answer
Food, shelter, fire, water. (But not in that order; try and guess what comes first.)

hr

jennifer rich is associate chair and assistant professor of writing studies and composition at Hofstra University. She has published articles in film and Shakespeare studies and is the author of two ebooks on critical theory and modern feminist theory.
"Writing is..."
If we understand the academic writing of first year students to be largely delimited both by these students’ positions within the university and by the materials and assignments provided to them, this formulation seems to describe their situation quite well. To participate successfully in the academic and intellectual communities to which they are presumably pursuing entrance, they must write in genres and thus assume subject positions for which they might not yet understand the motivations or possibilities.

Such misunderstanding, in Kill’s words, eventually leads to a situation where even when immediate circumstances may seem clearly to solicit a certain form of rhetorical response, it is sometimes a different, even incompatible form that comes, through stubborn habituation, to rhetorical expression. (Kill 225-226)

Of course, Kill is trying to negotiate the very difficult task of interpolation that we have discussed earlier. She is dissecting the obstacles to such interpolation of the student as student by focusing on her writers’ various subject positions, the demands of discourse, and so on. In fact, David Bartholomae admits in the title of his famous article students’ constructions of the University—that to some degree, academic prose is a performance, but a performance that few teachers acknowledge as such.

On the other side of the divide, we find student as victim. In this conception, the academy is represented as a pedagogical ogre, disparaging and eventually destroying the student’s unique ‘native’ voice. Min-Zhan Lu’s article entitled An Essay on the Work of Composition: Composing English against the Order of Fast Capitalism is one of the clearest discussions of this conception that I have found. Lu closely reads a sign for a ‘money collecting toilet’ (what we would conventionally call a public toilet) in China as a way of understanding student writing as both emanating from and voicing a particular world view that must not be ignored. She argues that composition teachers and departments must treat writing as ‘matters of design’ and embrace ‘linguistic imperfection’ as evidence of the unique voice of the student writer. Discussing the Chinese sign, Lu hypothesizes that this unusual translation of ‘public toilet’ is not a result of linguistic naivety, but rather contains within it ideological motivations (political, social, personal)—what she calls ‘dissonances’—that inflect the writer’s work and world-view. In privileging these dissonances, Lu implicitly applauds the Chinese writer’s refusal to conform and perform; Lu argues passionately that composition teachers should similarly embrace this refusal—by so doing, instructors would free the victimized student and build a world warmed by responsive and responsible uses of language. By all. For all’ (45).

The professional voice

These two constructions of the student necessarily provide two different versions of acceptable academic writing: implicit in the student as barbarian formulation is the notion that academic prose is alien to the student—something that must be acquired through ‘habitation’, i.e. repetition and routine. Lu’s essay, on the contrary, defetishes academic prose and calls for us to respect the student’s own situationally inflected voice. Anything else is necessarily a form of colonization. Yet, the very structure and tone of Lu’s own essay would seem to argue against just this position—in order for the sign ‘money collecting toilet’ to be understood in all of its cultural richness, it must be translated or decoded, and this decoding proceeds through the rigor of academic inquiry and manifests itself in academic prose. Lu’s essay, while asserting students’ rights not to perform, necessarily performs in order to do so.

In fact, all of the essays considered implicitly posit academic prose as a performance. Even the student who objects to the briefcase knows what is contained within it are the metaphorical nets, hoops, and whips that will compel a particular kind of academic performance. Yet, there is considerable hesitancy in recognizing academic prose as a performance in the classroom: diagnostics and first essays in composition, for example, routinely ask students to personalize the writing experience. Students are required to write about how they feel about writing, or discuss their most important academic experiences, and so on. This demand for personalization places both the student and the teacher in a pedagogical quandary. What, for example, is the appropriate response to the personal in an academic context, and how can the student succeed in mastering academic prose via the personal? Discussing a personal-essay prompt which she now must grade/evaluate, Kill remarks:

[O]ne of the larger pedagogical aims of this prompt is to blur the divide between personal motivations for writing and those for academic writing, as I don’t think this division makes for interesting thinking or interested students. In opening with the invitation for students to tell me about their backgrounds, it is my intention to address them as people with lives beyond the classroom. . . . In this way, my intention was to have student explore the relationships between writing they do outside the classroom and the writing that they will be doing for this class is, in effect, a challenge to the division between personal identity and student/academic identity. (224)

Predictably, Kill’s prompt was to “tell me a little about your background. I am interested in who you are in general, but also more specifically, what kinds of writing you do and have done” (Kill 223). Again, the motivation behind such prompts is, I would argue, born of a hesitancy to create the student as Student too precipitously and as such to alienate the student from his or her own “voice.”

Yet, the fallacy of this approach becomes readily apparent if we recognize that ac-
academic discourse is predicated upon the obliteration of the personal. It is for this rea-
sonthat the writing of students who are defined by a profession—who are habituated in a
distinct discourse—is necessarily prized.

To turn to my own experience with teaching professional (nursing) students, I im-
nediately noticed the discrepancy in competence when these students were confronted
with an assignment that asked them to enter the realm of the personal. When prompted
by queries that allowed them to showcase their expertise, their writing was wonderfully
briefcased—it contained within it the tone, method and confidence that characterize effec-
tive academic prose; however, when essay prompts delved into the personal, this academic
prose disintegrated. Without the appropriate situational academic context, the nursing
students retreated to the safety of a conversational rather than academic tone. The follow-
ing examples should clearly showcase this difference. Manuel, a 28-year-old student, was
a full-time triage nurse at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. He usually came to
class in his "scrubs," running from the subway to the classroom, usually breathless upon
his arrival. One "low-stakes" assignment early in the semester asked him to discuss the
"theory" behind triage—what criteria, in other words, are used to determine the patients
that should be examined immediately and patients that can safely be seen later. Manuel
provided a rather banal response to this question in his first response to this assignment. In
a half-page, he simply cited the usual dictionary definition of triage. Triage is, he writes,
quoting from (most likely) Merriam-Webster, "a process for sorting injured people into
groups based on their need for or likely benefit from immediate medical treatment. Triage
is used on the battlefield, at disaster sites, and in hospital emergency rooms when limited
medical resources must be allocated." In order to prompt him to think more about the hu-
manitarian impact of triage and to wrestle (figuratively) the dictionary/medical textbooks
away from him, I asked him to consider a situation where he was forced to make a difficult
choice, a situation that involved the negotiation of human needs with the need to ensure
that "trage" rules were being followed. As a non-native speaker, Manuel was at first hesi-
tant to let go of the comfortable rhetoric of medical textbooks and dictionaries that would
allow him to pad his answers with quotations—to write, in other words, a quotation-quilt
rather than a paper. But, when he turned to this question, he obviously found that—to
some degree—he was in his element. After all, as a triage nurse he deals with this particu-
lar issue almost every day. Because of this experiential and discursive familiarity, he was
able to write a fuller and more sophisticated response, even though some syntactical issues
remained for reasons I will discuss later:

When you take your place at your station, emotions need to be
checked at the door. This isn’t easy since we don’t just lose our
identities as “fathers, brothers, sons or uncles” when we get to
work. But, when you are attacked with a mother who is hysterical
because her son is having a manageable asthma attack requiring
a simple nebulizer treatment as opposed to a possibility of head
trauma (whether it is a potentially life-threatening subdural he-
matoma or just a mild concussion) you must be remembering the
principles of triage. The mother might be really scared, and the
head trauma patient might be quiet, but you are the one knows
which needs the immediate attention of the doctor, and which
should wait.

In Manuel’s first sentence we find the insertion of his particular discourse com-
unity. He uses a colloquial expression (“emotions need to be checked at the door”) that
he most likely heard in triage-nurse training. Also, his prose becomes markedly mature
when considering the hypothetical needs of an asthma patient and a head trauma patient.
This enables him to make the kind of judgment call that both define triage as a practice
and his practice as a triage nurse. His parenthesis use of medical jargon—“whether it is
a potentially life-threatening subdural hematoma or just a mild concussion”—also firmly
inserts/interpolates him with a particular discourse community in which he feels comfort-
able. Where Manuel trips up—where his syntax becomes somewhat confused—are pre-
cisely those places where the personal intrudes and prevents his use medically-informed or
experientially-informed discourse: “But when you are attacked by a mother who is hysteri-
cal because her son...” I asked Manuel if he was ever really “attacked” in the usual sense of
the word, and he replied, “No, only with words, but it is very difficult.” This initial phrase
“[b]ut when you are attacked” thus indicates the difficulty of negotiating the personal and
the professional both in the hospital setting and in writing. In fact, the sentence as a whole
might be seen as a linguistic “symptom” of the discourse-conflict between the personal and
the professional. The personal here is written in the hurried style of one who is anxious to
move beyond it. It stumbles over itself in an attempt to reach the more reassuring shol-
als of medical discourse: “having a manageable asthma attack requiring a simple nebulizer
treatment.” Once Manuel is able to reach this shoh, his writing becomes sophisticated
once again. Able to draw from his years of medical training, he becomes, in this moment,
a master—rather than a subject—of his own writing.

We may see a similar disjunction—between the personal and the professional—in
the writing of another student, Jacqueline. Writing about the social causes of HIV/AIDS,
Jacqueline, a 43-year-old registered nurse had this to say:
Homelessness is an often overlooked cause of HIV/AIDS. Because of the complications of drug addiction and lack of consistent medical care, the homeless are left untreated, and if infected, undertreated. Thus, many homeless persons are not diagnosed with HIV/AIDS until hospitalized with a full-blown infection such as PCP, CMV retinitis, or invasive thrush. By this time, their T-cell counts are at a point where anti-retroviral therapies are of little use.

Having practiced nursing for ten years, Jacqueline was easily able to adopt the confident tone of a medical professional. Her thinking process also reflected this training—moving from social etiology to medical consequences with a logic and ease rarely seen in undergraduate writing. However, when asked to reflect on her own reasons for becoming a nurse, Jacqueline’s tone and approach were quite different.

I don’t know when I decided to become a nurse. Maybe because my grandmother was so ill all the time and my mother didn’t much know how to care for her. Also, I knew that nurses make good money and that there’s always employment prospects.

In this passage, Jacqueline flits uneasily from one reason to another. We are left wondering whether her decision to become a nurse was financial or personal. Even if both were the reasons, neither rationale is clearly explained or articulated. The tone also is alarmingly conversational in character. Jacqueline seems to have forgotten her reader and has retreated into her own ruminations—which have spilled out onto the page. She is obviously uncomfortable in this discursive arena—one understandably unfamiliar to her as a medical professional. Yet in a composition class, this writing would be held up as proof of incompetence precisely because the student as Student imagined in these classes is one who can manage multiple discursive arenas effectively—the personal narrative, the persuasive essay, literary criticism, social critique, research, and so on. Jacqueline’s example, however, begs the following questions with which I will end my discussion: is the student as Student attainable or even an appropriate goal? Is the personal disabling or enabling in enabling the production of the Student? Or is habituation, rote and modeling and the consequent pedagogical rejection of nativist arguments, the way forward? And, finally, do we need to rethink our conception of the student and the consequently the methods of interpolation within academic discourse?

domietta torlasco is a critical theorist and filmmaker currently working as an assistant professor of Italian and screen cultures at Northwestern University in Chicago. She holds a ph.d. in rhetoric (uc Berkeley) and an mfa in film, video and new media (school of the art institute of Chicago). Her book on the undoing of the detective story in Italian art cinema, the time of the crime: phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Italian film, was published by stanford university press in 2008.