

# Verbal Equinox

Fall 2012

## Coordinator's Corner

by Claire Hughes  
Writing Center Coordinator

The Writing Center's skilled and enthusiastic tutors are having another great fall semester, supporting students from any discipline who are interested in writing well. Focusing on metacognition during 8,000 – 9,000 online and face-to-face sessions each year, tutors encourage students to discover the edges of their writing ability and push beyond them. We appreciate your support of the Writing Center's efforts to reach and support students.

Between tutoring sessions, tutors accomplish further projects like writing for and publishing our journal, *Verbal Equinox*. In this edition of the journal, three undergraduate student leaders and one graduate teaching assistant share their articles about online tutoring, the ins and outs of literature review, the discipline of creative writing, and the qualities of good argument. This edition is further enhanced by artwork from two talented undergraduate writing tutors. Enjoy!

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## *A Note from the Editor*

by Derek Stout  
*Verbal Equinox* Editor

This issue of *Verbal Equinox* is filled with valuable words from capable tutors and faculty. Our tutors have tirelessly worked researching and writing their articles, which explore the value of creative writing, how to write a literature review, what is objectivity and its role in writing, and online tutoring.

Our tutors have spent time with faculty discussing and reviewing the subjects they have written about. We are extremely grateful for these wonderful professors who have taken the time to provide their insights on the topics discussed in this publication.

We are also very excited to include beautiful art from two of our talented tutors: Devon Hoxer and Rachel Rigley. Believe it or not, these talented tutors and artists created this amazing work on the white boards of the Writing Center. We are proud to include their work in this issue of *Verbal Equinox*.

We are excited to share these words and works with you and hope that these valuable and helpful insights from our tutors and faculty will be helpful, and we hope to see you in the Writing Center soon.

# Creative Writing Is an Academic Pursuit

by Dwight Adams

I recently visited with Dr. Victoria Ramirez of the WSU English Department to discuss the benefits of creative writing to student development and critical thinking. I hope that what I learned from this discussion will support WSU's many creative writers and creative writing faculty and that we can help boost appreciation of creative writing as an academic pursuit.

The variety of creative writing forms and the multitude of pathways for wordplay establish the place of creative writing in modern academics. Creative writers explore narrative in novels and short stories, experiment with form and structure in poetry and experimental narrative, consider human relationships in drama, and relate both common and extraordinary experiences in creative non-fiction. The knowledge creative writers gain by practicing these artistic forms facilitates and enriches other studies. Among other benefits, creative writing helps familiarize creative writers with the types of work they will critically analyze in other classes and teaches them how to consider and practice the techniques an author uses in creating literature.

All academic writing gives students metacognitive opportunities, such as practicing a broad range of writing skills and exploring their own strategies as effective learners. Creative writing does the same, albeit with different foci. As Dr. Ramirez points out, the process of creative writing gives the writer a "more extensive experience in writing." Like the strongest academic writers, a creative writer is "playing" with words, ideas, structures, and sounds. This play—the craft-centered experimentation endemic to the artistic approach—"produces students with much stronger writing skills." Exposure to and practice within a variety of classes and forms strengthens a student's overall writing.

In addition to the instrumental benefits I've mentioned, creative writing can be intrinsically

valuable. Although, taken on its own, it may seem as though creative writing involves simply having fun or fooling around with words, the challenge of successful creative work—and the payoff—is uncontestable. Creative writing explores some of the aspects of human life that we find to be of the greatest value and sometimes to be the least accessible. Exploring these can open up new avenues of thought and feeling or help us to navigate those which are open but which seem incomprehensible. Ironically, in maximizing both cognitive and affective potential, the creative writer may be doing seemingly frivolous work in the process of making something powerful.

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Further, the work that creative writers commit to is substantial. Experimentation is hard work, with effects that may be surprising as they emerge in the writing process and end goals that may be difficult to visualize. Creative writers play in a field of few and amorphous guidelines, yet they are still required to produce compelling, effective, disciplined work. In fact, the bar that creative writers set for themselves tends to be extraordinarily high—even the best efforts oftentimes end in perceived failure. For this reason, the creative writer may work through a piece up to dozens of times before considering it complete, such that a five-page work may represent far more than a five-page compliment of effort.

Throughout and at the end of this process of experimentation and creation, creative writers will submit their best work to the holistic question: What does this work do? This is perhaps the most challenging and beneficial part of the process. As writers subject their work to critical analysis on the levels of word, sentence, paragraph, and even punctuation, they prove the worth of the effort and the finished product. Even a piece which will never see publication represents a process of choice, growth, and both intellectual and emotional struggle.

## Continued from Page 2

The use of words such as “do” and “doing,” above, to describe the diagnostic goals of faculty and critical readers may seem cryptic. In this article, I make use of these terms because the purposes and techniques of creative writing are multifarious, such that no single way of speaking about a piece of writing will suffice for a general overview. Some pieces are best spoken of as accomplishing a goal, relating a theme, investigating universal human experience, or eliciting a sense, and so forth. How they go about doing these things is varied and complex.

To succeed by merely splattering the wall with paintballs in hope of hitting the target would be quite a feat. No, the experience of the creative writer is one of practiced precision—the near-surgical application of techniques gleaned from classes and workshops and the discoveries of private practice. And sometimes a creative writer, to excel, must be able to judge his works from the responses of readers—to learn by analyzing reactions. In these and other ways, rigorous exercise in creative writing gives students the essential experiences of the serious academic and the professional writer.

Our creative writing faculty help students to improve the way they think about their work, to develop professional expectations from their own efforts, to experience critical analysis of their own work, and to engage in the fundamental practice of revision that is essential to academic pursuits. Through creative writing training, university faculty help students reach all of their writing goals.

The methods of creative writing faculty may differ from those of faculty in other disciplines. Dealing with a creative writer means helping the writer determine what he wants the piece to do and being able to analyze what the piece is actually doing. Neither is necessarily an easy task. Effective analysis requires awareness of the conventions of creative writing and openness to divergence from those conventions. Dr. Ramirez warns that we must not “hold the piece hostage to the simpler conventions of English that [we] apply to academic writing.” Readers and writers may get embroiled in the laundry list of academic writing virtues and vices, but even within academic writing, authors such as Richard Behm have acknowledged that the process of writing cannot be reduced to adherence

*“...the experience of the creative writer is one of practiced precision—the near-surgical application of techniques gleaned from classes and workshops and the discoveries of private practice.”*

to strict rules (8). Imagine, then, how much less effective it is to apply such rules to creative pieces.

Dr. Ramirez asserts that there is only one firm rule for readers and writers to apply: “You can do anything in fiction.” The same can be said of other creative writing genres. She reminds us, however, that the fact that the rules are negotiable does not mean that anything goes. Because of the variety of techniques available, creative writing is sometimes like fishing in unsteady waters—you may not only fail to catch a fish, you just may be thrown overboard.

In examining a creative work, writers and supporting critical readers must consider the writer’s technique and execution with an eye for the ultimate goal: Was the purpose fulfilled by the end of the piece? Were there points in the piece where the overall purpose seems to have been lost or set aside? If so, did the piece recover? Where? How? This discussion can be of immeasurable benefit to the writer. If a writer intends to, for example, disrupt the tone in one part of his story, he may ask himself why he chose to and whether doing so is helping or harming the overall effect of the piece. If the shift in tone is unintentional, he should reconsider his piece and correct the disruption.

At this point in the discussion, Dr. Ramirez presents a concept which every writer and reader needs to be aware of and able to recognize: “Effective anomaly.” She stresses the importance of not blocking ourselves off to recognizing and appreciating such anomalies when they pass us on the page. Critical readers and faculty consider what

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technique a creative writer is using and allow that his approach might actually work, for in addition to a rich vocabulary, sentence-level wordcraft, and the ability to imbue his work with a sense of unity, a skilled creative writer's technical repertoire includes abnormal use of punctuation and grammar.

Beyond these questions of technique, skilled writers will also be familiar with what kind of writing they are engaging in. As in questions of technique, no firm boundaries exist in the question of writing categories. But, as with technique, the decisions made regarding category do matter. When creative writers consider their technical options, they consider them in the context of the kind of writing that they are doing. For example, poetry lends itself to a different kind of wordplay than fiction does. Brave creative writers will bend these boundaries—sometimes with success, sometimes not.

Whether a particular piece is considered a success or not, the efforts of the writer have been successful, for in engaging in creative writing, students create their own success. Taking the reins of their education, they push the boundaries of their language capabilities and test new linguistic options. Faculty help students consider technique and execution in pursuit of their purposes. With the assistance of faculty, students can push their boundaries further, discover new options that they did not know were there, and even learn, by critical analysis of their own work, new ways of understanding the work of other authors. This process of discovery informs students' work in other disciplines. In this and other ways, the rigors of creative writing and its many benefits establish its place in the university, both in supporting academic pursuits and in being an academic pursuit of its own.

*Behm, Richard. "Ethical Issues in Peer Tutoring: A Defense of Collaborative Learning." The Writing Center Journal 10.1 (1989): 3-13.*

*All information, unless otherwise cited, is taken from an interview with Dr. Victoria Ramirez, PhD, of Weber State University, and subsequent discussion with the author, Fall 2012.*

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# Writing and the Challenge of “Objectivity”

by Eladio Bobadilla

Many students come to college with the illusion that to write well, they must be “objective.” This notion, picked up somewhere along the line (often in high school), then creates a great deal of anxiety when students are presented with the task of writing a position paper, an argumentative paper, or even a thesis statement for another type of paper. How, they wonder, can one take a position and remain objective? But the question so many students ask is the wrong one. The real challenge for the college writer is writing well, which is by no means dependent on objectivity.

The late historian Howard Zinn believed subjectivity, especially in the academy, is unavoidable. He said, “From the start of my teaching and writing, I had no illusions about ‘objectivity,’ if that meant avoiding a point of view. I knew that a historian (or a journalist, or any one telling a story) was forced to choose, from an infinite number

of facts, what to present, what to omit. And that decision inevitably would reflect, whether consciously or not, the interests” of the author (683). Zinn argued that every word we utter or write is endowed with meaning by its author.

It is not difficult to see his point. Every word in a good piece of writing reflects a conscious decision, a choice we make, and what ultimately emerges is a necessarily biased argument. This is not to say that objectivity does not exist, that truth is relative, or that opinion and fact are indistinguishable. There are certainly such things as empirical facts and outright lies. But that is beside the point, especially for those of us in the humanities.

In the humanities, objectivity cannot be our ultimate goal. For example, historians, as Zinn explained, must choose what to emphasize in telling history. They must make moral judgments

about what to include and what to omit. And they must constantly make calls about what word or phrase to use when describing a person, event, or movement. Even those who claim to be objective must concede that their objectivity is limited and that the very act of interpreting historical facts is a subjective one. This notion, of course, extends far beyond history, beyond the humanities.

The impulse to want to write “objectively” is a well-intentioned one. Students want to be open-minded, accurate, and fair—all admirable aims. A good argument should, in fact, be open-

minded, accurate, and fair.

But it should still be an argument. The college writing environment is, after all, a conversation. Students should imagine their writing as their opportunity to enter the conversation. Once they realize this, the idea of writing an argument should seem much less taxing and much more manageable.

Every day at the Writing

Center (or seemingly so), I see talented writers who squander their abilities in an attempt to write “objectively.” Good writers must understand that their task is to make a point, establish an idea, or advance a point of view. Certainly, I have also seen papers that reduce writing to shouting on paper, something that resembles (and is often influenced by) the current state of our political discourse. Intelligent students want to avoid entering that realm, and rightly so. But I must remind those students that the antidote to this ugly form of writing is reason, civility, and support, not some vague and ultimately unattainable notion of objectivity.

A good paper will avoid hateful, reductionist, or simplistic ideas. It will use good support, and it will not only allow, but will encourage complications. It will not simply aim to be objective. Objectivity is killing writing. Any attempt to hold on to that

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idea only serves to deny our fundamental human nature as writers and as people. It is important to hold on to the principles that make us want to be objective while at the same time realizing that our aim lies elsewhere, that our desire is really to write well-supported, reasoned arguments. In other words, we want to write well, not constrict ourselves by obsessing over objectivity.

*Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Print*

*“The antidote to this ugly form of writing is reason, civility, and support, not some vague and ultimately unattainable notion of objectivity.”*

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# Literature Review, Review

by Shaun Conner

Over the past few years, an increasing number of professors have started assigning literature reviews as part of their introductory curricula. Professors want their students to realize that the university is a part of an academic world filled with enduring questions and conversations. They want their students to be prepared to navigate and take part in that world. The purpose of a lit-review is to gather, study, and review the literature on a given topic. With this goal in mind, here are four guidelines for students to get the most out of writing lit-reviews.

## I. The subject is not the object.

One of the most confusing aspects of a lit-review is the need to gear the writing away from the subject itself and toward the literature written on the subject. For example, in writing a traditional research paper on respiratory illness, a student might include a detailed list of signs and symptoms, followed by possible treatments, but when writing a lit-review, students would turn their writing toward the research done, and literature written, about respiratory illness. The symptoms would be less important than the studies conducted, the treatments would be less important than the peer reviews written about the effectiveness of treatments. In preparing a lit-review, it might help to keep the following questions in mind: Where does this research come from? How was the research conducted? Why was it conducted? Is the research complete? Was this study done in response to an earlier study? Is this study representative of a larger movement or philosophy? And above all, how does this work/study fit into the larger context of the academic field?

## II. Reading more than writing.

It is not unusual for students to spend ninety-eight percent of their time working on a lit-review reading and less than two percent of the time actually writing the review. One of the major purposes of a lit-review is to impress upon students the vast scale of the academic conversation on any topic.

A student should spend a lot of time in the library becoming familiar with Academic Search Premiere, Google Scholar, and other research tools. Since the literature on any subject will be extensive, students should be on the lookout for reliable, peer-reviewed sources. Further, since good, reliable sources will be part of a larger conversation, it is a good idea to pay attention to sources that refer to or cite each other.

Quick Tip: A good place to find additional sources is the references or works cited page of the source.

## III. Order! Order in the paper!

It is easy to lose direction in a lit. review. Many students make the mistake of establishing an outline and then trying to force the sources to follow that structure. It will be far more effective, and reflect the literature far better, to let the sources determine the structure. One of the easiest ways to order a paper is chronologically, looking for the date on the sources and simply reviewing them in that order, but there are other ways. If there are serious divisions in the literature, you can follow those, dividing your paper into argument and rebuttal, pro and con, good and bad. If there are two or more schools of thought on a subject, it works well

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to give each school of thought a section of the paper. The point is to examine the literature and see the shape of the conversation, then draw up a paper that reflects and summarizes that structure.

IV. The fact that the references page comes at the end of the paper does not mean it should be written last.

To many students, the references or works cited page seems like a chore to be done at the end to wrap-up a paper, but writing the source page first can really help when it comes to a lit-review. A good sources page will give the writer a quick and understandable picture of the type, chronology, geography, and context of the sources. It would not be going too far to say that a lit-review is basically an incredibly detailed description of a sources page, so it makes sense to begin with the sources and then write the description.

One last tip could be to remain calm. It is easy to feel overwhelmed when examining the entire body of literature on any subject. It might help to remember that the literature represents a conversation. No one is asked to come up with the end-all, definitive work or grand, unified theory on a subject. In assigning literature reviews, professors simply want students to understand the complexity of a topic, be able to follow the diverse directions of a conversation, and prepare themselves to participate in the world of academic discourse.

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# Online Tutoring

by Derek Stout

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Writing centers have always had one focus: the writer. However, with advances in technology, tutoring has taken a drastic shift. The advent of the internet makes a new technology available to the writing center: online tutoring. The internet now reaches all parts of the globe and has found its way into the Writing Center. Anyone familiar with the WSU Writing Center knows that students can send papers via email to a tutor who can review it and send back valuable, helpful comments. While this is often convenient, it has also been the source of many questions and concerns.

One concern with this form of tutoring is that there is no face-to-face interaction. The only medium between the tutor and the writer is the writing itself. Another concern is that using the online medium gives the false impression that the writing center is a fix-it shop. Send it in, get it fixed, get it back. Unfortunately, this idea negates the entire purpose of a writing center and tutoring in general. Why do we have a writing center? It's not to get better grades; it's to get better brains. It's about students knowing it for themselves. The whole fix-it shop mentality affects tutors as well. The tutor's focus can shift to helping make the product better instead of helping with the process. When the focus is misdirected, the outcome is less than favorable.

Online tutoring can also have the drawback of enticing the tutor to edit the paper by focusing on the nitty gritty details. A tutor's responsibility is to help the writer become a better writer, and bypassing more important issues won't be beneficial. One way that the tutor can avoid this is to ask questions in the online session, just as they would in a face-to-face session. Questions are intended to prompt writers' thinking and help them find the solutions to the problems they are facing. After all, isn't that

what effective tutors do? Isn't that the method that the greatest teachers employ? A great teacher is not one who deposits all of his or her knowledge into the minds of eagerly awaiting students. A great teacher assists the students on the road to discovery.

But you might be asking if there are any benefits to online tutoring. Indeed, there are significant benefits to online tutoring. This medium allows the benefits of tutoring to be extended to many more students. Those who live far away

or who aren't able to come to the Writing Center during the center's hours can still receive help from capable tutors.

Online tutoring also allows the student to have a complete record of what occurred in the tutoring session. It's impossible for most of us to remember everything that was said in a conversation, and the same goes for tutoring. It is possible that the occasional student may sit down with a tutor, have a produc-

tive time, and then leave the Writing Center not remembering a thing that was said. In online tutoring, the writer and the tutor have a record of everything that happened in the session. This can be very beneficial to students when revising or going back to a paper after a much needed break.

Online tutoring can also allow both parties time to think. It can be hard to come up with ideas and solutions on the spot. Online tutoring allows the writer and the tutor time to think about what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. This ensures that every idea is conveyed as clearly as possible.

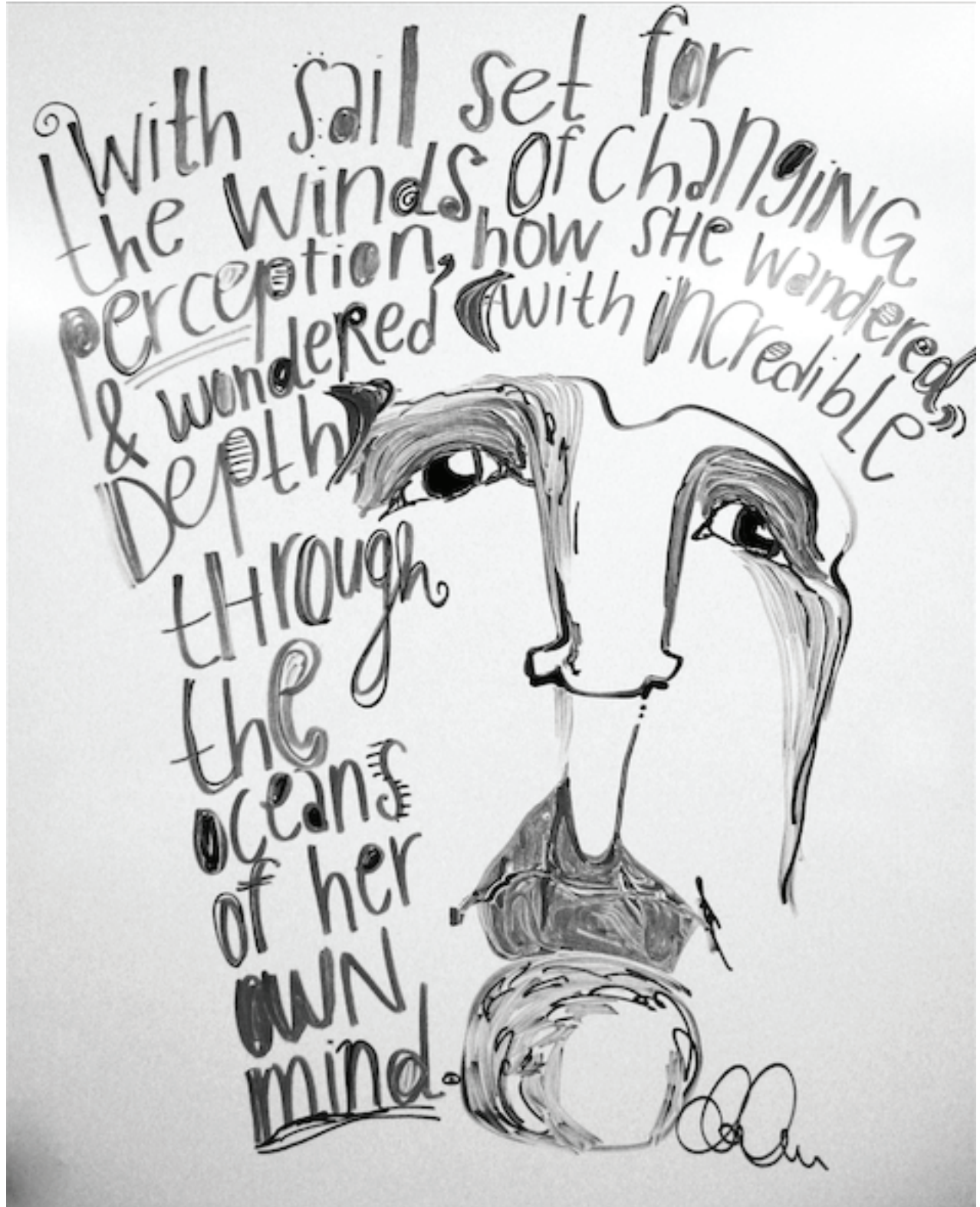
As with anything new, online tutoring presents a few concerns, but it also presents possibilities far beyond what many imagined. It may not work for some people, but for others it may change their educational experience, enhancing the quality of both the writing and the writer.

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*“Questions are intended to prompt writers’ thinking and help them find the solutions to the [writing] problems they are facing.”*

## With Sail Set

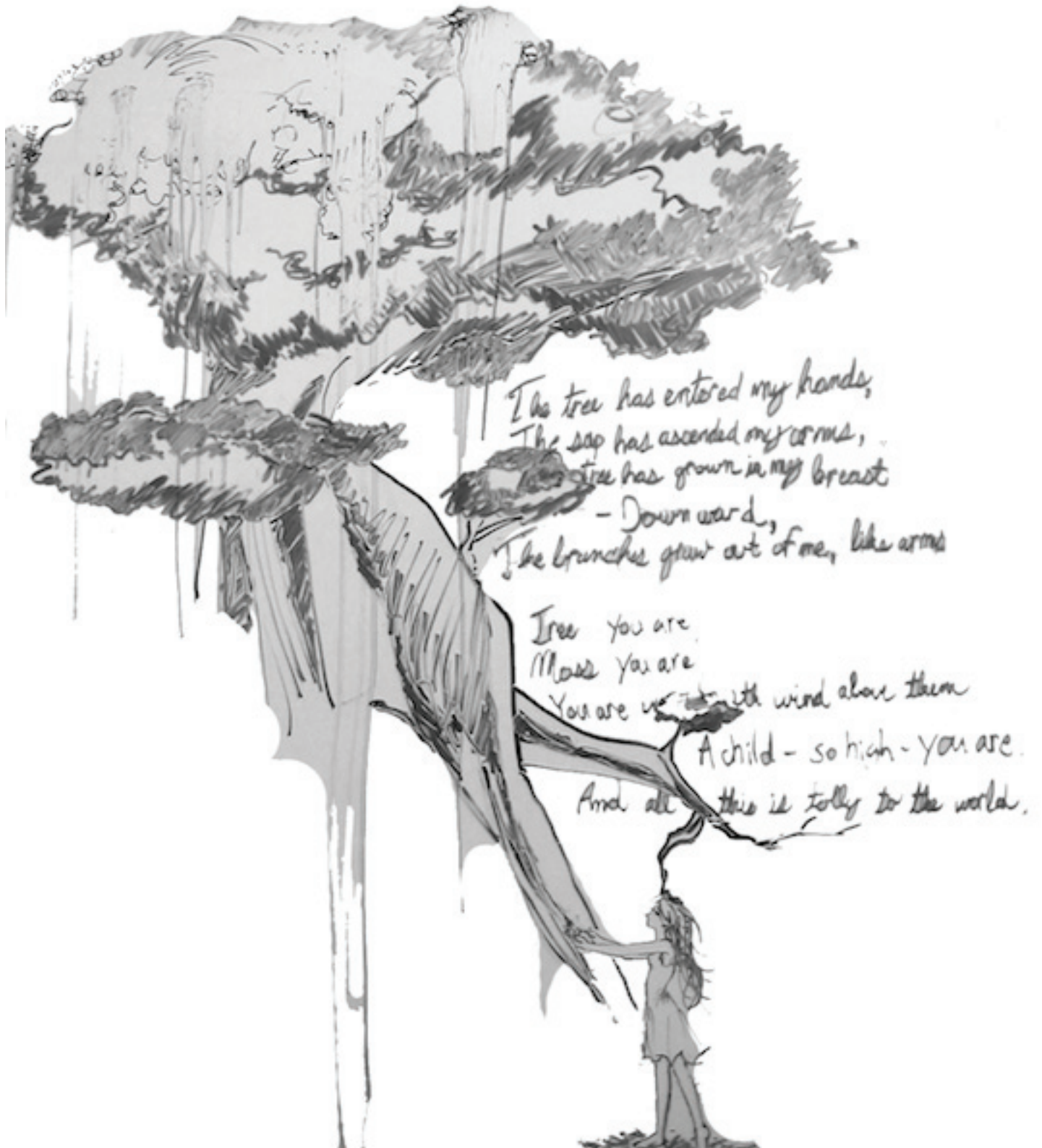
by Devon Hoxer



# You Are

by Rachel Rigley

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*Academic Support Centers and Programs*  
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