

Leveraging Personal Experiences as Strengths for Tutoring

“Develop one voice that readers will recognize when they hear it on the page, a voice that’s enjoyable not only in its musical line, but in its avoidance of sounds that would cheapen its tone: breeziness and condescension and cliches.”

–William Zinsser

Using personal experiences in the writing process is one of the most important tools in learning and understanding language. Personalizing writing leads to finding one's voice, maintaining a consistent tone throughout the paper, and most importantly making the writer feel more comfortable. The notion of personalizing writing may seem obvious to writers like you and me, but the idea is very much underused by beginning writers, especially ESL students. During my experience as an ESL tutor, I've seen many of my students stray away from what they know best – their personal experiences. These personal experiences may include, but are not limited to, language, culture, background, family history, interest, and anecdotes. Throughout the paper, I plan to show the theory behind leveraging personal experiences as strengths and share some real life examples of the theory.

Before I go into the theory, I want to discuss the reason why ESL students have problems leveraging personal experiences. One of the central reasons for not using personal experiences in one's writing is the lack of comfortability of the English language. When thinking of what to write about, students instinctively go to their personal experiences as potential topics. The hard part of the brainstorming comes from writing those potential topics onto pen and paper. ESL students struggle with finding the right word to convey their ideas. The process becomes exhausting and students go to look online and elsewhere for other ideas. Two major problems exist when looking to use another source's ideas. The first problem is plagiarism. ESL students may knowingly, or not, plagiarize ideas and this may lead to serious disciplinary action. The second problem is dependency. ESL students may start to look only for answers, and not learn anything, to complete an assignment. A student may have a hard time generating ideas in class when not given outside sources. There is a chance that students who constantly use outside ideas may perform well in class, but it may cost them their chance of improving their writing in the long run.

The theory of leveraging personal experiences as strengths comes from a vast number of writers and scholars. I chose to use the theory in *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, which was written by Williams Zinsser. I specifically chose to use Zinsser's book because it connected to ESL writing and ESL tutors. In *On Writing Well*, Zinsser highlights the importance of finding one's voice to improve one's writing. A voice can be defined "through [the] tone of voice, pacing of words, questions asked, pauses, inflections, [and] choice of words" (Face to the Sun). Without a distinctive writing voice, a paper can become dull and uninteresting. With a voice, a writer can distance his or her writing and ideas from other papers. Now that we know the importance of finding one's voice, how does one actually find his or her individual voice?

In order to find one's voice, Zinsser says to "write to express your own individuality" (Face to the Sun). The key to expressing one's own individuality is to be honest with oneself. Expressing individuality also requires conveying personal feeling and emotion onto paper. Feeling and emotion can set the tone for a paper, which is essential to English structure and writing fundamentals (The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors). The second way to find one's voice is to "write using common, practical words." When reading my tutees' writings, I occasionally see my students using complex vocabulary that do not fit in the sentences. The misused vocabulary stick out like sore thumbs and take away from the flow of the paper. I still encourage my tutees to use new vocabulary, but I warn them of using unknown words in the thesaurus. The final and most crucial way to develop a writing voice is to use one's "own heritage and experience." There is no substitute for personal experience. Personal experiences can change a direction of a paper, and bring originality and creativity to the writing process. Anecdotes help keep a paper rich with detail and create vivid examples for readers to remember.

I was able to use Williams Zinsser's theory of finding one's voice with one of my tutees this quarter. Sarah, an alias name for one of my tutees, was one of the ESL students who strayed away from using personal experiences in her writings. At the beginning of the quarter, she told me that her biggest problems with writing were brainstorming and developing ideas. At each session, I tried to

focus on her two main problems. Sarah's writing was pretty impressive. I found her writing to be well organized and filled with adequate examples. I didn't think she had a problem with generating ideas. She told me that she had spent hours each day of the week looking online for examples that were not her own. This was something very serious and I had to give her a talk about plagiarism. Even after the talk, she continued to use examples that were not her own. This time she was fictionalizing examples. When the prompt would ask for three examples, she could only come up with one. I suggested the reason for a lack of examples was because she was making it up. From that point up, we began to work on writing and brainstorming ideas based on her own personal experiences. At first, she had a hard time translating her ideas on to paper. We worked on different discussion and brainstorming techniques from The Bedford Guide to help her stimulate enough ideas until she was able to write some examples on paper. Sarah's writing began to develop a distinctive voice and tone in her papers. Brainstorming became a thing of the past for her when she began to write based on her own experiences.

One of my other tutees was able to use personal experiences to help his writing in a different way. In the middle of the quarter, Bill Turner came to the Ewrt97 class and discussed the ways to help tutees learn more efficiently. One of the techniques he suggested was to have tutees use their understanding of their native language to help learn English. Bill talked about having tutees define English words and phrases in their own language, and then translating the meaning back to English. This process would help tutees better understand the definitions of English words. My tutee was having the same problem understanding English vocabulary. I encouraged him to write the definition in his native language and revert his language back to English. He kept doing this technique each week until he was able to pick up definitions without using his foreign translator. His understanding of English had improved due to his use of his native language.

There are a variety of cases and examples in which using personal experiences can benefit one's writing. I encourage tutors to use the technique of personalizing writing to help their tutees. Personalizing writing can help the writer feel more comfortable, improve brainstorming and idea development, and create a distinctive writing voice.

Bibliography

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