

Recognizing the Truth of “Craft”

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I teach creative writing at Writespace Houston, a non-profit dedicated to providing MFA-level writing instruction outside of the university. Anyone can enroll, and there are no grades. The cost runs a couple hundred dollars for a course that meets six times, less for 1-day workshops; Writespace gives a lot of scholarships. Students range from teens to folks in their 80s. They are serious about writing, about finding their words, about telling their stories, about documenting their experiences. They are serious about taking notes and saving links and doing the exercises. They are not here to get college credit, get a degree, jump through hoops, or subsidize a football team. They are here to be writers and be part of a writing community. They are writers in and of the pandemic, and I am a writing teacher in and of the pandemic. In the pandemic, we met online for short periods and wrote and shared and talked, with the permanent backdrop of masks and fear and quarantine intensifying our desire to put words on a page. In this atmosphere, we tore down the idea of “craft,” and I want to keep it that way.

Prior to the pandemic, I’d been struggling with the rules writing teachers lay down for students. I’d been thinking about how much of what I taught was not so much about helping students learn to express themselves, but what was instead about making their writing “good” as defined by the white, East Coast-educated men of literature whose grammar adhered to the rules—some of which they themselves established. That’s how I’d learned to write: follow the rules, use grammar correctly, make the content clear, break up long sentences, don’t repeat words, read Strunk and White for advice. In correcting grammar, or suggesting that a poem would become stronger if the words fell into a certain kind of syntax, I felt like I was being a writing cop, but I wasn’t sure how to stop being a writing cop. How did I let go of rules that guide a lot of my own writing? What value did my teaching have if it wasn’t about following the rules to make writing “better”—more familiar; more conforming; more, in many ways, white—to an audience?

Two things happened during the pandemic: I got angry with elitism on a panel, and I read Matthew Salesses’s book *Craft in the Real World*.

Around the time I was thinking about these things, I participated in a panel on creativity. What is creativity? the panel was asked. In the audience was a wealthy white woman whose racism and elitism I had encountered many times before. *Oh, creators must read the classics, she said, and study the prize-winning novels of the past, develop a large vocabulary, build on the literary greatness of those who have paved the way.* She cited white authors. I think I said,

um, no, in that way people disagree now, with a little bit of a sneer; also: *paved the way*? You don't have to read *The Odyssey* to write about living in a car or trying to get to your mother before she dies, or about a truly awful flight. No one needs to read Beckett to write satire; no one needs to read Margaret Atwood to write about misogyny. I think I wanted to start a fight, and part of what I was fighting was the way I'd been taught to write, as well as the way some people expected me to teach writing. To be a writer, to create, all you have to do is sit down and do it. You don't need to know Shakespeare or Cervantes. Writers don't wait for a mythical muse. We write, and it is work. It's not reading 500 books assigned by Harvard professors or waiting around to being blessed by the Creativity Fairy Godmother. Anyone can write, and there shouldn't be any gatekeeping about that. The rich white lady in the audience sniffed: *I disagree with you entirely*, she said. She usually did, at these events.

Then someone asked the panel, what role does craft play in creativity? *Oh yes, craft*, people on the panel said. I still felt contrary. *Oh no, not craft*, I said. *I don't believe in craft*, I said. I believe in writing what you feel, what you need to write, in a way that you need, that your audience needs. I don't have to be able to diagram sentences precisely to get the author's meaning. Craft is rules. Why do we need those rules? Around the same time I'd had a conversation with a friend about capital letters for first-person pronouns. Texting, she told me, was pushing usage towards a lower-case first person pronoun: *i*. We were very descriptivist in our conversation, accepting of this, thinking of other languages and feeling that one day, yes, our *Is* will become *is*. *It's jarring*, my friend said. *For us*, I said, *it is*. *But we'll get used to it*. The idea of craft is socially specific, always changing, and in serious need of revision. *It feels racist and ableist to me*, I said, *not inclusive, to keep banging on rules that other people made in different times*. I decided to reframe my teaching with the philosophy of helping students write what they want to write, not trying to teach them to conform to a white, able-bodied, male-centric norm.

About a week later I saw an article online about Salesses's new book on writing. I'd been using Natalie Goldberg's classic *Writing Down the Bones*, but I'd also been looking for other guides on writing, other methods for teaching. Salesses's point was exactly what I'd been working my way towards: craft is a lie. "The spread of craft," he writes, "starts to feel and work like colonization" (Salesses, 2021, p. 10). My teaching had been colonizing. I was a colonizer.

I taught a workshop using some of *Craft in the Real World's* guidelines and suggestions. Students did freewriting, wrote short pieces, wrote in response to prompts. Students around my age—I'm 47—wrote adhering to the rules they'd had to learn in school. What if, I asked, because I'd decided that my guidance would come mostly in the form of questions, what if you didn't have to keep to those rules? What would you write if no one knew those rules, thought we had to use them? What if we got rid of "craft" as a set of rules and methods?

The writing was amazing. It felt more honest, it felt more intense, it felt like the authors had enjoyed writing it more. Without having to consider "craft," the writers in my workshop felt liberated and inspired. Leaving the concept of craft behind and not worrying about the rules

helped writers who were previously shy about sharing, worried about grammar. It helped writers define their audiences and feel more comfortable writing for those audiences. Grammars, spellings, syntax—creative writing has no need for gatekeeping through these ideas. I am trying to decolonize my teaching, my readerly mindset, my classrooms. This is going to stick.