



Candace Walsh

## The Braided Essay as Change Agent

Until the fall of 2021, the braided essay was just another form to me. Little did I know that teaching students to write braided essays would crack open new, surprising pedagogical worlds that have yet to be exhausted, and set me on a journey of my own. It all began with Melissa Febos' essay "The Mirror Test." In this essay, Febos examines slut-shaming from three main braided strands: personal narrative, evidence-based research, and a critical response to popular culture's depictions of it throughout history. She thickens the braid by including theory, literary analysis, and interviews with women from minoritized subject positions on their experiences, going beyond the limits of her subject position as a white woman to represent the topic.

As often happens in the best writer friendships, my friend and colleague Anna Chotlos, an accomplished essayist in her own right, read "The Mirror Test" first, then sent me a link my way. I sat down and read it in one go, experiencing the tingly feeling I get when an essay or story is crafted so well it kind of hurts. It was immersive, deft, complex, and kaleidoscopic, yet tight and compelling the whole way through, and absolutely stuck the landing.

As essayists, Anna and I wanted to do more than admire "The Mirror Test." We wanted to dive deeper into its structure. I sensed technical rigor under its lyrical sheen, which led me to open up a software I generally try to avoid as much as possible: Excel. We began to make a running list of the essay's interweaving strands, noticing artfully irregular patterns of unspooling, synthesis, and weave. When we



Later that day, I resumed conceptualizing lesson plans for my junior-level composition class on the theme of Women and Writing. “The Mirror Test” was fresh in my mind, and given how much slut-shaming is still relevant to and often weaponized among college students, I decided to include it, as well as Melissa Faliveno’s thematically related braided essay “Switch Hitter,” as first-week readings. I hoped the essays’ frank yet transcendent engagement with sexism, substance abuse, and other common but shame-stained, victim-blaming issues would foster a sense of permission for students to write about their own personal experiences as the semester progressed.

### **The Setup**

That decision soon bloomed into an idea: I would design my Women and Writing third-year rhetoric and composition course around students writing a semester-long, longform braided essay project of 5,000 words or more, on a social issue topic chosen by the student. The goal: to develop expertise on how different people and groups were successfully addressing the issue, so that if they had the chance to share what they learned with a policymaker, or become a policymaker themselves, they would be well-prepared. This was a “so what?” we like to see at the end of a synthesis essay, writ large and actionable. The project would satisfy the course outcomes: online university library research and selection of sources; writing as a social activity; engaging with and creating multimodal media; employing persuasive writing methods; constructively identifying strengths and areas needing improvement in one’s own and others’ writing; and identifying, analyzing, and employing the rhetorical elements of logos, ethos, pathos, and kairos.

In this online-asynchronous class, my students were a mostly nontraditional group, many in midlife; nursing students, addiction counselors, and others in the helping professions, as well as teenagers and early twentysomethings. As an instructor assigning longform braided essays, I was asking my students to do more than write expressively. They needed to locate and write about evidence-based research demonstrating successful interventions to their social issue and identify and respond critically to relevant

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pop culture media that engaged with the social issue. Expressive writing + scholarly writing + critical writing. Additionally, they were tasked with assembling these strands of writing into a cohesive whole—not formulaically, but with informed freedom. They could decide whether to craft a strictly alternating braid, a collage-like braid, or a structure led by association, intuition, and/or transitions. They could use crots, headings, transitional sentences, or other twining choices. This offers students—in addition to being creative writers, informed experts, and cultural critics—opportunities to be composers, designers, architects, and builders. Not bad for a J-comp class. They wrote beautiful personal stories of their own experiences of social issues including anxiety, navigating racism and sexism in medical care postpartum psychosis, growing up with addicted parents, and supporting loved ones on the autism spectrum.

Along with Febos’s and Faliveno’s essays, I asked students to read the scholarly source “‘Good Girls’: Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus” by Elizabeth A. Armstrong et al. I assigned a reading response that addressed the following questions:

1. What were some of your favorite parts of Febos’ and Faliveno’s essays? What sentences or passages resonated with you personally? How and why?
2. Where did you notice intersections between the essays and “‘Good Girls’”? Be specific. How did the intersections affirm or challenge Febos’ and Faliveno’s essays?
3. How has reading these three texts altered and/or expanded your thinking about any of the topics the authors addressed?

I intended this assignment to create a thinking and writing space for students that would foment a sense of familiarity and connections between personal narrative and scholarly source texts. “‘Good Girls’” concludes that social class correlates to slut-shaming; the lower one’s social class, the more harshly a woman is judged by female college peers for being sexually active outside of committed monogamous relationships. As Athens county is the poorest county in Ohio, and is also part of Appalachia, class affects my students’ everyday lives, and this piece resonated. Its strengths include an accessible academic writing style—rather

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than columnar walls of jargon—and a strong depiction of the intersection of class and internalized sexism.

In the second week, students read texts on the intersection of race and health care, including creative nonfiction essay “[Breathing](#)” by Shanda Mc Manus and Kendra Hotz’s academic article “‘I Can Do For Me’: Race, Health, and the Rhetoric of Self-Love and Suffering.”

I asked them to write a 500+ word response to these readings, addressing each of the following questions:

1. What did you find moving in each of these texts? Please share some of your favorite sentences and phrases.
2. Identify 2-3 of the major claims in each text, and give examples of how the authors' prose provides examples of (any or all of the following) ethos, logos, pathos, and kairos to deepen impact on the reader.
3. How has reading these texts altered and/or expanded your thinking about any of the topics the authors addressed? (for example, the concept of surrogacy; physiological responses to systemic oppression; the intersection of religion and self-neglect)

This time, I asked students, a few days after that due date, to post a section from their response on a dedicated discussion board and respond to another student’s post. I aimed to give them a beat between writing a low-stakes response for my eyes and deciding what they wanted to excerpt for a wider audience. The pace and the agency of making that choice proved to be an impactful step toward becoming comfortable with sharing their writing with their peers, which could grow into comfort with sharing their writing with the public. Thanks to earlier discussion about the qualities of productive feedback, the students’ responses to others’ passages were supportive and connective. Most of my Ohio University students are white, and so this week’s assignments aimed to illuminate aspects of racism they may not have

been aware of, and to invite them to build on lived experience of medical and religious institutions to notice how racism exacerbates sexism in those areas.

By week 4, my students were reading the first 85 pages of Audre Lorde's coming-of-age memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, chosen as an exemplar of personal narrative that pairs Lorde's clear voice and indomitable spirit with the realities of intersectional oppression related to her race, class, immigrant status, and sexual orientation. The memoir begins with this question: "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like the sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?" (3) This apt question and powerful text ushered students toward beginning to write their essays' personal narrative strands.

1. What is an issue or topic you are most passionate about because of the role it played in your life; its personal significance? (Think back to Melissa Febos's essay "The Mirror Test," Melissa Faliveno's "Switch-Hitter," and Shanda McManus's "Breathing.")
2. Write a first draft of an 800+ word personal narrative that shares your lived experiences in relation to this topic. This is not a public document. Only I will see it unless you decide to share it further.

Subsequently, they were assigned to write about how the issue was depicted by popular culture, using examples and citations in MLA style. An optional assignment: to interview someone from another subject position whose life had been impacted by the same social issue.

I introduced what would become the research strand via a scholarly source synthesis midterm paper of three peer-reviewed journal articles on their topic that presented successful approaches to ameliorating the social issue. In preparation for this assignment, they read Karen Rosenberg's "[Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources](#)." I shared a step-by-step PowerPoint on doing online library research, and met with students in online conferences to walk them through the process of research and evaluating promising sources. I emphasized the importance of finding clear, concisely written

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sources with discrete, actionable findings and helped them to decode what the source was adding to the existing conversation. Once they had three good sources, the findings could be compared, contrasted, and combined with the students' own thinking to build toward useful, applicable conclusions. They also composed annotated bibliographies. This strand gave students ample opportunities to notice that their experiences were part of larger oppressive systems, that what had happened or was continually happening to them was not due to personal shortcomings. I believe this shift in their understanding supported them in claiming their lived experiences and voices.

Texts that formed the backbone of the class include the aforementioned essays; *Zami; Shiner* by Amy Jo Burns, an Appalachian novel about two sets of low-income mothers and daughters; and essays on form including Nicole Walker's "The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action," Sarah Minor's "What Quilting and Embroidery Can Teach Us about the Narrative Form," and Lidia Yuknavich's "Woven." As we began to be attentive to structural choices, the students read and responded to texts about the Heroine's Journey and the Hero's Journey.

At that semester's conclusion, numerous students ended the class not only proud of writing an often far-over five-thousand-word essay; they had achieved competency and competent in the in the course outcomes. They also shared, unsolicited, in emails and conferences, a consistent result of feeling deeply healed, empowered, and fired up as advocates.

"...not only did it help me cope with some of the ongoing issues I've dealt with my entire life, but it also challenged me and helped me develop as a writer."

"Writing this essay added to my level of expertise in understanding the [family caregiver support] opportunities that are and are not available. I have been inspired to work toward promoting counseling for caregivers upon completing my master's degree."

I did not expect this. Then it happened the next semester, and the next.

I could see how making coursework a journey of incremental completion would develop and strengthen efficacy that could later be transferred to big, multi-tentacled life projects: applying to grad schools or jobs, moving to a new place, buying a house, or navigating the health care system as a patient or a caregiver. Every assignment was a building block of this braided personal essay, including student's identification of a personally meaningful social issue; readings of poems, essays, and novels along with written responses; guided free writes; personal narrative writing; instructor-student conferences; discussion board contributions and comments; a midterm research synthesis paper; interviews; responses to novels, television shows, and films; learning about and comparing and contrasting the hero's and heroine's journeys; a letter to one's younger self; structure plans; peer review sessions, and a required revision round. By April, students had written well over 5,000 words and could pick and choose what went best together. Some opted to write additional passages to fill in perceived blanks or further develop themes.

### **The Class**

Each semester, I observed that students chose social issue topics that seemed to coincide with the most central wound needing healing in their lives. Given the opportunity, it seemed as if the students' bodies partnered with their minds to inform the decision, just as skin scraped on one's arm demonstrates the response to heal and not fester, to expunge and not hoard harmful impact or even intention. These topics often involved or overlapped with students' experiences of various forms of abuse that led to trauma. In another Febos essay, "In Praise of Navel Gazing," she writes, "The truth of such trauma's commonness demands social change, and a society resistant to such change will always deny, discredit, and punish the victims (or advocates of victims) who speak out." Our classrooms can be a place in which this denial, discrediting, and punishment is banned so that social change has the best chances of being realized. In that essay, Febos cites James Pennebaker's evidence-based research connecting expressive writing about difficult



topics to improvements of physical health. Why was healing such a consistently reported outcome? As Lisa Tyler summarizes in “Narratives of Pain: Trauma and the Healing Power of Writing,”

50 undergraduates were assigned to write about either trivial topics (describing their plans for the day or the shoes they had on, for example) or "the most traumatic and upsetting experiences of your entire life" for 20-minute periods on each of four consecutive days (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Giasser, and Glaser 240). Students who wrote about traumatic events felt depressed immediately afterwards. Nonetheless, on the fourth day of the experiment, they showed a significantly improved immune response (based on the response of white blood cells to foreign substances). Six weeks later, they had visited the health center significantly less often than had students in the control group. And three months after the experiment, they reported feeling significantly happier than the subjects who had written about trivial topics. (17)

Why? Pennebaker’s research showed that not writing expressively about difficult topics is experienced by the body as keeping secrets, holding something back. This takes a physical toll in the form of stress, which weakens our immune system. Secret-telling is powerful as a writing act that need not be a public act. Writers might opt to widely share this work, but it’s not contingent on receiving the benefit. A convenient source for the original 1986 research as well as ongoing replications and expanded findings is the third edition of Pennebaker’s book written with Joshua M. Smyth, *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain* (2016).

The combination of creative writing and the term *healing* can provoke a gag reflex in creative nonfiction writers and readers. This response is often an internalization of the straight, white male concept of what literary writing should be: first and foremost art. The science, however, shows that expressive/narrative writing is a healing act, whether we feel icky about it or not. Creating social change requires strength and resilience, qualities that emerge from healing. It requires people to claim agency over what they can, to increase their areas of agency, and to cultivate and apply persistence, collegiality, and influence.

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My students' braided personal essays often included such moments of transcendence, advocacy, and agency. One student who researched art therapy as a method of recovery from intimate partner violence had stopped making art when she began the relationship with the man who became her abuser. She wrote, "I am realizing that I need to find and create my peace. I cannot wait for the legal system to provide it for me. It might be time for me to peel the plastic off the canvas and get out my paint brushes. I have a bridge to strengthen and cross."

I understood from Pennebaker's research why writing about personal experience would have healing effects. Yet my students were also reporting increased agency and advocacy. Why?

I reasoned that the research strand moves the writer from identifying as a victim to locating their experience in the context of institutionalized and systemic power structures, from despondency to hope and expertise. One student wrote, "Researching the topic of ADHD was incredibly empowering. I gained so much knowledge and perspective through the process...peer-reviewed studies on the subject gave me insights into the lives of other families raising children with ADHD....It added to my sense of expertise and confidence regarding parenting a child with ADHD. The research...helped me to understand the physiological aspects. This is so critical to understanding the way my child views and processes the world around him. I believe that any parent of a neurodivergent child is desperate to understand their child and also feel understood themselves. Writing the braided essay helped me accomplish both of these things." Students learn ways the issue is being successfully addressed and can implement and share actionable recommendations. And it follows that increased expertise leads to increased confidence.

And what of the pop culture strand? I knew it was intended to instill a critical faculty in the writer. Over the course of our lives, we've received countless lifelong media messages that often reinforce existing oppressive power structures, with shaming and alienating effects. Oftentimes people don't question these messages, especially if they come wrapped in the package of a glamorous movie or comedic show. My students learned to decode and talk back to such messages in their essays, and encounter future messages

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armed with the ability to see right through them. ItWatching media on one's topic can also lead students to connect parasocially yet impactfully with community, as I noticed with this student's statement: "The pop culture-focused source led me to watch an episode of *Super Nanny* that had me in tears. I identified so strongly with the struggling mother's story."

The braid's combination of writing modes provides not just the benefit of each mode, but the alchemical impact of its combinations. The 2022 article "Healing from Heterosexism: A Discovery-Oriented Task Analysis of Emotion-Focused Writing" in the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Health* found that expressive writing increases queer folks' resilience as they experience ongoing heterosexist oppression. It explains that "sexual minority stressors are linked to the relatively high rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and substance use disorders documented in LGBTQ + individuals" (Collins et al. 2). Resilience supports mental health, equanimity, and determination. One writing exercise I zeroed in on in that article used, like the braided essay assignment, multiple modes to positive effect: "participants...were asked to express their feelings for five minutes, then to consider what needs these feelings indicate for five minutes, then to think about ways to meet those needs for five minutes. All three conditions resulted in positive effects, including large effects on self-reported change and on event-related stress and medium effects on depression." First the participants engaged in expressive writing, then reflection and synthesis, then strategy and self-advisement. Results were "characterized by descriptions of confronting negative and painful feelings, delving deeper into emotions, and working through feelings to formulate action plans" (Collins et al. 4). This last process indicates resilience, self-advocacy, and an increased facility for a skill necessary to effect social change. I could see how my happy accident of assigning a larger and more complex project with similar foci over many weeks could result in similar yet more expansive benefits.

Writing braided essays is almost always a power-claiming act, and it should be available to anyone, not just creative writing students—and not just college students, of course. I taught a version of the class to the general public via Literary Cleveland in 2023, and saw that the outcomes for students who

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committed themselves to the process tracked. One student went on to publish her pro-choice essay about having an abortion a few months later. Within academia, instructors of required rhetoric and composition classes have opportunities to connect this process with students who don't identify as writers. As Felicia Rose Chavez states in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, a commitment to diversity must include making writing spaces inclusive for people who don't identify as writers and/or have been disenfranchised from the act of writing. Such inclusivity offers further opportunities for students to discover an identification with the writing role while expanding the number of people who benefit from its ameliorative effects. Michelle Hall Keils describes composition studies as “a gateway to enfranchisement” (90): “The invitation to write represents an opportunity to realize the rhetorical possibilities of turning transgressive power into transformative potential” (105).

## Conclusions

Although I originally chose to ask students to write a braided personal essay to make teaching a rhetoric and composition class more creative, I learned the form is ideally suited to a rhetoric and composition class's course's outcomes. Along with obvious connections like library research, students' discussion board conversations allowed them to write as a social activity; their pop culture criticism strand engaged with multimodal media; they employed persuasive writing methods via ethos (the authority of lived experience combined with evidence-based research), logos (research findings), pathos (personal narrative), and kairos (researching the history of and recent developments related to the social issue); and constructively identifying strengths and areas needing improvement in one's own and others' writing (peer review). Given the personal nature of the writing, I made sharing personal narrative during peer review optional, and met with students to serve as a reviewer if they weren't comfortable with pairing up with a peer one on one. I paired students who chose to share personal narrative according to similarity of topics and levels of disclosure, which led to a great deal of community-building and validation.

A creative nonfiction workshop on the same topic might focus instead on the use of craft elements: humor, voice, and formal innovations to present research findings more engagingly; motifs and rhyming action to create more connection points between strands; intentionality related to release of information and treatment of time; persona choices and portraiture; attention to tone, more playfulness and risk-taking with structure, and a reading list centering literary essays by writers from minoritized groups that engage with social issues.

Each strand is powerful but when combined, I saw this type of braided essay as a personal and societal change agent any writer can employ. Alternating strands resulted in resilience, as another student shared as she described moving between personal narrative and research. A student shared that “the writing process demanded vulnerable introspection, which was difficult at times, but the research was so enriching I felt uplifted and encouraged.” Another spoke of how research papers don’t generally permit engagement with emotions and the sharing of lived experience. “Braided essays give the writer the opportunity to accomplish both facets. The reader is allowed to take a journey with the writer while also learning pertinent information on the subject at hand”; the writer is fortified on their journey by the altruistic understanding that readers can learn valuable, even life-changing insights from their work.

Last fall, I applied for a Fulbright open research/study award grant to bring this work to universities in Germany in the form of writing workshops and sought academic affiliates. I quickly received two enthusiastic responses in the affirmative: one from Dr. Gerd Bräuer, Head of Training and Projects at Freiburg University of Education’s writing center and founding director of the first writing center in European teacher education; and one from Dr. Amy Mohr, Lecturer in American Literary History at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, in association with its writing center. Although my Fulbright application did not meet with success, I remain encouraged by the German faculty’s enthusiasm and will continue to assign the braided essay to students closer to home.

Recently, a student reached out to me. She told me she thinks about the class often, and was just talking to a friend about how in addition to gaining expertise and becoming an advocate, she had also reconnected with her love of creative writing, a passion that lost momentum after high school. “I’m writing poems again!” she enthused. Her update highlighted that there is no wall between strengthening a writer’s voice in the world and their creative voice. One strength feeds the other, dismantling oppression as poems, stories, plays, and paintings spring into being.

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