer me a means to gradually construct my paper which is the focal point of the fourth stipulation. With Professor X’s guidance, not too much and not too little, I was able to alter the way I approached the paper.

The process itself wasn’t so different. I wrote my paper from introduction to conclusion which is what I had always done before. This time, though, I used three different word documents to organize my body paragraphs. When I got stuck on the significance of Olivia’s

ring, I could write about M.A.O.I. until I was ready to return. The quotes my professor asked me to bring him were my guide; I'd already done most of the footwork; I just needed to do the brain work. When I finished one section of the paper, I transferred it to the main document and made my corrections. The main document was gradually built over a period of three days, and I had only used one theory to set-up my argument. There were no critics in my paper, and my paper was fifteen pages long at the end of three days. By waiting to add the critics to my paper, forgoing the "scaffold," I was able to create an argument wholly my own. It was both gratifying and terrifying because, no matter what, I only had two more days to write the paper, and there was no time to make truly major adjustments.

The day after I finished the body of the paper, I wrote my endnotes based off of the research I had done prior to deciding what it was I needed to write about. Not only was I able to produce two pages of endnotes in little more than three hours, but I was also able to include more pertinent information from my sources. If I had used my "scaffold" of sources, then I would have simply offered a very limited view of the work other critics had done; I'd done it before. Endnotes allowed me to expand my use of any given source with the added bonus of being able to explain my reasons for using a critic or for quibbling with their view on a subject. For instance, when talking about the significance of M.A.O.I., I was able to explain why I thought the letters were meaningless:

The criticism discussing the potential meaning of M.O.A.I. is both vast and varied.

Maurice Hunt suggests that the letters are simply placed in the scene to further ridicule Malvolio as a Puritan because Puritans were known to "[twist]" meaning from words in order to justify their beliefs (282). Robert Fleissner speculates that the letters could have stood for "Mare Orbis Aer Ignis" (Water-Earth-Air-Fire), "I AM Olivia," "My Own

Adored Idol,” or as another component of the anagram for Olivia/ Viola (95). Fleissner also notes that the letters could have also simply been taken from Malvolio’s name (96). Because there are literally thousands of ways to interpret M.O.A.I., the definitive interpretation of the letters is impossible, which is why I stipulate that the letters are most likely meaningless.

The freedom I felt when using the endnotes was great, and I plan on using them more. Because of this paper, they have become a permanent part of my writing process because of the way they allow my research to be more effective.

On the day before my paper was due, I proof read it. While grammar was not the reason for my becoming an English major, I do have a grasp of it; although, depending on how late I waited to start on my paper, my usage is spotty at best, at least in my own papers. I have always been told to let my papers rest before proofing them, but that usually doesn’t happen; my papers arrive at professors’ desks ink still wet. However, with this paper, I took my time and read it carefully, aloud. I found obvious problems and fixed them. I found not so obvious problems and fixed those too. I found places where I wasn’t sure if there was a problem or not, so I rewrote them to be sure they were not problems. I remembered to spell check. I finished my paper with enough time to enjoy a glass of wine and watch the latest episode of *Restaurant: Impossible*; it was a miracle. I placed my paper in Professor X’s mailbox the next morning and got it back the first day of classes this semester. There was a big “A” on the back along with a note to work on my diction and syntax. I was pleased.

In retrospect, I spent less time on my Shakespeare seminar paper than I had on any seminar paper before it. I was unwittingly cajoled into pre-writing, although I did my usual research. While I typically write my paper from beginning to end, I wrote this paper in pieces

that I gradually grafted together. Endnotes were used for the first time and extensive time was given to proof reading. Even with all of the extra steps, I wrote an entire seminar paper in a week and received the grade I wanted; I also used my own voice rather than a “scaffold” to hide behind. Ultimately, my writing process was challenged, and I think I am a better writer for it.

Work Cited

Murray, Donald M. "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*. Ed. Victor Villanueva and Kristen L. Arola. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011. 3-6.