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HAVIN' IT YOUR WAY

Arman Terzian, Haverford College, Class of 2014

Prior to my junior year at Haverford College, I thought that the amount of time you spend working on an assignment indicated how hard you worked, and therefore how well you would do in a class. The more hours you put in, the higher the grade you will get. To an extent, I still want to believe this holds true. It's difficult to feel like the kid who spends thirty hours writing an essay, making every effort to make it perfect, shouldn't get a noteworthy grade. After a few years not working very hard and continuing to receive the same "good," but not exceptional grades, during my junior year I decided I wanted to put in long hours and work hard.

Despite all the time I spent working on essays, I did not see dramatic improvement in my grades, and saw only marginal improvement in my writing. Making no progress, I started to ask myself why all the time I spent on my work did not make any difference in the grades I received or the clarity of my arguments in essays I wrote. Unable to figure out the answer on my own, I asked around. I spoke with classmates who do exceptional work, and deans, professors, and others who did well in college years ago. I wasn't too sure what to expect: Would they tell me their good grades came naturally? Would they tell me I just didn't have it in me to do the work my professors wanted to see from me? Would they say, "Hey man, you've definitely made some strides, but I just don't think your work will improve much more"?

Thankfully, none of them told me that. None of them told me the good grades just came "naturally" for them. No professor, classmate, dean or adult felt like my situation was hopeless. What they said, however, still did shock me a little bit (but thank God left my self-esteem intact). My peers and adult mentors told me I should trust my intellectual ability when I write rather than get anxious about every word and idea I put down on paper. Over-thinking an idea often makes it more difficult to explain. In addition, I thought working for eight hours straight on a paper would help me get the essay done faster. Yet, everyone I spoke with said working in 2-3 hour bursts, and taking time away from an assignment to rest, run, or do other work, will let my subconscious work through ideas and help me move through the essay at a faster pace. Taking a step back often allows for two steps forward.

While the advice in the above paragraph really helped me understand the writing process better, I still didn't completely understand what makes a "great" essay. I saw examples of "good" work and tried to emulate the sentence structure, organization and flow, while getting less anxious and taking some much-needed study breaks while writing essays. Yet, trying to imitate the way other people wrote didn't really help me out at all (although less anxiety and the study breaks definitely did). Again, my peers and professors came to the rescue: they taught me, most importantly, that *excellent essays come in many different forms*. Each person has their own unique writing style, and the way my classmates organize their essays may differ from mine completely: no one writing style is the right, or proper, way to communicate ideas.

When I stopped trying to write like other people, and began to trust that my own, individual writing style was good enough for my professors and good grades, conveying ideas with clarity somehow got significantly easier. This all didn't happen overnight. In fact, I'm still working on

it. But over time the frustration that I had thought was a necessary part of writing went away (for the most part). A lot of the anxiety totally disappeared. And my confidence in academic work sky-rocketed. Despite writing like myself instead of other people, I did realize all good essays had at least one thing in common. At the end of the day, writing is another form of communication. Music conveys ideas through lyrics and notes, artwork gets across a point through images, and in the same vein, writing essays involves using sentences, paragraphs, organization and flow to transmit an idea from the writer to his or her audience. All good essays, then, should get a point across clearly. How someone goes about doing so, however, is always up for grabs.