

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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On the first day of the *Detective Fiction* class I designed and taught, I started by asking my students what they thought I owed them as an instructor, and what they owed me—and each other—in return. After a discussion, we settled on this: their obligations were to engage fully with the texts and films, to come to class prepared to speak, and to write the assignments to the best of their ability; mine were to provide thought-provoking material, to ask the kinds of questions that allowed for good discussion, and to give them the technical guidance they'd need to write well.

Every time I've done this exercise—which I do in all my teaching, whether as a private tutor or a classroom instructor—students react similarly. At first, they're a bit surprised to be asked: having navigated educational institutions not typically concerned with their opinions, students often look at the question as if it might be a trap. But they quickly warm to the task. As they do, they come to see the class as something that they're responsible for, something that (as all of us instructors know) cannot work at all without their commitment.

To build this commitment, I begin by pushing students to see how their personal perspectives are necessary to the work of literary analysis. The first few class sessions are dedicated to giving students rich material and then asking them to discover their own ways of understanding fiction and film without falling back on mere opinion. In one exercise, for example, I'd play a short clip of an assigned film on loop for several minutes. While the scene looped, I'd ask students what they noticed. As the obvious things (about plot, setting, or character) were quickly mentioned, students would naturally begin offering more interesting observations: how the framing at a pivotal moment of *Kiss Me Deadly* recalls images of '50s HUAC hearings, say, or how cuts in *The Big Lebowski* suggest the contemporary political tensions around war. Through exercises like these, students learned to keep their observations rooted in the language of the film (or the text) but also to bring in their own arguments, their own ways of seeing. As they do, they come to understand that the joy of textual and visual readings doesn't lie in the substance of the film or novel alone. It lives in the space between the work and its audience, in the capacity of each viewer or reader to offer something new and substantial.

This emphasis—on balancing individual insight with a careful attention to the work itself—leads naturally to the way I teach students to write. I prioritize mastering the fundamental tenets of compelling writing while also allowing each student to preserve (or discover) their style, both in substance and expression. In my class and writing workshops, I stress to my students that they should write like themselves, that there is indeed a way to blend academic rigor and cogent argumentation with humor, personal asides, and lived experience. Through a mixture of one-on-one feedback, in-class writing exercises, and editing workshops, I encourage students to develop their writerly voice, to find a sense of authenticity in what they put on the page. In part, this goal comes from my extensive work as a private writing tutor. Since 2016, I've coached some 300 students (including high schoolers, undergraduates, and mid-career professionals), helping each one craft a distinct and compelling style of writing. Because I ask clients to “pay what they can,” I've worked with students of widely varying backgrounds and needs—from quite privileged students undertaking independent research projects to first-generation immigrants seeking to improve their writing for academic or professional reasons. The style that worked for one client would not work for another: each one had something specific they needed to say, and it needed to be said in their voice. The same is true for undergraduates in the humanities. For many students in my class at Duke, learning to write this way took time: as I mention in my cover letter, they struggled to move past cliché in their first essays. By the end of my class, I was happy to see the newfound skill and confidence with which they wrote. I think much of this confidence came, as one student said in their course evaluation, from learning “how to develop [their] writing style without letting go of [their] personality.”

I believe that part of the extraordinary care that my students displayed in their writing came from the fact that they felt a real sense of obligation to and ownership of what they wrote—something that is doubly important, I think, in the age of AI. We've all heard, I'm sure, the reports of students simply feeding essay prompts to AI

and turning in the resulting papers. To an extent, I understand them. If students feel no connection to what they write—if it appears to just be an impersonal assignment or a hurdle to overcome—then perhaps using AI feels justifiable. But the inverse, surely, is equally true: when students see an essay as something that is *theirs*, infused with their voice and their way of looking at the world, I believe they can bring a remarkable amount of attention and thought to it. When students see that the act of reading and writing about literature is a deeply personal experience, they can naturally gravitate away from relying on AI in the interest of developing their own arguments about a work. In doing so, they learn what we in the humanities know but can never really explain to someone who hasn't experienced it: that writing *is* thinking.

For me, teaching is about giving students the tools—not the least of which is writing—that help them confront complex ethical and intellectual questions affecting their own lives. It is, then, about helping students see that the study of literature is always both academic *and* personal. When I opened the course evaluations at the semester's end, I was naturally thrilled to see comments like “TAKE THIS COURSE” and “this was one of my most intellectually stimulating classes.” But I was most affected by the feedback from a quiet Economics major, who, in a lengthy email, told me that he'd lost his passion for reading in high school, but that “after 5 years you have reignited that appreciation [...] I am excited to read for the first time in a while.”

I believe, as probably all of us in the humanities do, that the practical skills we teach are vital for anyone who seeks to communicate clearly or engage in sustained thought about our world. I will be honest, however, in saying that I don't think those practical skills alone are how we will convince a new generation of students to dedicate serious time to reading, thinking, and writing about film and culture. If our work as instructors has value, it's because we might yet guide students to discovering what all of us did at some point in our own educations: that writing will change their lives. We owe them nothing less.