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ENGL 211C

9 December 2019

Final Exam – Reflective Cover Letter

Throughout this semester, I learned to write in a variety of styles, which depended on the purpose of my writing. Because all three of my short essays were in different styles of writing, they all used different tones and word choice. The first short essay was a narrative, and because it was meant to tell a story about myself, I adopted a more relaxed and creative style. I threw comma rules out the window in favor of flow, had quite a few sentence fragments, and multiple paragraphs composed of only one sentence. I learned that if I wanted to tell an entertaining story, which is required for a good narrative, I couldn't write monotonously. I had to make my writing sing in the same way a fiction author's writing would.

My third short essay, being a research synthesis, was much more formal. I stuck to grammar rules and used language specific to the topic. The style I used was similar to that of my documented essay, which was completed at the beginning of the semester. While both essays used a similar style of writing, the word choice was related to the discipline, which I learned was necessary to address the topic. My documented essay used cybersecurity jargon such as "mitigating risk" and "secure behavior," while my short essay used phrases like "equal treatment" and "the social model."

One smaller homework assignment where I did well at this was my writing journal on "Introduction to Freedom Dreams." My writing journals that focused on strictly factual information (such as "Writing a Narrative") were also more objective in their word choice, while

“Introduction to Freedom Dreams” used word choice that was based more on abstract concepts, like “motivating change” and “escapism.” This can also be seen in my analysis for these two assignments; “Writing a Narrative” talked specifically about what I had learned in relation to my upcoming two narratives, while “Freedom Dreams” focused on analyzing and applying the information to the real world. Based on the context of these two assignments, I varied the way that I spoke about the topic.

However, there are a few things I’m still working on. My main problem is with wordiness—sometimes it’s better to be concise. My word choice may have been different in my first short essay, but I still have a bad habit of elaborating more than I need to. This is fine for most academic writing, but not for a general audience. Because I am going into a field where both types of writing will be necessary, this is something I will need to work on in the next few semesters.

I’m also still working on learning the vocabulary of my major; while I know the basics, some of the concepts I was researching were outside of my understanding. I used words that I couldn’t elaborate on, because I knew they were necessary but wasn’t completely sure what they meant. Because I only declared my major this semester, I have time to learn the jargon used in this discipline, and the documented essay was good practice for me. In the next few semesters, I will have to pay attention to the way experts in this field write and learn to apply it to my own writing.

Critical thinking and reflection were major parts of my coursework this semester. I had to be reflective in my service-learning narrative, and at first, I wasn’t sure how to write about it. I had many thoughts and feelings floating around in my head, but nothing to unify them. As I started writing, I found that it was easier to lump thoughts and events into categories that

explained what I learned. Through writing, I was able to organize my thoughts in a way that made them useful to me.

I was required to write in multiple different genres that required me to analyze information in different ways. As mentioned above, my service-learning assignment required reflection, which meant that my analysis was more introspective, and I had to consider what the topic meant for me specifically. My first short essay was strictly a narrative, and focused less on lessons learned and more on exploring my own identity. My documented essay required lots of research, which meant that I ended up analyzing sources and constructing an argument. I did not write a critique for this paper, mostly because I'm not experienced in the discipline yet. As I learn more about cybersecurity, I will need to work on my ability to critique information given to me, which will be easier once I've taken classes that give me some background knowledge.

I mostly used Monarch OneSearch in searching for scholarly sources. While researching for my documented essay, I found it hard to judge credibility. One thing I could have done better is evaluating timeliness. Most of my sources were current, but I had one in there from 2012 and one from 2002. I've learned since then that because technology changes rapidly, it's better to search for sources published in the past few years.

However, one thing I think I did well at is evaluating popular sources. There are many websites that have information on cybersecurity, and I did research to find out which ones were used by experts in the field and considered credible. This helped me narrow my focus down to sources that were less biased or written by experts, and away from blogs written by amateurs or companies that were advertising something. This information will be useful for me to know in the future when I start a career in cybersecurity.

My research synthesis paper primarily used ideas from other people, and I had to present the information in a way that made it clear what was and wasn't my own analysis. I used reminder phrases and citations, as we discussed in class when we composed the service-learning class synthesis. Because I wanted to work on paraphrasing, I only used one quote in the essay. However, I still think there's room for improvement, specifically in knowing where in-text citations are necessary with longer paraphrases. My professor last semester told the class that if we didn't place an in-text citation at the end of each sentence, it was plagiarism, but Professor Matheson said at the beginning of the semester that doing that is unnecessary if all of the paraphrases are from the same source. I will need to do some research on my own to figure out what will be expected of me in my major.

During this semester, I had two conferences with the professor about my papers. Specifically, my first conference was about the documented essay. While I was learning many new things in my research, I felt like my lack of background knowledge was hindering me in being able to present the information properly. Professor Matheson gave me suggestions on how to organize my sources to read well. One of the things that he suggested was to put my summary of "The Human Side of Cybercrime" at the front because it would work as a good introduction, which I ended up doing in my final product.

My writing this semester required me to draft each step leading up to the final product. My third short essay is an example of this; I created a first draft by summarizing my three sources, stitching them together in the correct order, and adding an introduction and conclusion. After that, I revised it, which ended up involving me breaking the first source into two halves and adding more information to it, as well as some analysis that I didn't have in there before.

Compared to my documented essay, which I made minimal edits to, I did much better at revising and editing my third short essay.

In my previous semester, my professor encouraged us to dump our thoughts onto the page instead of worrying about grammar or proper wording, and then constructing our essays from that. This is fine for many people, but I ended up with very long, rambling essays that required much more editing to make coherent, never mind salvaging a single point from the mess. I prefer the strategy that I was taught to use this semester. For me, it's easier to write in small chunks, because it helps me to keep my focus. I even did it for this essay; I broke it into four sections, stitched them together, and revised them so that they read more smoothly. I've found that I am the kind of person who needs structure; it's much easier for me to plan out how I will write first than for me to just open an empty word document and start writing.

Because the two narratives I wrote already had a beginning and end to them, all I had to do was figure out what the beginning and end would be. That made my process a bit different from the documented essay and research synthesis; instead of breaking my writing into segments, I wrote the first and last paragraphs of these narratives first, and after I was done writing everything in the middle, revised them to fit the flow of the story.

However, I still sometimes have trouble editing things out. While I can edit for flow, consistency and to add new information, I find it hard to decide what information isn't necessary. It's difficult to change what was in my original plan too drastically when I've already drafted the essay. If I'm going to stick with this method of making my first draft, I will have to learn to be comfortable with completely reorganizing and omitting paragraphs if I need to, instead of trying to make my original structure fit.

For both of my conferences, I completed a developmental activity that had to do with grammar and sentence structure. As mentioned above, I have a problem with wordiness, which is why I chose to do an activity based on revising sentences to be more concise. This was a good starting point for me to begin working on this skill in the future.

I also did an activity on the difference between “that” and “which.” While using these words comes naturally to a native English speaker, it’s also useful to know why we use those words in the way we do. I learned that the difference was based on whether the clause following the word was restrictive or non-restrictive, both of which were terms I had never heard of before. In doing this, I deepened my understanding of grammar and sentence structure a bit more.

During this semester, I worked with two different citation styles: APA and MLA. I used APA for both my documented essay and research synthesis, and MLA for the two narratives. This was my first time writing a paper in APA style; I’d used APA citations in the past but hadn’t been required to know how to format the paper itself. Specifically, I learned how to make a cover page, use headings, format a running head, and page numbers. Additionally, I learned to use the Purdue Owl website as a reference, which I hadn’t been using before. Because I am majoring in a subject that will require me to write in APA style, this information will be useful for me in the future.

I likely won’t use MLA much in the future, but knowing where and how to use it is still important in the event that APA isn’t appropriate for the topic I’m writing about. I formatted my service-learning narrative according to MLA, which required me to use an appendix. It was a bit tricky for me to figure out how to format it properly, but I worked it out in the end.

Because this class required me to do a lot of research, I found that articles formatted according to APA or MLA style were easier to skim through and pick out the important bits.

This was especially obvious during my research for my documented essay; most of the articles I read were formatted according to APA. I know now how important it is to follow the correct style; having your paper locked into one format instead of improvising is easier for the reader. It also makes it simpler for the reader to skip around and find specific information in your essay, as well as the sources of your information.

This class challenged me, and the biggest challenge I faced was the documented essay. I feel like I grew as a writer from that experience, which is important because I've chosen cybersecurity as my major. This class also required me to write in several different genres that I wasn't used to writing in, and to analyze information in new ways and for new purposes. I explored a new editing process, tackled problems that I had with sentence structure, and learned to format papers according to the correct citation styles. While I still have areas that I need to work on, I developed many useful skills in this class, and I will continue to use and build upon them in future writing.