

Why I Need to Write (in response to *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott)
By Danielle Alexander

Mud oozed upward around my high heels as I cautiously stepped out of my gold Honda Civic. *You've GOT to be kidding me.*

At this particular farm in Holly, 18-year-old Spencer McKay was preparing his hogs, goats, and cattle for this year's fair. Nauseous from the smell of manure and pretending to not be afraid of animals with wings, I struggled to ask questions, comprehend answers, and take notes, and my lack of knowledge on agriculture failed to assist my efforts to appear the least bit confident. What can I say? I belong in the suburbs.

On my first day as a teacher-intern at The Oakland Press, Local News Editor, Julie Jacobson-Hines, asked me to cover the Oakland County Fair, specifically the livestock competition. Feeling moist and extremely smelly, I sat down at my desk later that afternoon only to realize two things: I now have to compose an article about a topic of which I know nothing. Also, someone will be reading it.

I guess these fears commenced in high school. During those four years, I almost failed every essay, and in one case, I even received a negative score. (Yes, you read that correctly, and yes, I do realize I was better off not turning anything in). My writing did improve in college, but Bs and Cs were very frequent, even in my journalism classes.

WHY in the world did I do this internship? These people are going to wonder how I teach writing if I can't even write myself. I, however, had no choice. Not only did I have to write it, but I only had one hour in which to write it.

And so I wrote. With the help of Google, of course. Through my research, I learned that animals must be frequently hosed down in order for them to remain cool during the warmer months, steer are male cows that have been castrated, and, for obvious reasons, children who grow up on farms are raised knowing that their animals are only temporary visitors. *Who knew?*

I took a deep breath, hit submit, and headed home.

After booting up the computer that next morning, I discovered that my story was going on A1. *WHAT? A1 is the front page!* After texting my fiancé and parents, I grabbed ten newspapers from the stack and discretely placed them in my bag. At that moment, "I understood immediately the thrill of seeing oneself in print" (xiv).

During those next four weeks, I wrote, photographed, and/or videotaped over 35 stories, many of which were featured on A1, as well as online. Writing suddenly felt so easy and viewing stories with "Danielle Diacono" on the byline was extremely

gratifying, not only to me, but also to my parents, grandparents, former teachers, friends, and even students.

I still cannot believe that it took 24 years for me to feel confident in my writing. It took 25, however, to discover that "...publication is not all that it is cracked up to be. But writing is" (xxvi).

Several months after the internship, I began freelancing for The Oakland Press and later contributing to the Daily Tribune. I was assigned the "education" beat and profiled two administrators, teachers, students, and/or parents of students every week. It did not take long for me to realize the truth in this quote: "To be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care" (107).

During each interview, I experienced *sonder*. According to The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, *sonder* is "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own- populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries, and inherited craziness- an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk".

Although a teacher, I had NO idea that Hazel Park High School, a school less than a half hour away from mine, rose to 48th percentile from 5th in one year, or that Royal Oak Middle School, another school nearby, hosts FREE workshops for parents to better deal with the "middle years". *HOW were these NOT major headlines?* Seeing my name in print was no longer motivation but being able to "expose the unexposed" (198) became my personal mantra. And I truly had fun doing it.

While composing, I made it a goal of mine to tell MY version of stories in MY way. "...what you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your own sense of humor or insider pathos or meaning. All of us can sing the same song, there will still be four billion different renditions" (181). Perspective is always key to an accurate and interesting story, but it quickly became obvious that a writer's style has the potential to increase (or decrease) readership; with that said, I learned to experiment with syntax and punctuation until it sounded like I was explaining what happened in-person to myself, over a non-fat latte. Without the whip.

I continued freelancing up until I began my Master's classes when I convinced myself that I had "no time to write". I had three new preps, two Master's classes, and I still needed to be a good wife, daughter, sister, and friend. I saw no "profit" in writing for fun since if I could find the time to do that, I would be much better off getting ahead in schoolwork, exercising, or, if I am being completely honest, sleeping.

I truly could not have began reading Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* at any better time.

In her book, Lamott says, “Interviewers ask famous writers why they write, and it was (if I remember correctly) the poet John Ashbery who answered, ‘Because I want to.’ Flannery O’Connor answered, ‘Because I’m good at it,’ and when the occasional interviewer asks me, I quote them both” (xxviii). Whether I decide to continue freelancing again or experiment with other types of writing, Lamott reminded me of several truths about myself that I have recently disregarded:

- First of all, I need to write to organize thoughts, understand who I am, and make sense of my beliefs because without knowing who I am, I cannot see other people as they really are (98).
- Secondly, only I own what happened to me, and no one has the power to tell MY story but me (6).
- Finally, I have the potential to help others, especially within education, since that tends to be the topic I care most about (235).

Practical is a word many use to describe me since I tend to avoid engaging in activities that have no “profitable purpose” (monetary or not). With that said, if I actually want to commit to writing on a frequent basis, I had no choice but to create a rational reason to persuade myself of its importance.

And just like that, I am convinced.