



W. Scott Olsen

A Desire for Stories

Here is something I believe about every nonfiction writing class, from college first-year composition to MFA and Ph.D. workshops. One of our jobs as writing teachers, and perhaps our most important job, is to create and maintain a sense of energy and desire for storytelling. If a student has the desire to write, to tell a story, whether that story is personal history, a profile of someone else, or the ways gene receptors work, she or he will usually want to write it well.

Storytelling, in this fashion, is not just personal narrative. I do believe the personal essay is important, but the writing class is a space to bring a larger definition. A math equation is a story. A musical composition is a story. The evolution of workers' rights is a story. The manufacturing of a bar of soap is a story. All of this can be traced to a distant past and all of this has a mysterious future.

Look at this way: Narrative is connectedness. How many times do we begin a story and then stop, take a breath, and begin again, but much earlier in time? How many stories use flashbacks or frames to make the present moment clear? History (as different from Chronology) is story. Ethnography is story. Economics is story.

In my own life, as a travel writer, I have always been more interested in the journey between two places than in either place itself. There are certainly lots of writers who write profiles of towns and cities and depots in the wilderness. But for me, the trail between two places is the richest place. Think *Canterbury Tales*. Think *The Snow Leopard*. The trail is the place where everything comes together and braids into the peculiar quality of that particular day. In my other life, as a photographer, story is the compelling drive. Lots of photographers do wonderful work with portraits or still-life composition. But I believe

there is a great deal more energy, and more insight, in documentary work, in wildlife work, in travel work, in photojournalism. Work of any sort that involves a story allows us, readers and viewers and listeners, a point of entry. We compare, and we add.

To look at exposition as storytelling is a way to think about what details matter (oftentimes the tangents are the most important), organization, analysis of relationships, and more. To look at any bit of writing as story (even a Chemistry lab report), is a way to think about how we write and how we engage as readers.

As everyone reading this knows, this is not an easy task. With all the best intentions, writing and reading instruction before college often creates an arch, hackneyed understanding of what writing should be. There are many reasons for this. A lot of it has to do with what students are asked to read.

Yet I also think this is because students are focused on Writing (writ large) much more than they are focused on whatever story they want to tell. And a lot of it has to do with how teachers respond to technical elements instead of content.

Yes, there are many exceptions. But students with poor language skills and students with excellent language skills alike often look at writing as more form than content. No one has really talked with them about telling a story that matters to them.

So, what to do?

The writing program at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, where I teach, is very much like every other first-year composition course in the world. We assign four to five essays each semester, each with a different rhetorical purpose, and we go through the stages of writing as a process. There are drafts and workshops and revisions and all the rest. We fret over MLA style, just like everyone else.

However, the Concordia writing program has two distinctive features as well. The first is an element we call field research. While we have the traditional library/internet-based research assignments, we also have an assignment that requires the students to get up and out and away from their cell phones.

Often, this assignment leans toward ethnography (some of our professors teach it as such explicitly). For my classes, the assignment asks students to interview somebody, or several people, outside of their own usual community. They are not allowed to interview somebody in a group to which they already belong. For example, a member of the choir cannot interview the choir director. (Although discouraged, a member of the choir could interview the choir director at a different school or organization.)

The point here is that the students have to do a lot of observational and/or participatory research before they can write an essay. I stress that their observations and/or participation is the source of their own authority. From their time with this new group, they discern a pattern, which becomes a focus, which becomes the subject of their essay.

In many ways, this is Journalism 101, basic observation and reporting, hiding in Composition 101. But the journalist is often a short-timer—an hour on site and 800 words. The projects my students are chasing are much deeper.

Most of the time, this assignment leads people to engage with communities they find interesting but know very little about. Sometimes it's the homeless, or a food pantry, or immigrant communities. Sometimes it's a ride-along with the police. Sometimes it's hanging out with athletes in a different sport. It really doesn't matter.

This often leads to some wonderful essays because the students are, in general, starting with a dearth of information and have to fill in a lot of blanks. (A side note: I am often amazed when a student, after spending 20 to 50 hours with a group, and despite the title of the assignment, will tell me they didn't do any research. Something new about the definition of research needs to be shouted from the rooftops.) One reason these essays are usually better than the more usual fare is that the stories matter. The students have been present and heard or saw the stories first-hand. This creates a desire to get it right.

The second defining characteristic of the Concordia writing program is what we refer to informally as the remix project. What this means, for most of us, is the students write a paper, a standard academic paper, and then translate that into some other format for some other audience. The purpose of this assignment is to generate and develop a sense of audience awareness and audience needs and how different rhetorical situations encourage different rhetorical approaches. Most people in my department have their students write an essay first and then translate that paper into something else. It could be a poster. It could be a letter. It could be anything.

I do it the other way around.

In my class, after the field research assignment, I introduced them to StoryCorps. StoryCorps, of course, is the radio program based around interviews. According to its website, StoryCorps was founded in 2003 at New York's Grand Central Terminal and, since then, more than half a million people have contributed stories. StoryCorps is a longtime partner of NPR's Morning Edition, has won Peabody Awards; their list of accomplishments is long and deep.

If you are unfamiliar with StoryCorps, find them [here](#).

If the field research assignment is ethnography or journalism, the StoryCorps assignment is oral history.

I impress upon my students the fact that they will not only produce a StoryCorps interview, it will be published. The StoryCorps archives are at the Library of Congress and can be searched, by anyone and everyone, via the internet forever. I even tell them this could be a line on their resume.

Instead of going from paper to something else, I go from something else to paper. The assignment for StoryCorps is to find a person in their family who has a story. I really don't define what I mean by a story. Again, it could be anything. The students, I have learned, are very good at reaching out toward family members who have had significant events. I have seen papers about recovering from alcoholism or

drugs, adoption (both giving up and discovering birth parents), auto wrecks, significant health issues, veteran stories, small business stories, tremendously happy success stories, the works.

I tell my students they have to do at least two interviews. The first interview is to establish context and learn some background. Go sit down with Uncle Joe or Aunt Mary and talk to them for a while. Discover what their stories really are.

Adoption, for example, is not uncommon. I seem to have a number of students every year who are either adopted or know someone else who was. We talk about how adoption is, however, an event instead of a story. All the reasons behind it are the story. Go sit down with your adoptive parents (or whomever) I say. Ask them to tell you the story from the first idea. When you discover what that sense of energy or heat may be, ask them about it.

Parents with military service is another topic I've seen often. Stories about favorite sports coaches, too. Stories about starting a small business.

One of the things I've learned over the years is that when you ask someone else to tell you their story, and you are genuinely interested, they tend to cherish the opportunity.

When I talk to students after they have completed their initial interview, they are often amazed. "I heard that story all my life," they say, "but only in little bits. Never all at once. I never knew half of it."

It's easy to point out the dramatic examples. One student, for example, went to interview a neighbor she thought was an elderly bachelor. Turns out he had a whole family living in another state that he hadn't talked to for years. Another student found out her mother could have been a mail-order bride (she wasn't). But the dramatic revelations are not as common as the unfolding of a story with less volume but no less importance. A number of students have gone back to old music teachers, old coaches, old mentors of any sort, and asked them to tell their histories and motivations. These people were important to the student and the student now has a bit of perspective (just time passing), so they can look back and ask questions.

This is easier than it seems if students are aware of the importance of a follow-up question (which requires that the students actually listen to the answers instead of merely recording them). The follow-up question can be nothing more profound than “why?” if the student is listening.

“I always wanted to be a music teacher.”

“Why?”

“I had a good teacher myself. She was great.”

“Why?”

“She loved Franz List. She loved the complication there. She said it was fun.”

“Why?”

“All that racing up and down the keyboard! We laughed and laughed. I try to bring humor to difficult things now.”

“Ah ha!”

Based off the first interview, I do ask the students to go do some good, old-fashioned library or newspaper reading. I usually schedule a day where the class will meet in the library and forewarn the librarians about what we’re chasing. Figure out what you can about the issue behind their story. Then generate a list of questions, based on the first interview as well as the outside reading. Arrange a time in a place where you have at least an hour of uninterrupted time. With your questions, do a second interview, which is the one to be recorded.

We listen to a number of examples from the StoryCorps site. Many of them are quite short. My own assignment is for an interview that is no shorter than 20 minutes. And StoryCorps interviews have an implied form which is easy to follow.

One of the things we talk about after listening to examples is how basic and easy the questions *seem*. Why do they seem so easy? It’s because the interviewer and the subject already know where this is going. It’s not rehearsed, but there is clearly a focus. The questions do not ramble all over *terra incognita*.

The goal, I tell my students, is to get the interview subject to tell good stories about the well-defined idea discovered in the first interview. When done right, the questions can seem mundane or nearly invisible, yet the stories can be profound.

Here is an example of [a student interview](#). Please, do take a few minutes and listen to it.

Keep in mind, the StoryCorps interview is not a draft. It is its own project. It needs to be able to stand alone. However, in my class the StoryCorps assignment is also the foundation for something much larger.

Think about the interview above. Bryce took that interview and began a writing project about women and education during the Dust Bowl era. He had his great-grandmother's story as a foundation, and just one of what became many sources. Most importantly, though, he wanted to write this paper. He had a desire to get it right—to honor his great-grandmother but also because this was now one of his stories, the stories of his family and his region.

I love the story his great-grandmother tells. But in the terms of this assignment, she is not unusual. Students rarely have any trouble finding someone else with a good story. And it's a fine bit of learning empathy when students hear the details.

Bryce's research for the written essay was both broad and deep. He had many fine conversations with librarians about finding relevant material well beyond a Google search. He became excited to find more stories, everything from other personal narratives to government documents, and the final writing project was extraordinary.

If I had told him earlier that he was going to write a large research paper about women and education in the 1930s, I'm sure his eyes would have glassed over. The only difference was desire to tell a story.

Some practical notes:

- I stress that this assignment is not a radio-production assignment and the interviews are unedited. There should be no worries about the broadcast quality of the interview beyond it's being audible and understandable.
- StoryCorps has a fine app for cell phones that will record and then upload the files. However, in my experience, the app works on only about 80% of the students' cell phones. It's just as easy for the students to record the file outside the app, either on their phone or computer, and upload directly.
- StoryCorps asks students to load a number of keywords to help with searches. Despite doing as much as actually giving the students the keywords to enter (student name, professor name, college, subject's name, topic of interview, etc.), this step seems to be as invisible to students as telling them to alphabetize MLA Works Cited pages. They nod their heads as if they understand. And then don't.
- The technical help and education people at StoryCorps are extremely nice and helpful, but not immediate or on-demand. Send them email. They will get back to you soon.
- When students say they want to interview someone about a very private topic and they really don't want anyone to hear, the answer is always no. This is a public assignment. Pick someone else.
- There will be the inevitable problems with StoryCorps logins and accounts and such. These are usually fixable quite fast.