Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 8
Issue 2 *Alternative Assessments*

Article 2

1992

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John Smolens

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Recommended Citation

Smolens, John (1992) "Reverse Assessment," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1609>

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REVERSE ASSESSMENT

John Smolens

The First Draft: Scotty To Mars

One day we began a workshop by writing together, starting with the salutation "Dear Martian." Twenty-one freshmen sat with me in a circle in one of the small classrooms in the Auditorium Building at Michigan State University. It was early in the fall term, but the room was cool. Many students sat with their coats around their shoulders. After a few minutes of restless settling, the room fell into the quiet of writing. We had done this before, but the "Dear Martian" salutation seemed to put an edge on things.

Since the beginning of the term we had written together in class frequently; up to this point the students were writing regularly in their journals, and they were working on a personal narrative, their first typed papers which would be graded. (As the term progressed they would be asked to move from personal narrative to an analytical prose.) As with many freshmen, they were still quite timid—reluctant to offer criticism of their classmates' writing. They were still at the point where they wanted me to tell them what I expected—they wanted to remain safe, to not do something that could be considered "wrong." The newness of campus life had not yet worn off, and most of them were looking to me for guidance as to what makes a piece of writing good. In my experience, many freshman writers' first offerings are vague and general because that's what they think we want from them. They believe we want them to communicate ideas, abstractions, pure and simple, without the excess baggage of details. Therefore, from the beginning we had talked about the use of specific details, and thus far many of the assignments and readings were designed to show how reporting from the senses helps the writer communicate ideas to the reader. We had not yet talked much about audience and how that influences the way someone writes.

So our audience was a Martian, and we were describing one human activity in a way that a Martian (who understood English) could understand it. The students appeared both confused and challenged, which was fine with me. Students who are both will always work— physically and mentally— to overcome their befuddlement; when they've succeeded they feel a sense of accomplishment. Rather than being told, they figured it out.

As usual, I wrote with the class. I wrote about neckties; more specifically, about my father teaching me how to knot a tie. (Not surprisingly, many of my students also began a how-to piece, how to use a phone, how to feed and care for goldfish, etc.) After about twenty-five minutes we stopped and took a five minute break (our workshop classes are double sessions of an hour and forty minutes); I went across the street to the main office and made copies of my notebook pages. When I returned to class, I asked everyone to clear their desks and distributed the copies of my rough draft. Then, for emphasis, I moved my chair into the center of the circle and read my first draft out loud:

Dear Martian:

Some earthlings wear a garment we call a necktie. It is hung about the neck (which ordinarily connects the head to the shoulders). Usually it is thicker at one end than the other and it is acceptable to have this thicker (or wider) end lay on top of the thin end. (The width color and fabric of a necktie changes according to personal taste and what we call fashion trends.)

I am facing the long mirror in my parent's bedroom. I recall my father standing behind me. I am young. Six maybe. Around first grade because I went to a parochial school and we had to wear ties to school (though sometimes we also wore what were called "clip-on" ties which had a permanent knot in them). My father's hands come over my shoulders and begin to knot the tie. "First, the wide end of the tie should hang longer than the narrow. Then you wrap the wide end over, and around the narrow. If you want a thick knot— called a Windsor knot— repeat this motion. Then you pull the wide end up through the joint and down again through the hole in the knot."

My father's hands are quite large. Generally speaking father's are bigger than their sons— though this may change as both mature. Somehow the notion of neckties is connected to maturity. Maturity and conformity. There has been a tradition in our culture that men— grown, mature men— wear neckties. As symbols of influence, prosperity, of the willingness to conform to certain social constructions.

I hated neckties as a boy, probably because I had to wear them to school everyday, and on Sunday when we went to church. Saturday was the one day of the week when I didn't have to wear a necktie.

X X X

Other things to explain: a week, a day; the difference between a weekday and the weekend.

Official nature of neckties.

Why is it so associated with male dress: What does it mean when a woman wears a necktie?

When I was finished, I asked what they thought. There was silence, and looking around me, I saw a lot of fear— the gazing-at-the-linoleum-floor-and-please-don't-call-on-me kind of fear we're all familiar with— and I waited. The last thing these new freshmen wanted to do was criticize their professor. I waited for what seemed like an eternity to me (we're talking a good fifteen seconds here), and their averted stares said, with increasing panic, *Isn't he going to say anything?* Finally one student reluctantly leaned forward and spoke. I don't remember exactly what she said, but I do recall the result: for the next half hour the students tore my draft apart. And with good reason.

Almost every one had something to say about a sentence, a phrase, or whatever, and I got up and went to the board and began recording phrases of their criticism:

Can't see the father
Can't see the boy
sentences are too long/too short
words/phrases repeated
problems with use of "it"
women and ties— worth exploring in separate paper?
maturity/conformity idea interesting— expand?
not sure a real Martian would understand how to tie a knot
opening unclear— is it necessary to mention the father in first paragraph
verb tense consistent?
lacks ending
paragraphs too long?

And on and on. I covered the board with their phrases, and they had all by now overcome their fear of criticizing a piece of writing— even if it was written by their instructor.

What I had recorded on the board looked a lot like the concerns *we* express to our students about *their* writing. I have done this a number of times with my classes and each time the language of their responses varies (as does the piece of my writing they are discussing); however, in every instance the students demonstrate that they possess the critical faculties to assess a piece of writing. Such a collaborative critical exercise allows them to voice their innate critical judgement, something which I fear is too often

suppressed in our society. The fact that the draft in question wasn't produced by one of them allows them to speak without the fear of hurting a peer; furthermore, if the draft is produced by their instructor, who is traditionally perceived as a figure of authority, and they see that their advice is taken seriously, they realize that their criticism is valid and appreciated—that criticism is constructive, and no one is above benefitting from it. Such reverse assessment can help students become more *aware* of the critical faculties they bring to the classroom.

The thrill of dissection peaked when one student said, "I'm sorry, but this is really, you know, bad. A college prof ought to be able to do better."

I agreed, and we talked about how "bad" rough drafts could be written by anyone. Some students believe that this notion of drafts is something for students only—that those of us who teach writing don't need to go to all the bother of drafts and revision. If nothing else, I had proved that myth wrong. We decided to come to the next workshop with a new draft. I asked them to record their ideas that were on the board and to also consider them when they revised their drafts.

The Second Draft: The Tie That Binds

I divided the next workshop into two segments. First, the class worked in small groups: they read each other's drafts and discussed them, using their criteria. Their discussions were lively because rather than applying a criteria handed to them (from above, so to speak), they were working with a criteria they had developed themselves. It gave them a sense of autonomy—they were building and applying a critical criteria of their own.

In the second portion of the workshop we focused on my second draft, something they were clearly anxious to do, I think, because they wanted to see if in fact their criticism, their criteria, had helped me improve my second draft.

Dear Martian:

Here on earth we have a ritual concerning the tie. Or, more accurately, the neck tie.

When I was about six years old (a year being measured by the time it takes for the earth to orbit our sun) I was expected to wear a tie on Sunday. Sunday was (and to some still is) considered different from the other six days of the week because it was a day of worship, of giving thanks, of reflection. On

this day my family would attend church and we would always wear our best clothes—our “Sunday clothes.” I always wore a tie with these Sunday clothes.

But in order to do so I had to learn how to tie a necktie: to learn the proper knot. To do this my father positioned me in front of a mirror, a piece of glass which allows me to see my own reflection. At this point in our lives my father was much larger than me, he was taller, heavier, and stronger, which is not uncommon for human fathers. My father was also balding, losing his hair, something that we often associate with the aging process. He stood behind me and I watched his hands tie the tie around my neck. His hands were large and they had hair growing from the back of his fingers. More important, his hands were assured. As he tied the knot he explained each step: “First, the wide end of the tie should hang longer than the narrow. Then you wrap the wide end over, and around the narrow. If you want a thick knot—called a Windsor knot—repeat this motion one extra time. Then you pull the wide end up through the joint and down again through the hole in the knot.”

My father’s hands shaped the knot into a neat triangle against my shirt collar. But when I tried to tie the knot myself, I got confused and it didn’t come out right. It took many Sundays in front of that mirror for me to learn to tie the knot myself. When I finally managed to get the knot right, my father seemed proud—not at how I looked so much as because I had done it myself. Learning to do it myself, I now realize, was the real point of the ritual.

X X X

Though I don’t often wear a tie now, I do on special occasions, ones that are more formal. The tie in our culture suggests maturity to some, conformity to others. It is not as necessary as it was in my father’s day.

I still don’t get the knot right on the first try.

After I distributed and read this second draft, there was not the fearful silence of the previous class. Something else was going on: their heads were bent to the task of careful reading. There was underlining. Notes were made in margins.

When we began discussing the draft, the consensus at first was that it was an improvement. I was complimented for working so hard on it (this draft was composed on my computer, so, if nothing else, it looked a lot neater than my left-handed scrawl). I was about to show my gratitude when someone said, “But it’s not finished.” Many agreed. One student noted that I had not done all the things mentioned in the previous class, which led us to a discussion about how we should take criticism—and they seemed to agree that (1) it is the writer’s prerogative as to what points of criticism should be considered and “applied” to the next draft, and (2) you can’t do everything in just one draft: some critical responses will have more immediacy than others. This, I think, reinforced why writing several drafts is important. Another student still found some of the phrasing vague and wanted to know about the lines at the bottom of the draft. When I explained that they were attempts at

saying the same thing several different ways, the students debated the virtues of each.

At this point one student made a remark that seemed to transform the class.

"The problem, really," he said, "is this Martian guy."

There was an extended outburst—some students liked the idea of writing to a Martian, while several now tended to suggest that maybe the Martian isn't necessary because (1) we don't even know if Martians exist and (2) even if they did, why would we write them a letter?

The notion of audience had finally surfaced, and we went on to consider just to whom (or what) this piece of writing about neck ties was addressed—and why. They concluded that this didn't have to be a letter to one individual at all. At this point I took some good-natured chastisement for coming up with such a stupid writing assignment. They wanted to take control of the assignment, and I thought that was fine and asked to whom (or what) should this piece be addressed. They came up with the following, which I listed on the board:

- the National Neck Tie Association (NNTA)
- historical perspective: write it for a time capsule to be opened in 2090
- anthropological perspective: write it as an observation of our culture

The last two ideas appealed to many of the students. (Imagine if, the day before, I had started out by asking them to write from a historical or anthropological perspective— they, and I, would probably still be sitting there, many staring at the linoleum.) Now they were taking control of the process to the point where they were determining audience and how best to address that audience. Once this happened, their discussion moved toward a reconsideration of content.

We talked about the significance of a necktie. Why it has been traditionally considered men's apparel. What it means when a woman wears

a necktie. We discussed the kinds of events and places that tended to require a tie: funerals, weddings, religious services, family gatherings. They associated ties with grandparents and traditions held by previous generations. We discussed what a tie suggested in terms of establishing a specific "role"—teachers, ministers, bankers, persons with some official status. We discussed whether they liked ties—and differed substantially. I doubt that any of us had ever given such careful, sustained consideration of neckties.

At the end of class we agreed to revise the draft by addressing one of the three audiences listed on the board (no one seemed interested in communicating with Martians anymore, which was fine with me).

The Third Draft: Dear Earthlings

Necktie As Ritual

In our culture we have a ritual concerning an article of clothing known as the necktie. The tie often suggests maturity to some, conformity to others; though traditionally worn by men, it has recently become not only acceptable but fashionable to be worn by women. Neckties often remind me of my father who taught me how to make a proper knot.

When I was a boy we attended church every Sunday, a day that was considered different from the other six because it was for many a time for worship, for giving thanks, for reflection. We would always wear our best clothes—our "Sunday clothes"—and I had to learn how to properly knot my tie. My father would stand behind me before a mirror, a piece of glass that allowed us to see our own reflections, and explain the Windsor knot as his hands tied the tie around my neck. At this point in our lives my father was much larger than me: he was taller, heavier, and stronger, which is not uncommon for human fathers. My father was also balding, losing his hair, something that we often associate with the aging process. His hands easily shaped the knot into a neat triangle under my shirt collar. But when I tried to tie the knot, I got confused and it rarely came out right. It took many Sundays in front of that mirror for me to learn to tie the knot myself—and when I did, my father seemed proud of my accomplishment as much as my appearance. Learning to do it myself, I now realize, was the real point of the ritual.

Neckties aren't very important to me, possibly because I wore one every day for eight years while attending school. I've seen too many childish, rebellious acts performed by boys—and men—wearing neckties to believe that they have anything to do with maturity or conformity. But the ritual of *learning* to knot a tie, passed on from one generation to the next, establishes a sense of continuity; and though I don't always get the knot right on the first try, I know I was taught well.

My students agreed that this was an improvement over the second draft; the prose was better organized and focused, the language more sophisticated. However, some still wanted to quibble with the content. Though the piece wasn't finished, what I was trying to say was becoming clear—clear enough to differ with. It was, we agreed, a matter of opinion—because the piece now expressed an opinion.

When they read each other's third drafts, they found much the same thing had happened. Their drafts had become increasingly focused and the language more sophisticated; and they had expressed an opinion about their chosen subject. We had gone from the "assignment" nature of in-class writing (doing what the instructor asks) to what writing is really about: the writer devising the best means of communicating his or her ideas. If the first drafts addressed to the Martian were at times silly, the third drafts usually expressed an opinion that had been arrived at through the process of revising the paper *and* reconsidering how to assess each draft. The students seemed impressed with how well their drafts had developed.

I asked them to review for me what we had done with this piece of writing, and again I recorded their ideas on the board:

precise language
organization
opinion stated
audience
strong opening and closing paragraphs

As we moved through the remainder of the term, we made occasional references back to the "Martian letter." It was the group activity that had first allowed the students to not only assess their writing (and their instructor's writing), but to assess what they wanted to do in the class. They had determined the criteria by which the drafts would be criticized, and in doing so they developed a sense of autonomy. Time and again that criteria would be applied to future reading and writing activities; it was a foundation—a foundation that they had constructed—upon which to build their own critical discourse.

John Smolens is an Assistant Professor in the Department of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University and the author of the novel *Winter By Degrees*. Beginning with the Fall, 1993 issue, he will co-edit *LAJM* with Diana Mitchell.