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Lobsters & Second Conversations: Addressing the “So What” in Your Writing *Stina Kasik Oakes*

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Lobsters & Second Conversations: Addressing the “So What” in Your Writing

Stina Kasik Oakes

Overview

What’s a lobster? A second conversation? For years I worked to explain to students how to incorporate purpose, depth, and meaning into their writing with the terms “deeper meaning,” or “story under the story,” or “what the essay is *really* about.” But these phrases didn’t quite work; I struggled to explain the ideas in a cohesive way that made sense to them. Then I read “The Future of Football,” (Simmons) where Malcolm Gladwell and Bill Simmons discuss the problem football is facing with concussions, comparing it to what’s happening off the field in other sports; in it Gladwell introduces the term “second conversations.” And that’s when it clicked for me: “second conversation” is the term I was looking for to describe the “so what?” of an essay.

This assignment introduces this concept to students as I do in my classes. They’ll read “Consider the Lobster” by David Foster Wallace (but, the beauty of this process is that it works for any essay). I then explain second conversations through the Gladwell/Simmons article. This leads to their ability to articulate that while the topic is the Maine Lobster Festival, it’s really about so much more; second conversations include the morality of eating, impacts of tourism, meaning of pain, etc. It creates a common language for our course: our “lobster” and our “second conversations.”

Through this assignment, students will be introduced to second conversations; practice finding them on their own; learn to apply them to their own writing and research processes; and understand how to transfer this process to their critical reading

skills. This process helps connect exigency to audience, further extending the discussion Quentin Vieregge establishes in “Exigency” in *Writing Spaces* volume 3.

Time Commitment

1-2 class sessions

Materials

You will need an article for students to read prior to class discussion. I use David Foster Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster.” Any creative nonfiction longform article should work. Essays that focus on an event, person, or object work best - you just won’t have the “lobster” terminology. I’ve also used Wells Tower’s “Who Wants to Shoot an Elephant?” (elephant) and Marie Laskas’ “Hecho in América,” (blueberries) and both have worked well. In class, you’ll need access to Bill Simmons’s “Simmons Vs. Gladwell: The Future of Football” from *The Ringer.com*.

Activity Process

Introducing the Concept: one class session

- Before the assigned class, students should read David Foster Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster,” or whatever article you’ve selected. I prep them for the coming discussion by explaining while the topic of the article is Maine’s Lobster Festival, that’s not what the essay is really about. I ask them to see if they can figure out what it’s about as they read.
- At the beginning of class, have a brief discussion about the article. Then, review the idea of the topic of the essay versus what the essay is really about. Give them an example of what you mean: I usually explain that Wallace uses the graphic discussion about cooking the lobsters as a way to point out the ethics of our eating choices. Have them get into pairs to brainstorm more ideas.
- Next, pull up the Simmons article “Simmons Vs. Gladwell:

The Future of Football.” To explain why we’re using this seemingly unrelated article, I share an anecdote about how I struggled to explain to students how to get depth or meaning into their essays, but came across this piece and the terminology clicked for me. I assure them we aren’t going to discuss sports or read the entire piece. I provide context for the article - what Simmons and Gladwell are discussing and why, what their credentials are - establishing the rhetorical situation.

- Read the following passage out loud:
 - “Football has a *problem*. I thought of this the other day when I had the fun job of interviewing Astros GM Jeff Luhnow at a RAND conference in Santa Monica. He talked entirely about analytics, and what all the data they now collect mean for the decisions they make — how they didn’t bid on a major free agent after doing a micro-analysis of his swing, or what can be learned, in real time, by precisely measuring the rotation on a pitcher’s slider. That kind of stuff. The audience found him fascinating. Here’s the thing, though: I’m guessing that less than half of the people in the room were actually baseball fans. But it didn’t matter: There is now a **second conversation** about baseball — the Moneyball conversation — that is interesting even to people who don’t follow the first conversation, the one that takes place on the field. Same thing for basketball. There’s an obsessive first conversation about a beautiful game, and a great **second conversation** about how basketball has become a mixed-up culture of personality and celebrity. Boxing had a wonderful **second conversation** in its glory years: It was a metaphor of social mobility.” (emphasis mine)
- Explain the general concept of a second conversation. I use phrases like “topic under the topic” or “what the

- essay is really about.”
- Write on the board:
 - DFW is using _____ (lobster)
 - to discuss _____ (second convo).
 - Pair up students to complete the sentence in as many ways as they can. For example, DFW is using the *Festival, specifically the attendants* to discuss *food elitism*.
 - After giving students time to work, have them share their responses with the class. This will allow them to see that there are many possible second conversations present. I remind them in that many professional essays there are several second conversations, but we’re going to focus on defining one for their writings.
 - At this point, have a general discussion about second conversations and where else they can find them. Specifically, look at ways that other disciplines use them. If you have time, have students look back on other articles they’ve read for class and find the second conversations present.

Extending the Concept: depending on class time, this section can be completed the same day as the previous one, or in a separate class.

- Put students in pairs and pick an object for each pair. I use things like: office supplies, specific animals, household items, etc. For this example, I’ll use narwhals (because I love them and use them in examples whenever possible).
- Give students 5-10 minutes to briefly investigate their topics online. At this stage, I encourage them to follow any link they find interesting.
- Now, ask them to narrow their scope. In other words, narwhals can become “narwhal tusks,” or “narwhal stuffed animals.” If you want, give them 5 minutes to presearch their new, focused topic. I find this extra time helps them to solidify their thinking for the later parts of the exercise.
- Each pair brainstorms potential second conversations for their topic. For example, narwhal tusks could be used to explore: hunting regulations; who has the authority to say

who can hunt what; the importance of conservation; or why people would want to buy/trade animal parts, etc.

- Then, each pair completes the following and shares with the class:
 - I am using _____ (lobster)
 - To discuss _____ (second convo)
 - My example would read:
 - I am using *narwhal tusks*
 - To discuss *why people want to buy or trade animal parts*
- Next, each pair creates a list of people who might be interested in their topic and second conversation. Challenge them to define both likely and out-of-the-box groups. For narwhal tusks and trading/selling the tusks, I would list: environmentalists, Inuit communities, PETA, fashion designers, scrimshaw artists, policy makers, hunters, etc. If you really want to challenge them, have them switch their topics with another pair and come up with new audiences for that pair.
- With their own topics, select one or two audiences from the list: one likely and one out-of-the-box group. Then, brainstorm why those groups might care about the topic.
- Now, add to the template:
 - To _____ (audience)
 - Because _____ (purpose)
- To wrap up the activity, discuss how research can fit into this process. Have them make a chart with two columns and brainstorm the types of research they might find for their topic. While there will be overlap between the two categories, I use this as a visual way to demonstrate how to make research more manageable:

Popular Sources Lobster: _____	Academic Sources Second Convo: _____
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Continuing Practice:

- For the rest of the semester, every discussion about their readings starts with figuring out the lobster and second conversation(s) to reinforce this concept, have students.
- I use this foundation for every essay students write, using the terminology “lobster” and “second conversation.”
- Throughout the essay writing process students use the template, updating and revising it as they work:
 - I am using _____ (lobster)
 - To discuss _____ (second conversation)
 - To _____ (audience/ “who cares”)
 - Because _____ (purpose/ “so what”)

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Learn the concept of second conversations to define context and exigence
- Incorporate second conversations into their writing, adding purpose (the “so what”)
- Deepen their critical reading skills
- Expand their concept of research based on awareness of rhetorical needs and audience

Learning Accommodations

- You can replace “Consider the Lobster” with another longform, nonfiction essay. You could also use a podcast episode or segment from something like *This American Life*.
- Students can watch and/or listen to David Foster Wallace reading the entire “Consider the Lobster” essay on YouTube (“David Foster Wallace”).
- Instead of reading the Simmons piece out loud, you can assign the essay – either all or part – prior to class.
- Use audio apps like Kurzweil for readings.
- All steps can be done in class or asynchronously, online or in person, in groups or individually.

- If online, use an app like Google Slides or PowerPoint to present each step. Add more examples throughout. If done asynchronously online, add in short prompts or quizzes to ensure understanding.
- All readings can be completed online, for free.

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