Difficulty With Essays
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As a student in Professor Laurie Delaney’s Introduction to College English (ENG10000) class, Mary Sousa was asked to write an essay in response to at least one reading from the class. Using Richard Rodriguez’s “Reading for Success” and Malcolm X’s “How I Discovered Words: A Homemade Education,” Sousa discusses her own writing process in “Difficulty with Essays.”

Trying to write an essay is difficult. Reading a book with the very nicely written essays is great and allows me to see examples of good essays. Suggestions such as the journalist’s questions, mapping, brainstorming, and idea books give support and guidance that are supposed to be helpful. After reading all the material of what goes into an essay and the helpful suggestions to get me started in the right direction, such as ways to overcome writer’s block, it is time to begin. Still nothing; I just sit there in front of the computer. I ask myself, how can I use all of the useful information that has been given to me? I try mapping and brainstorming, but a topic or idea is needed. Frustration, irritation, and confusion are very strong emotions I have at this point. I go back to the text and reread one of the stories, and something clicks. An experience comes to me that can be related easily to one of the stories in the required text, so I begin.

Ideas for the essay pop into my head. Writing begins fast at first with all the examples found, personal experiences I can write about, and the thoughts evoked by the story that was read or idea I came up with. When rereading what has been put down on paper or typed on the computer, it all of a sudden becomes unclear or out of focus as to what those written words have to do with the thesis or the story. The ideas somehow have nothing to do with what I was trying to convey. The frustration of what is in my head and what I want to put down on paper is intense.

When taking my ideas to someone to run by them, again the ideas sound great and clear. I do not know how many times I have heard, “That’s great! Write it like you just told me.” How did I say it? What were the words I used? Sitting in front of a computer or piece of paper to write, the ability is not there. The words that make sense are gone, hidden away somewhere and requiring an enormous amount of time to pull them out and put something on paper. The waste of time drives me nuts.

In “Reading for Success,” by Richard Rodriguez, one reason he found reading to be difficult was because it made him feel secluded; the words were colorless and lifeless. He began reading just to read, not always understanding what he was reading. To me, my writing is colorless and lifeless compared to what is in my head. I am writing but not always understanding if what I am putting down on paper is correct or making sense. Then there is the boredom that comes from trying to think and make sense of it all.

In “How I Discovered Words: A Homemade Education,” Malcolm X claimed he felt a certain failure in not having the ability to tell, written or orally, what was in his head. He did not know many words, so he used the dictionary to learn more. The thesaurus and dictionary have become my best friends when typing papers. With a limited vocabulary, it can take me quite a while to look up words, to find others that mean the same. The time required to find the right words takes away from the concentration of getting them down. Finding enough words to fill the page can be and is a challenge. In the paragraph just before this one I use “boredom,” so off to the thesaurus I go. Maybe boredom is not the right word for that sentence. In looking in the
thesaurus "tedious" is found, sounds good, but does its meaning go with what is trying to be conveyed? Next comes the dictionary to make sure the meaning of that word fits with my sentence. Yes, tedious definitely fits.

Where does it all come from? How do I put down more? The panic of having to find another paragraph, the screaming inside my head shows through to the outside as frustration: body shifting, eyebrows furrowing, lip biting, pencil tapping, eyes wandering looking for something to help. Each word and sentence is agonized over as the essay slowly lengthens.

How can something as easy as telling one’s idea or thought be so difficult? We tell people what we think all the time. Why should this be so hard to do since I do this very well many times a day? These feelings of frustration go a long way back to my high school days when teachers shot down my papers and did nothing to help me get back on track with them. They would give me no guidance or give the least amount of hinting about what was needed or expected of the paper. I would strain for the words and ideas, just as I strain for words and ideas to come to me now. Maybe it is just the idea of the paper being looked at by someone who is more knowledgeable with words and the written language. It could be that the ability to write has always been, there just dormant for so long it requires an enormous amount of prompting to loosen it up and get started. I personally do not like the feeling of not being capable of performing the task of writing down my thoughts in an organized manner.

When trying to do revisions on this essay, I run into the same problems I had in coming up with the essay. Out of ideas, I refer back to the text Making Connections Through Reading and Writing by Maria Valeri-Gold/Mary P. Deming. Under the helpful hints in revising papers, it asks the question, “Have I chosen the appropriate words to express my ideas?”(23). Words are the problem! What is in my head are lots of words, but are they the right words, and do they go with the ideas that I am trying to express in my essay? How do I get them to come across to the reader in sentences that make sense? How do I come up with enough of them to cover the amount of pages required? The Webster’s Pocket Dictionary and Thesaurus are my only insight into the world of words and their meaning or usage.

How wonderful it would be to have the ability to sit down and just write colorful and animated essays without frustration, irritation, and confusion. I can see my fingers flying across the keyboard, putting down words that make sense to the reader and me. What a thought! Someday this might happen, but until it does reality returns and I am once again asking myself if what I am writing is good enough.

Work Cited