

Ryan Griffith
Spring 2023 Sabbatical Leave Report
Grossmont College
09.25.23

What was accomplished during the sabbatical leave?

My sabbatical leave proposed to find new, equitable forms of writing that honor the diverse backgrounds of our students at Grossmont College. In particular, I intended to conduct research into alternative compositional forms that complicate the five-paragraph essay and honor multicultural modes of writing. I accomplished all of the following objectives for the sabbatical:

- I researched and read the work of authors who practice alternative, more equitable forms of composition, particularly writers representing a range of racial, ethnic, gender, language, and social backgrounds. From these writers I compiled a bank of model essays for use in English 120/124 courses at Grossmont College. Of the many essays I read, the five I found most relevant and immediately adaptable to our composition courses are “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldua, “Practical Magic” by Rowan McCandless, “Our Secret” by Susan Griffin, “States” by Edward Said, and “The Ordinary Devoted Mother” by Alison Bechdel. I chose these pieces not only for their formal inventiveness and complication of the five-paragraph essay model, but also because the aforementioned writers reflected a vast array of backgrounds and experiences: Anzaldua is a lesbian, feminist, Chicana writer; McCandless, a biracial writer who calls herself “the daughter of many diasporas”; Said, a Palestinian-American academic, literary critic and political activist; Griffin, a respected feminist, writer, activist, poet, and teacher; and Bechdel, a celebrated cartoonist and graphic novelist, whose work often reflects gay life.
- I created equitable paper assignments (see attachments) for each of the aforementioned authors and texts. These assignments offer Grossmont students new, multicultural forms of expression in their writing, especially

the capacity to express their realities, their unique selves, with greater complexity, authenticity, and accuracy. Also of note are the ways my paper assignments offer new forms that complicate the traditional five-paragraph essay. Now students will be given options to write in such forms as the collage essay, the hermit crab essay, the graphic novel essay, or the photographic essay.

- I practiced the writing process, from planning to drafting to revision, of multiple writing projects in alternative forms. One of these pieces, "Transit," was subsequently published in the journal *Flash Boulevard* on March 11, 2023.
- I enrolled in numerous on-line writing workshops, especially those offered by *Bending Genres*, an online journal devoted to formally innovative writing that crosses genres and experiments in form.

What are the implications for me as a teacher/thinker/creator?

The sabbatical leave afforded me the time to rethink and revise my teaching practices to be more culturally responsive and equity-minded. Especially important, and the focus of this project, was to reexamine the Western patriarchal model of the five-paragraph essay for student compositions and propose alternative models that honor our students' complex multicultural realities and modalities of thought. Through my research and subsequent compilation of essays and writing prompts, I am now significantly better prepared to meet the needs of my students.

Additionally, I have made significant advances in my thinking about what an essay "is" and the uses of writing as a component of an effective undergraduate education. I have moved toward the belief that an essay should be a tool for students to explore and discover what they think and who they are; as such, the essay should be a form that accommodates risk, invention, ambiguity, chaos, and seeking. The traditional five-paragraph essay, with its stiff, artificial constraints, rigid thesis, and predictable formulaic unfolding, does nothing but produce stilted, unoriginal, often lifeless writing. Why should an essay be different from students' lives and the world

itself? Paraphrasing the words of Franz Kafka, an essay should be the axe to break open the frozen sea within us.

What are the implications for the discipline?

As previously noted, the five-paragraph essay so popular in English Departments is actually an impediment to students' progress because it forces writing into a structure that is not conducive to intellectual inquiry and engagement. The discipline needs to move beyond these traditionally stolid, patriarchal templates and towards new forms of student writing such as the collage essay, the hermit crab essay, the photographic essay, and the graphic essay. These forms allow for writing that accommodates multiple voices, diverse realities, intellectual life, and movement towards the complexities of truth. Given the challenge of the equity movement to reconsider old educational assumptions about race, gender, ethnicity, language, class, and social circumstance, my work to adopt new writing forms is absolutely essential to the future of English as a relevant discipline.

How does the sabbatical contribute to the educational goals of the department, college, and district?

Articulating our shared values on its webpage, the District's Mission Statement cites "the power of diversity and inclusion: we are committed to a climate for learning that considers diverse perspectives to be a powerful component in the education of every individual, accommodating both differences and commonalities." The main purpose of this sabbatical project was to create a learning climate that "considers diverse perspectives" and "accommodates both differences and commonalities," especially through writing that honors students' unique backgrounds, realities, cultures, and capacity for original thought. Clearly, this project supported the District's value of "the power of diversity and inclusion," as well as the range of other values previously mentioned.

Additionally, the District's Mission Statement cites another shared value as "creativity and innovation: we value the capacity for ingenuity and originality on our campus and within our community." This sabbatical project was, most fundamentally, about exercising "ingenuity and originality" in re-envisioning the possibilities for student writing. Not only did I need to rethink old models of composition, I needed to gather new models for student writing and create new prompts to stimulate thought.

In addition to advancing our institutional goals and values, this sabbatical will also benefit Grossmont College faculty through a series of Professional Development workshops I will offer, both at the departmental, division, and college levels.

Departmentally, I will offer workshops during FLEX week but also through ongoing conversations as part of our "Decomposition" series, monthly meetings I designed and initiated in 2019 to advance our practices in the teaching of composition. My research into equitable forms of writing will be invaluable to our composition courses, but it will also be illuminating to all of my colleagues across the campus, since writing is a skill practiced across disciplines. In particular, I see clear applications for my project to writing done in Cross-Cultural Studies, History, Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science courses, among many others.

Ultimately, I hope my sabbatical work will manifest itself in the teaching philosophies of our English Department instructors and the curricula of our English 120/English 124 courses. I realize that change is slow and that many instructors hold the five-paragraph model sacrosanct, so I anticipate my new essay forms will encounter at least some resistance. Nonetheless, given the challenges of the equity movement to reconsider old educational assumptions in order to serve the diverse needs of our students, I believe that the kinds of essays we teach and require of our students must evolve.

Ryan Griffith 2023 Sabbatical Report Abstract

“Finding New Forms: Equity in the Composition Classroom”

The equity movement has challenged us to reconsider old educational assumptions in order to work for a greater number of students who differ by race, gender, ethnicity, language, class, and social circumstance. Accordingly, my sabbatical project sought equitable forms of writing that honor the diverse backgrounds of our students. I conducted research into alternative compositional forms that complicate the Western patriarchal five-paragraph essay and honor multicultural modes of writing. I read current scholarship, gathered equitable essay models and assignments for composition, and practiced writing the very innovative forms that I want students to produce. Ultimately, this sabbatical resulted in the creation of model essay and assignment banks and the composition of my own essays. In the coming semesters I will offer presentations to faculty and hopefully publish my findings in academic journals. The Grossmont students, English Department, College, District, and community will benefit from these more equitable practices.

Sample Prompts

English 124
“Our Secret” Paper
200 points

Length: 5-8 pages

Value: 200 points

Due: Submitted to Canvas by _____.

In “Our Secret” Susan Griffin is writing in experimental form, trying to do something that she can’t do in the “usual” essay. She wants to make a different kind of argument and engage her reader in a different manner, and so she mixes personal and academic writing, assembling fragments and seemingly unrelated material into surprising and suggestive relationships. She organizes her material, but not in the usual linear mode of thesis-example-conclusion. Her prose serves to create a “field” where many bodies are set in relationship.

For this option, write a Griffin-like essay, one similar in its methods of organization and argument. You will need to think about the stories you might tell and about the texts you might gather (stories and texts not your own) that connect your own personal history to a larger historical event or persona. You should also think of metaphors that resonate with your experience, such as Griffin’s use of the cell and the V-1 rocket. As you write, you will want to think carefully about arrangement and about commentary (where you will speak to your reader as writer of the piece). You should not feel bound to Griffin’s subject matter, but you should feel like you are working in her spirit of experimentation.

Grading Criteria:

1. Does the paper have *at least three* (3) independent, fully developed strands? Do these strands have some sense of internal resonance, or suggestive relationships between them?
2. Is the paper fully developed, realized to its maximum potential?
3. Does the paper demonstrate careful, thoughtful organization?
4. Does the paper utilize *at least three* outside sources? Are these sources cited both in-text and in a Works Cited page using proper MLA style?
5. Is the paper mostly free of grammatical and mechanical errors?

English 124 Final Project
“How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldua
200 points

Length: 5-8 pages

Value: 200 points

Due: Submitted to Canvas by _____.

Note: Option two can only be done individually—no group projects.

Gloria Anzaldua has described her text as a kind of crazy dance. It is, she says, a text with a mind of its own, “putting together pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will.” Hers is a prose full of variety and seeming contradictions; it is a writing that could be said to represent the cultural “crossroads” which is her experience/sensibility.

As an experiment whose goal is the development of an alternate (in Anzaldua’s terms, a mixed or *mestiza*) understanding, write an autobiographical text whose shape and motives could be described in her terms: a mosaic, woven, with numerous overlays; a montage, a beaded work, a crazy dance, drawing on the various ways of thinking, speaking, understanding that might be said to be part of your own mixed cultural position, your own mixed sensibility.

To prepare for this essay, think about the different positions you could be said to occupy, the different voices that are part of your background or present, the competing ways of thinking that make up your points of view. Imagine that your goal is to present your world and your experience to those who are not necessarily prepared to be sympathetic or to understand. And, following Anzaldua, you should work to construct a mixed text, not a single unified one. This will be challenging, since you will be writing what might be called a “forbidden” text, one you have not been prepared to write.

Grading Criteria:

1. Does the paper have *at least three* (3) independent, fully developed strands? Do these strands have some sense of internal resonance, or suggestive relationships between them?
2. Is the paper fully developed, realized to its maximum potential?
3. Does the paper demonstrate careful, thoughtful organization?
4. Does the paper utilize *at least three* outside sources? Are these sources cited both in-text and in a Works Cited page using proper MLA style?
5. Is the paper mostly free of grammatical and mechanical errors?

English 124 Final Project
“States” by Edward Said
200 points

Length: 5-8 pages

Value: 200 points

Due: Submitted to Canvas by _____.

Note: Option two can only be done individually—no group projects.

Using Edward Said’s “States” as a model, compose a similar project, a Said-like reading of a set of photos. These can be photos prepared for the occasion (by you or your colleague); they could also be photos already available. Whatever the source, they should represent people and places, a history and/or geography that you know well, that you know to be complex and contradictory, and that you know will not be easily or readily understood by others, both the group for whom you will be writing (most usefully the members of your class) and readers more generally. You must begin with a sense that the photos cannot speak for themselves; you must speak for them.

In preparation, you should reread closely to come to a careful understanding of Said’s project. To prepare a document that is Said-like (one that shows you understand what Said is doing), you will need an expert’s sense of how to write from and to photographs, and you will need to consider questions of form—of order, arrangement, and genre.

Grading Criteria:

1. Does the paper arrange a minimum of seven (7) photos and offer a “reading” of these photos, a way of understanding their complexities and contradictions, to give readers a sense of the various perspectives and arguments surrounding a people/place, or a history/geography you know well?
2. Is the paper fully developed, realized to its maximum potential?
3. Does the paper demonstrate careful, thoughtful organization?
4. Does the paper utilize *at least three* outside sources? Are these sources cited both in-text and in a Works Cited page using proper MLA style?
5. Is the paper mostly free of grammatical and mechanical errors?

English 124 Final Project

“Practical Magic: A Beginner’s Grimoire” by Rowan McCandless

200 points

Length: 5-8 pages

Value: 200 points

Due: Submitted to Canvas by _____.

Note: Option two can only be done individually—no group projects.

In “Practical Magic,” Rowan McCandless creates a wild mash-up of many different forms, including autobiography, Q & A’s, definitions, lists, graphics, photographs, instructions, how-to manuals, diagrams, text messages, and maps. Her arrangement of these diverse materials creates an argument about the ways we make meaning of the world these days, navigating a constant bombardment of information and forms to determine what is most significant to our lives.

It is useful to think about McCandless’s text as a mash-up of materials that reflect our current ways of perception, as a way of making the reader experience the difficulty of making sense of the world today. One way to study this, to feel its effects, is to imitate it, to take it as a model. For this option, write a McCandless-like essay, one similar in its methods of organization and argument. You will need to think about the central autobiographical narrative as well as the materials (definitions, diagrams, text messages, etc.) you will use.

Grading Criteria:

1. Does the paper utilize *at least three* (3) different types of materials (definitions, lists, maps, text messages, etc.) to give the reader a sense of the complexity of the contemporary world? Do these materials resonate with a central autobiographical narrative?
2. Is the paper fully developed, realized to its maximum potential?
3. Does the paper demonstrate careful, thoughtful organization?
4. Does the paper utilize *at least three* outside sources? Are these sources cited both in-text and in a Works Cited page using proper MLA style?
5. Is the paper mostly free of grammatical and mechanical errors?

English 124 Final Project
“The Ordinary Devoted Mother” by Alison Bechdel
200 points

Length: 5-8 pages

Value: 200 points

Due: Submitted to Canvas by _____.

Note: Option two can only be done individually—no group projects.

In the spirit of Bechdel, compose a piece of graphic memoir. Your piece need not be as long as Bechdel's, but you should think of yourself as imitating Bechdel, taking on her ways of composing. You can come up with your cartoon frames by either drawing them or, if you know how, constructing them digitally in whatever ways you can.

Once you've composed seven to ten frames, write an afterword in which you explore what you've discovered in the process of trying to compose like Bechdel does. What was it like? How did the process reveal something to you about your own methods of composing? What did you learn from trying Bechdel's approach?

Grading Criteria:

1. Does the writer compose at least seven to ten graphic frames and write an afterword in which the writer explores what they've discovered in the process of trying to compose like Bechdel does?
2. Is the paper fully developed, realized to its maximum potential?
3. Does the paper demonstrate careful, thoughtful organization?
4. Does the paper utilize *at least three* outside sources? Are these sources cited both in-text and in a Works Cited page using proper MLA style?
5. Is the paper mostly free of grammatical and mechanical errors?