Writer in the Attic: Place-Based Constraints on Research Writing

Joy Santee

During my senior year of high school, I wrote what I thought was an exhaustive treatment of every ESL method for my AP English class. We were to pick a topic related to our intended college major, and I was jealous of classmates headed for the sciences. Olestra was a cool topic. The classmate with that topic got to study potato chips that promised to save us from obesity. Although I didn’t see the need for ESL research in rural Iowa in the mid-1990s, Mrs. Kaufman assured me I would need it for college.

Our school’s library had little for me, but a field trip to Iowa State University’s library changed what was possible. I never knew so many books could exist in one place. All these books! Semi-hidden stairways leading to books on narrow terraces! Who knew you might ever need a map to find a book? I tried really hard to look like a college student and played it cool, but all those books intoxicated me.

I don’t remember being offered database access then or whether I had the slightest notion that journals were anything other than manly diaries. I just remember the rush to find and photocopy as many book chapters as I could, given our few short hours and the limited number of coins in my pocket. I made snap decisions about whether any given page was worthy of my nickels based on a quick skim for key quotes. I didn’t know any better.

The scope of my project was ambitious, of course, but apart from the many passive sentences that Mrs. Kaufman decisively underlined in red and marked...
with a large P on earlier papers, I was used to succeeding in my writing and confident I could turn those photocopied pages into an A paper.

I thought I had everything for research writing success at my disposal then, and I’m glad now that I didn’t know differently. I would have been overwhelmed by understanding how little I knew—how crude my research process, how blunt the color-coded note cards I’d made from my photocopies. Only kids in my AP English class, the second offered at our school, did research papers. Only the AP class got to go to the ISU library. I thought I knew what I was doing.

Our final draft was to be typed, but with only an electric typewriter at home, earlier drafts had to be done by hand. Draft, actually. Not drafts. Rewriting in any real way was too difficult with just a typewriter, so I relied on a detailed outline and advanced with unearned confidence.

I wrote in my attic bedroom, an unheated space on the cold north side of an old farmhouse. With a single bare bulb and just a small bed and dresser, I didn’t realize the trope I was re-creating—poor student, cold, writing in solitude in an attic in winter. The church people and my mom’s determined work ethic kept us from being threadbare, and I don’t think the students in the trope had stuffed animal collections, but I wrote alone in the attic anyway, often in bed on my stomach under a warmish tent of blankets, my breath on my hand to keep it warm enough to hold the pencil as I wrote. Sometimes I could convince the cat to join me under the covers and share his furry heat, but most often I wrote alone.

Downstairs was warm enough, but distractions eliminated it as a place of writing—Wheel of Fortune, an obnoxious pubescent younger brother, my pet rabbit Buster—so to my bed I went to write. By the final draft of the paper, the north wind blew less and spring was well on its way, warming my room and my writing hand and helping me get my A, complete with fewer passive sentences.

My exhaustive treatment of all major ESL methods in fifteen pages was, of course, a failure by academic standards that call for innovation in thought with nearly every page, but I learned what was possible with a single afternoon at a library, a pencil, and a few blankets to keep me warm.

This semester my students’ laptops, grandmothers, and distant uncles will begin dying off just before key deadlines, just as they do each semester. I’ll read paper after paper on football concussions, video game violence, and global warming, but I’ll also see the fraught relationships my students have with their own places of writing: Derrik complains about a roommate who consistently comes home drunk at 4:00 a.m. John wonders why his parents can’t just leave
him alone when he’s in the zone, bedroom door closed. Marissa tells me she starts twitching if she hasn’t checked her phone in the last three minutes. Janelle juggles school and work while caring for both her son and her mother.

Sometimes I tell these students about the farmhouse attic, about finding a place and a way to write. I remind them that phones can, in fact, be turned off without harm; walk them through the process of getting a new roommate, at least for next semester; and help them create scripts to talk to their parents about boundaries. I don’t know what to tell Janelle, and eventually she drops the class, unable to sustain her 3:30 a.m. wake-up time, the only time she can find to write. She promises me she’ll be back in my class next semester, but I know that’s not likely.

I now write in a warm house with a desk, relative quiet, database access, and good coffee, but writing is still hard. My brother moved to my grandparents’ farmhouse, and Buster finally died. Nearly half of the kindergarten class of my small meatpacking town now speaks Spanish as a first language. It’s been a long time since I’ve written under a tent of blankets, though the attic bedroom is still cold when I go home for Christmas, and I’d have to revive it if I were to write there since Wheel of Fortune still blares downstairs, too, from the TV atop the fridge.

Last fall one student told me he wrote part of his final paper in his car, the only quiet space he could find. I hope he had enough gas money to turn on the heat once in a while, but I didn’t have the heart to ask.

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Joy Santee is an assistant professor of English at McKendree University, teaching academic and professional writing, visual rhetoric, and writing pedagogy. She also directs the Writing Center and coordinates the university’s WAC program.