Becoming an Explorer

For many people, the term “explorer” brings to mind famous travelers like Lewis and Clark or Christopher Columbus. It may

conjure images of the daring adventurers who first landed on the moon, or of people who traversed dangerous landscapes to

see what few others had seen before. Explorers rise to challenges and seek out the unknown. They do not take for granted

what they will find in a new environment. Rather, they enter the space with minds open, ready to see, hear, feel, touch, and

taste things they could barely imagine.

Chapter 2 | Exploratory Writing

7

Explorers may recount their travels in writing. They may use language to try to paint a picture of their experiences. But

we do not call these accounts instances of exploratory writing. They are travel narratives—reports after the exploration has

concluded. In this chapter, you will be doing a very different kind of writing. You will not report on what you have already

seen, experienced, or learned. You will instead use writing to explore and encounter new ideas.

The purpose of exploratory writing is to make observations, ask questions, and bring to light complexities. While many

types of writing aim to make a claim or provide information, exploratory writing focuses instead on opening up an idea, not

narrowing or focusing it.

Roving Curiosity

Read the following excerpt about the explorations of the Mars rover, Curiosity.

NASA’s Curiosity Mars rover has analyzed its 12th drilled sample of Mars. This sample came from mudstone

bedrock, which the rover resumed climbing in late May after six months studying other features.

Since the previous time Curiosity drilled into this “Murray formation” layer of lower Mount Sharp, the mission has

examined active sand dunes along the rover’s route, then crossed a remnant plateau of fractured sandstone that once

more extensively covered the Murray formation.

While on the “Naukluft Plateau,” the rover examined its 10th and 11th drill targets to repeat an experiment comparing

material within and away from pale zones around fractures. From there, Curiosity also took the latest in a series of

self-portraits.

“Now that we’ve skirted our way around the dunes and crossed the plateau, we’ve turned south to climb the mountain

head-on,” said Curiosity Project Scientist Ashwin Vasavada, of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena,

California. “Since landing, we’ve been aiming for this gap in the terrain and this left turn. It’s a great moment for

the mission.”

Curiosity landed near Mount Sharp in 2012. It reached the base of the mountain in 2014 after successfully finding

evidence on the surrounding plains that ancient Martian lakes offered conditions that would have been favorable for

microbes if Mars has ever hosted life. Rock layers forming the base of Mount Sharp accumulated as sediment within

ancient lakes billions of years ago.

The Murray formation is about one-eighth of a mile (200 meters) thick. So far, Curiosity has examined about one-

fifth of its vertical extent.

“The story that the Murray formation is revealing about the habitability of ancient Mars is one of the mission’s

surprises,” Vasavada said. “It wasn’t obvious from pre-mission data that it formed in long-lived lakes and that its

diverse composition would tell us about the chemistry of those lakes and later groundwater.”

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“NASA Mars Rover Descends Plateau, Turns Toward Mountain.”

Solar System Exploration.

NASA, 13 June 2016.

solarsystem.nasa.gov/news/2016/06/13/nasa-mars-rover-descends-plateau-turns-toward-mountain

Curiosity is a slow-moving rover. It takes time to collect samples, exploring its alien environment inch by inch. Even the

title of the article, “NASA Mars Rover Descends Plateau, Turns Toward Mountain,” hints at its plodding pace. Curiosity’s

mission makes speed impractical. If it were designed to move faster, its observations would be less accurate because it would

not have time to interact with the environment in ways that allow it to gather detailed information. The same is true for a

curious writer. When exploring a new idea or a new text, move slowly. Use the aptly named rover as your model and practice

approaching exploratory thinking at a gradual pace.

Asking Questions

One way to approach exploratory thinking and prepare for exploratory writing is to use a pre-writing exploratory technique

called a

double-entry journal

. This is a note-taking technique that requires an explorer to slow down and interact with the

material he or she observes, whether that material is textual, environmental, or social.

To start a double-entry journal, create two columns in a notepad. If you would rather complete this exercise using a computer,

simply create a table that is divided into two vertical columns. In the first column, you will record observations about the

text with which you are interacting. In the second column, you will record questions and ideas related to your observations.

Here is an example of what a double-entry journal might look like for the first 3 paragraphs of the excerpt from the article

“Mars Rover Descends Plateau, Turns Toward Mountain.”

Observations

Questions and Ideas

•

Six months seems like a long time to pause

while climbing the mudstone bedrock.

•

The formations the rover examines have

interesting names: Murray formation,

Mount Sharp, Naukluft Plateau.

•

It seems like active sand dunes and fractured

sandstone are being juxtaposed – active

sand dunes interrupt the fractured sandstone

that “once more” covered the formation.

•

An experiment is being repeated in which

samples are being taken from pale zones

around fractures.

•

It is entertaining to think that the rover is

taking selfies while on Mars!

•

Did the rover go off route for six months? If yes, why? If

no, what was it doing in one place for that long?

•

How are these formations named? Are they named after

scientists? Do the names have any cultural or scientific

significance?

•

What are active sand dunes? What would cause one

area to be made of this type of sand while another area

is made of fractured sandstone? Do these two types of

sand occur side by side? What could this tell scientists

about the landscape of Mars and how it was formed?

•

What are pale zones and why are they important? What

do scientists hope to learn from these samples? Why

would they repeat the collection process?

•

Are there scientific reasons for the rover’s self-portraits?

Or are these meant more for other people who are

interested in the rover but not directly involved in the

mission? How much of what the rover does is meant to

provide entertainment or educational information for

non-scientists?

Double-entry journals are meant to help the note-taker record his or her observations and then begin to dig deeper into those

observations by asking questions and potentially proposing hypothetical answers. Since each reader will make different

observations, no two journals will look exactly alike.

Practice creating a double-entry journal while listening to someone read a short essay entitled “Body Ritual among the

Nacirema”:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmbJfSdSZbM

You may find it helpful to pause the recording in order to write down your observations. After you have listened to the entire

essay, read back through your observations and then record questions and ideas as they occur to you

When Your Preconceptions Get the Best of You

In the mid-fourteenth century, a self-proclaimed explorer penned a book that would be read by many travelers for hundreds

of years to come. The book has gone by several different names, but today, it is most commonly referred to as

The Travels

of Sir John Mandeville

. The narrator records descriptions of many strange and fantastical people, animals, objects, and

environments. In the preface to his travel narrative, the narrator insists that he accurately portrays the people, places,

and objects he encountered. However, it is clear to a modern reader that what the narrator actually describes are highly

fictionalized and stereotypical ideas about different races and regions of the world. Unfortunately, because he marketed his

account as factual, it took explorers many years to realize his fallacies and debunk his accounts by providing observation-

based accounts of other peoples, places, and cultures. Study the below excerpt, which appears in a section describing

Mandeville’s travels through Indonesia. What evidence can you find to support the claim that the narrator did not approach

his subject from the viewpoint of an explorer, but rather constructed a narrative to reinforce his own biases?

In one of these isles be folk of great stature, as giants. And they be hideous for to look upon. And they have but one

eye, and that is in the middle of the front. And they eat nothing but raw flesh and raw fish.

And in another isle toward the south dwell folk of foul stature and of cursed kind that have no heads. And their eyen

be in their shoulders.

And in another isle be folk that have the face all flat, all plain, without nose and without mouth. But they have two

small holes, all round, instead of their eyes, and their mouth is [f]lat also without lips.

And in another isle be folk of foul fashion and shape that have the lip above the mouth so great, that when they sleep

in the sun they cover all the face with that lip.

[. . .]

And in another isle be folk that have great ears and long, that hang down to their knees.

And in another isle be folk that have horses’ feet. And they be strong and mighty, and swift runners; for they take

wild beasts with running, and eat them.

•

Mandeville, Sir John. “Chapter XXII.”

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville.

Romanization.com.

www.romanization.com/

books/mandeville/chap22.html

While it is obvious to the modern reader that Mandeville’s travel narrative is based in fiction and not fact, many of its original

readers thought otherwise. To them, these fantastical descriptions seemed plausible. They had little knowledge of the people

and lands in this part of the world and so, when left to imagine what lay beyond the known, many readily accepted the idea

of people who have no heads and others who have only one eye. They took Mandeville’s narrative as fact in part because

they understood the world through

binaries

, or opposites. They assumed that people in faraway places must be very different

from themselves. In some cases, the more pronounced the difference, the more accurate the depiction seemed to them.

Little is known about the author of

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville

, except that he likely did little traveling during his

lifetime. While he billed himself as an explorer, he was instead a fiction writer. He did not visit places that were new to him

with no preconceptions about what he would find. Instead, he framed his travel narrative using a

biased

view of the world.

He made assumptions about what other places and people are like.

Our culture today is much more adept at spotting offensive stereotypes, but as writers and explorers, we must be aware that

we all still approach topics with preconceived notions. This is because we are shaped as thinkers by our encounters and

our communities. We use these to help us create

frames of reference

. When used consciously and responsibly, frames of

reference can be helpful tools for a writer. They give us a way into a new experience, encounter, or idea. However, if we are

unwilling to engage in exploration, we will end up writing accounts that contain the types of fiction and stereotyping that

plague

Mandeville’s Travels

.

Just like how the exploration of new places can challenge our beliefs and even change the way we think about ourselves and

our world, exploratory writing can help us break away from patterns of biased and binary thinking. Many important discoveries

have been made when people have allowed themselves to break away from biased and binary thinking and explore new ways of

approaching a problem or a topic. For example, germ theory, the idea that microorganisms are the cause of illnesses, went against

the prevailing scientific ideas of its day. Many scientists were biased toward old ideas and reluctant to consider any new ways of

approaching public health issues. A few scientists, however, approached the problem with the spirit of explorers and considered

evidence that broke from established patterns of understanding the world. As you will see in the following video, their willingness

to make observations and ask questions changed the way people understand biology and helped pave the way for many medical

advances that vastly improved the lives of many people.

https://youtu.be/N9LC-3ZKiok

The Myth of the Perfect Writer

For as long as Jun can remember, she has heard stories about writers who can sit down at a computer and type out a perfect

essay or even a best-selling novel. They are people who are touched by inspiration on a daily basis, often waking up with

brilliant ideas fully-formed in their sleepy heads. These stories always frustrate Jun. Why is writing so easy for some and so

difficult for her? Why doesn’t she ever wake up with a clear outline for her current writing assignment, a persuasive paper

on why it’s important to pay attention to the ingredients in your dog’s food? Instead, she begrudgingly sits at her computer

and stares at her dog, who offers no help at all.

When Jun finds herself particularly stumped by a writing assignment, she thinks about those gifted writers who turn out

perfect essays. She obsesses over what it must be like to be able to come up with ideas so quickly, to think in outlines and

paragraphs. The myth of the perfect writer taunts her as she toils through her essay. Her ideas do not come to her fully

formed. Even when she finally finds the confidence to type out a paragraph, she knows she must revise it at least once. Each

new idea brings with it new anxieties. It is even worse when no ideas come at all. Then she gets really nervous. As you may

imagine, Jun is no fan of writing!

Unfortunately, Jun’s experience is common. When writers accept the myth of the perfect writer, the only logical outcome is

feelings of anxiety and frustration. Luckily, the idea of the person who can sit down and write the perfect essay or story in

one try is a myth. Writing takes time and work. It also takes revision and, most often, the help of members of a community

of writers. The best way to combat the myth of the perfect writer and the anxiety it can produce is to remind yourself that,

as a writer, your task is not to create the perfect essay. Instead, your goal is to develop and practice skills that will help you

effectively cultivate and communicate your ideas. Developing these skills takes time. Even professional writers continue to

develop their writing skills as they continue to write.

While some writers do simply sit down and write fully formed ideas, it is important to keep in mind that this approach often

does not lead to effective writing. For a writer to break out of the binary thinking that leads to anxiety, he or she must learn to

approach writing as an exploration. After all, if writing were simply jotting down ideas, there would be no room to develop

them. Approaching writing as an exploratory process ultimately leads to more refined ideas, better writing, and growth as

a writer.

Using Exploratory Writing to Address Writing Anxiety    
  
You know what aspect of writing gives you the most anxiety.

In this assignment, your job is to describe what aspect of writing generates the most anxiety in you, then use exploratory writing techniques to address that anxiety.

You may use any of the techniques described in the core content for the unit, or any technique described in these slides.  
  
Your assignment will consist of three parts. Each should be about a paragraph in length:

In detail, describe the aspect or aspects of writing that you find most challenging or unpleasant.

Next, identify the techniques you have chosen to you to help you overcome your challenges and explain why these techniques seem most beneficial to you.

Finally, reflect on your experience using these techniques. Did they help? In what way? Did you find any of them particularly challenging or frustrating? Why?

This assignment is meant to help you practice exploratory writing techniques, so you should experiment with multiple techniques and focus on explaining how these techniques might enhance your writing process.

The length of your essay should be at least one full page in following the formatting guidelines listed below.

Formatting Guidelines:  
1. Font should be Times New Roman.

2.Text should be double-spaced .

3. Margins should be set at one inch.

4. Name, Course, Instructor, and Assignment should appear in the top left corner.

5. A title should be centered and bolded at the top of the paper.