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THE

Syntax

OF

Sports

Class 6: Drafting and Editing

Patrick Barry

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For all the college students who have helped out with this series of books through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Michigan. You all demonstrate, every day, that youth is not wasted on the young.

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1

Previously On: Rhetorical Repetition

Prof. Barry: Last class you and I talked a little bit about Stephen King, Ms. Toth. Do you remember what his "Prime Rule" is for becoming a writer?

Ms. Toth: Yeah. He said you need to read a lot and write a lot.

Prof. Barry: Good. And what's the technical term for when we repeat a word at the end of consecutive phrases, clauses, or sentences, like you just did when you said, "You need to read a lot and write a lot"? We talked about that last class too. It's a form of rhetorical repetition.

Ms. Toth: Epistrophe.

Prof. Barry: Right. So when a character in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* asks, "Where now? Who now? When now?" that's an example of?

Ms. Toth: Epistrophe.

Prof. Barry: And when Yann Martel, the author of *Life of Pi*, writes in another one of his books, *Beatrice and Virgil*, "Just as music is noise that makes sense,

a painting is colour that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense," that is also an example of?

Ms. Toth: Epistrophe.

Prof. Barry: And finally—

Ms. Henrietta (*jumping in*): Wait, I have a question. Can the repetition in epistrophe be more than one word?

Prof. Barry: What do you mean?

Ms. Henrietta: In the last example you read—

Prof. Barry: From Yann Martel?

Ms. Henrietta: Yeah. In that one, you repeated two words: "makes" and "sense."

Prof. Barry: Don't forget the word "that." The passage was "Just as music is noise that makes sense, a painting is colour that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense."

I didn't emphasize the "that" the first time I read it. But Martel seems to have deliberately included it.

Ms. Henrietta: So epistrophe can even involve repeating *three* words?

Prof. Barry: I don't see why not. There's no upper limit to rhetorical repetition. In fact, the third example I was going to have Ms. Toth read repeats five words. It comes from the play *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare.

Anybody know the famous speech that Mark Antony gives in that? It starts off with "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

Ms. Burke (*jumping in*): Yeah. We read that speech in one of my political science classes.

Prof. Barry: Good. At three different spots in the speech, Mark Antony closes his thoughts with the same five words: "Brutus is an honorable man."

Ms. Burke: He's being sarcastic, right?

Prof. Barry: Very. Throughout the speech, Antony repeatedly undermines the claims Brutus levels against his now-murdered friend Julius Caesar. He mockingly remarks that these claims *must* be believed because "Brutus is an honorable man."

Ms. Henrietta (*jumping in*): So Mark Antony doesn't think Brutus is an honorable man?

Prof. Barry: Not at all. He thinks, rightly, that Brutus killed Caesar.

For our purposes, however, the important thing to understand is that you can include multiple words when using epistrophe, just like you can include multiple words when using the second form of rhetorical repetition we talked about: anaphora.

We'll review that move next.

2

“I Have a Dream”

Prof. Barry: Given that epistrophe involves repetition at the end of consecutive phrases, clauses, and sentences, can you please remind us, Ms. Burke, what anaphora involves?

Ms. Burke: Repetition at the *beginning* of phrases, clauses, and sentences.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And just like with epistrophe, anaphora can include multiple words. Consider, for instance, one of the most powerful examples of anaphora in American history: Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington in 1963.

King doesn’t just repeat “I” in that speech’s famous refrain, does he? Nor does he just repeat “I have . . .” or even “I have a . . . .”

Ms. Burke: Right.

Prof. Barry: What does he repeat?

Ms. Burke: He repeats “I have a dream. . . .”

Prof. Barry: How many words is that?

Ms. Burke: Four.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And sometimes King includes additional words as well. He'll say, "I have a dream that one day . . . ."

Ms. Burke: So seven words total?

Prof. Barry: Yup.

Ms. Burke: Is that the longest example of anaphora?

Prof. Barry: In the speech or ever?

Ms. Burke: Ever.

Prof. Barry: Probably not. But as I said, it is definitely one of the most powerful—and also one of the most memorable. Think of how often you have heard someone say, "I have a dream." Better yet, try to remember a time when you *didn't* know those words existed.

Ms. Burke: You mean when I was younger?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. When in your life did you first learn about King's "I Have a Dream" speech? Middle school? Elementary? Kindergarten?

Ms. Burke: I'm not actually sure.

Prof. Barry: It's hard, right? That speech, his language, is now a foundational part of our American identity. The phrases King put together hold special places in our collective memory.

For example, see if you can finish these lines: "Free at last. Free at last. _____."

Ms. Burke: "Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

Prof. Barry: Isn't that kind of amazing? King said those words way back in 1963. But all these years later, they have somehow managed

to secure a place in your brain—and probably in millions of other brains as well. Recently I even came across them in Bruce Springsteen's memoir, *Born to Run*. Anybody read that book? Maybe you, Ms. Nina, our music major?

Ms. Nina: No.

Prof. Barry: No? "The Boss" hasn't made it onto a syllabus in one of your music classes?

Ms. Nina: Not yet.

Prof. Barry: Well, if he does, you'll see that "Free at last" phrase in one of the opening chapters. It's a fun example of just how pervasive King's words have become. Like Abraham Lincoln did with the Gettysburg Address, like Patrick Henry did with "Give me liberty or give me death," King injected language into the world that has continued to have real staying power.

Perhaps some of you will do that at some point.

Ms. Nina: You think we are going to create phrases like "I have a dream" and "Free at last"?

Prof. Barry: I know that sounds ambitious, but I don't want you to rule it out. We think of King as this mythic figure, somebody whose eloquence we can never equal. But he, like the rest of us, sometimes struggled with words.

When he was an undergraduate at Morehouse College in Atlanta, his papers and exam answers didn't exactly wow his professors. One described his academic record as "short of what may be called 'good.'" Another suggested King was "a little above average in scholarship."

You can read these and other assessments of King in a series of essays by the Stanford historian Clayborne Carson. He examines King's years in higher education, including what the president of Morehouse, Benjamin Mays, said about him. Mays described King as "not brilliant" and capable of only "B work."

Ms. Nina: At least the president of Morehouse knew King. That says something about the impression King made.

Prof. Barry: Like that King must have done something to stand out?

Ms. Nina: Yeah. How many students do you think the president of our university knows by name? It's gotta be a pretty elite group.

Prof. Barry: But maybe King was in that elite group because he did something bad. Maybe King was a troublemaker. The FBI certainly thought he was, later in life. The file J. Edgar Hoover collected on him is huge.

Mr. Marshall (*jumping in*): So you're saying the president of Morehouse knew King because King got suspended or something? Like he had to go to the principal's office a bunch of times?

Prof. Barry: Not necessarily. I am simply pushing you to think of other reasons the president of Morehouse might have known King. Generating some possible answers to that question could be a useful exercise, especially since we will be talking about the drafting process in general today. So let's start trying out a few ideas.

3

Eulogy Pact

Prof. Barry: Maybe somebody can help Mr. Marshall out? What are some other reasons the president of Morehouse might have known Martin Luther King when King was an undergraduate there?

Ms. Carroll (*jumping in*): Maybe Morehouse is really small. Maybe the president knew everybody.

Prof. Barry: Good. That's a clever way to start thinking about the question. The United States has a number of very small colleges where the president probably does know a large percentage of each graduating class. Harvey Mudd College, for example—which you might like, Ms. Carroll, given its focus on math and engineering—has typically had a graduating class of about 200 to 250 students.

Or think of Davidson College, where NBA star Steph Curry went. The graduating class there is around 400 students.

Ms. Carroll: How big is the graduating class here at Michigan?

Prof. Barry: Undergrad?

Ms. Carroll: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Around 7,000. So that means there are usually about 28,000 college students on campus every year, plus another 16,000 graduate students.

Ms. Carroll: And you are saying Morehouse is closer in size to Davidson than it is to Michigan?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. Which makes its list of notable alums that much more impressive. Morehouse graduates include Spike Lee, Samuel L. Jackson, former mayor of Atlanta Maynard Jackson, and Olympic gold medalist Edwin Moses, as well as many judges, pastors, CEOs, and prominent academics. Not bad for a school whose entire student body is just 2,500 students.

In fact, I think it was even smaller when King was a student there. Benjamin Mays, the Morehouse president we've been talking about, did a lot to increase enrollment.

Ms. Carroll: So maybe Mays did actually know most of the students. Maybe that's why he could refer to King by name.

Prof. Barry: That's part of it. The size of Morehouse certainly helps foster student-faculty relationships. But there are a couple of other reasons as well. One is that King made an effort to get on Mays's radar. He attended Mays's sermons. He showed up at Mays's office. He took a lot of concrete steps to secure Mays as a mentor—which is something all of you should keep in mind

as you begin to build your own academic and professional contacts. Purposeful proximity can really pay off.

King and Mays became so close that King eventually called Mays his intellectual and spiritual mentor. Later in life, they even made a eulogy pact.

Ms. Ida (*jumping in*): What's a eulogy pact?

Prof. Barry: They agreed that if Mays died first, King would give a eulogy at Mays's funeral. And that if King died first, Mays would give a eulogy at King's funeral.

Ms. Ida: So who died first?

Prof. Barry: King. In 1968.

Ms. Ida: Did Mays give the eulogy?

Prof. Barry: He did. One of the most memorable sections includes a bunch of rhetorical repetition, all centered around the word "if." Here's how it starts.

Ms. Carroll: "If Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century B.C., Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet in the 20th century."

Prof. Barry: Keep going.

Ms. Carroll: "If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther [King] was called of God to prophesy in his time. If Hosea was sent to preach love and forgiveness centuries ago, Martin Luther [King] was sent to expound the doctrine of nonviolence and forgiveness in the third quarter of the 20th century."

Prof. Barry: See where this is going?

Ms. Carroll: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: It's not quite as extreme as Rudyard Kipling's poem "If—," where Kipling starts 13 sentences with the word "If." But

it does offer a glimpse into where King may have learned to be so savvy with words. Rhetorical repetition, parallel structure, the power of the particular—a lot of King's go-to moves can be found in Mays's own style of communication.

So in a way, Mays was more than just King's spiritual and intellectual mentor. He was also King's oratorical mentor.

4

Friends in High Places

Prof. Barry: There is another reason Benjamin Mays knew Martin Luther King Jr. by name. It has to do with someone Mr. Marshall mentioned on the first day of class. We were talking about how Martin Luther King got his name and how it could have been "Michael King Jr." Do you remember the person I am talking about, Mr. Marshall?

Mr. Marshall: Yeah. Martin Luther King's dad.

Prof. Barry: And what was his name originally?

Mr. Marshall: Michael King.

Prof. Barry: Until?

Mr. Marshall: He switched it to "Martin Luther King."

Prof. Barry: Remind us why he switched it.

Mr. Marshall: Because he went to Germany and was inspired by the life of Martin Luther.

Prof. Barry: The theologian?

Mr. Marshall: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Was Martin Luther King's father a theologian?

Mr. Marshall: I think he was a minister.

Prof. Barry: Is that the same thing?

Mr. Marshall: I don't know. They seem similar.

Prof. Barry: If I said that one of them focused more on private study and deep thinking, which would you say I was describing?

Mr. Marshall: Probably a theologian.

Prof. Barry: And if I said that one of them focused more on public engagement and caring for a community?

Mr. Marshall: Probably a minister.

Prof. Barry: So now take another shot at the original question. Which label—theologian or minister—do you think better describes not Michael King but his famous son, Martin Luther King Jr.?

Mr. Marshall: A minister.

Prof. Barry: I think so too. As steeped as King was in philosophical thinking, he was an activist more than he was an academic. His focus was on leading marches and organizing protests—practice rather than theory.

In sports terms, we might even think of him and other prominent ministers as performing the role of a coach. They make speeches, inspire action, and always try to demonstrate what it means to lead a life of purpose and integrity—or at least the best ones do.

Mr. Marshall: Do you think King got that quality from his dad, given that he was a minister?

Prof. Barry: At least a little bit, yeah. But others certainly influenced him as well, including this Benjamin Mays guy we have been talking about. He knew King's dad.

Ms. Bart (*jumping in*): That's probably another reason King got such personal attention at Morehouse.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. It helps to go to a college where your dad is friends with the president.

5
Disciples

Prof. Barry: By mentioning that King's dad was friends with the president of Morehouse, Benjamin Mays, I don't mean to lessen King's rise as a civil rights leader and national hero. He was an amazing man who accomplished extraordinary things. But he wasn't a solo act. No great figure is. Everybody needs connections, recommendations, mentorship. Everybody needs help.

And that's, importantly, what Mays provided.

He was there for King during King's first year at Morehouse, when King was only 15 years old. He was there for King during King's last year at Morehouse, when King was trying to figure out, like many of you, what to do after graduation. And he was also there for King throughout King's professional career, including appearing on stage to give a blessing at the close of the 1963 March on Washington, which is where King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Yet even more important than the consistency of Mays's presence was the power of his example. Here's how King's wife, Coretta, described that power in her memoir *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* Can you please read it for us, Ms. Burke? She's explaining that King decided to enter the ministry largely because of Mays.

Ms. Burke: "From first to last, Dr. Mays took a great interest in Martin. It was not so much that he deliberately guided him toward the ministry as that he influenced Martin by his own example."

Prof. Barry: Keep going.

Ms. Burke: "For although Dr. Mays was brilliant, he was not removed from the heart of the people. In the pulpit he talked a great deal about social justice; you might say he preached a social gospel. This conformed exactly with Martin's ideas, and it helped to form them."

Prof. Barry: One more passage.

Ms. Burke: "At Morehouse, listening to Dr. Mays preach . . . Martin came to see that the ministry could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying."

Prof. Barry: Remember when we said ministers are kind of like coaches?

Ms. Burke: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Well, Mays was the kind of coach who inspired other people to become coaches too.

That happens a lot with great coaches. Think about Coach K at Duke. Does anybody remember who his basketball coach was when he played in college, at West Point? We talked about this relationship on the first day of class.

Ms. Bristol (*jumping in*): Bobby Knight.

Prof. Barry: Yup. Bobby Knight. I'm guessing that had some impact on Coach K's own decision to go into coaching.

And now think about all the people who went into coaching after playing for Coach K.

There's Bobby Hurley. There's Johnny Dawkins. There's Steve Wojciechowski. There's even someone who coached here at Michigan for several years.

Do you know the name of this Coach K disciple, Ms. Bristol?

Ms. Bristol: I don't think so.

Prof. Barry: How about you, Mr. Boh? You tend to know these bits of Michigan trivia.

Mr. Boh: Is it Tommy Amaker?

Prof. Barry: It is. Amaker played for Coach K in the 1980s and then, after being the assistant coach at Duke for a while, eventually became the head coach at Michigan in—what was it, 2002? 2001?

Mr. Boh: Something like that.

Prof. Barry: You know which school he went to next?

Mr. Boh: Seton Hall?

Prof. Barry: Nope. That's where he was before coming to Michigan.

Mr. Boh: Maryland?

Prof. Barry: Nope. That's where his sister went.

Mr. Boh: Then maybe I don't know.

Prof. Barry: It's a school we have talked about before.

Mr. Boh: Today?

Prof. Barry: No. Earlier in the semester, on the first day of class, when we were looking at that wild football game that ended 29–29.


HARVARD BEATS YALE, 29-29

The Harvard Crimson

Harvard Students Set Up School For Teens Ejected From Sudbury

Champi's Passing Quiets Yale Fans

Mr. Boh: Between Harvard and Yale?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. Amaker went to one of those after Michigan.

Mr. Boh: Which one?

Prof. Barry: Guess.

Mr. Boh: Yale?

Prof. Barry: Guess again.

Mr. Boh: Harvard?

Prof. Barry: Yup. Amaker's next coaching position after Michigan was at Harvard. Which means he started out as a player at what some people called the "Harvard of the South" (Duke), he became the coach at what some people call the "Harvard of the Midwest" (Michigan), and he eventually made his way to the actual Harvard. That's not a bad professional trajectory.

6

Payton and Bradshaw

Prof. Barry: The reason we are spending so much time on coaches today is that later in the class, we'll be looking at an essay that poses a question that perhaps Mr. Carlos, our pre-med major, will read for us. It's by a doctor who is also a fantastic writer.

Mr. Carlos: "Top athletes and singers have coaches. Should you?"

Prof. Barry: The doctor is a guy named Atul Gawande. We'll soon borrow a concept from him called an "extra ear." But first I want to return to Martin Luther King. He's going to help us introduce a related concept, one that students in past years have really embraced—possibly because when they say it, they get to use profanity.

Mr. Carlos: It's about King?

Prof. Barry: Not exactly. It's about being okay with less-than-stellar first efforts as well as understanding that sometimes you need to struggle a bit before developing a skill and producing something of value. Martin Luther King's trajectory as a public speaker simply provides a good example of that.

After graduating from Morehouse, he followed Benjamin Mays's advice and enrolled in seminary school so he could train to become

a minister. But guess what grades he got in his public speaking courses?

Mr. Carlos: I'm guessing you're going to say he didn't get an A.

Prof. Barry: That's right. I am.

Mr. Carlos: Did he get a B?

Prof. Barry: Lower than that.

Mr. Carlos: Really?

Prof. Barry: Yeah.

Mr. Carlos: Did he get a B–?

Prof. Barry: Lower than that too.

Mr. Carlos: Seriously? Martin Luther King got lower than a B– in public speaking?

Prof. Barry: Yup. He got a C, a C+, and a P for "Pass" during the 1948–49 school year at Crozer Theological Seminary.

Pretty surprising, huh?

Mr. Carlos: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Or think about NFL legend Walter Payton. In his first game as a pro, back in 1975, he was handed the ball eight times and thrown it once. Guess how many yards he gained?

Mr. Carlos: Not very many.

Prof. Barry: Negative four. He lost more yards than he gained. A similar thing happened in his fourth game, against the Detroit

Lions. Handed the ball 10 times to move the Bears upfield, Payton, who many consider the greatest running back of all time, gained a total of zero yards. He went backward as much as he went forward.

Nor is Payton's experience unique. A lot of eventual superstars struggle at first. Take a quarterback Payton faced that year: Terry Bradshaw of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Later in Bradshaw's career, he helped the Steelers win four Super Bowls, and he eventually earned a spot in the Hall of Fame. But during his first season, he had a really hard time. He threw 24 interceptions in just 13 games.

Mr. Carlos: That's more than two a game.

Prof. Barry: A couple times he even threw four interceptions in the same game. And his completion percentage for the year was around 30 percent.

Mr. Carlos: Did he improve at all the next year?

Prof. Barry: He did. And the year after that. And the year after that. Then, in 1974, he had a real breakthrough.

Mr. Carlos: Fewer interceptions?

Prof. Barry: Far fewer. He also had a much better completion percentage. Best of all, he and the Steelers won the Super Bowl that year.

You can kind of think of that season as the payoff from a bunch of not-so-great first efforts. We, however, are going to call them something slightly different: "shitty first drafts."

7

The Fantasy of the Uninitiated

Prof. Barry: The phrase "shitty first drafts" comes from the writer Anne Lamott in an essay I have mentioned a few times this semester. And now we are finally ready to read from it.

Would you mind helping us out with that, Ms. Nina? Some of the "shitty first draft" examples we'll eventually talk about involve your favorite topic: music.

Ms. Nina: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. Here are two key sentences from the essay, which appears as a chapter in Lamott's book *Bird by Bird: Some Thoughts on Writing and Life*.

Ms. Nina: "For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts."

Prof. Barry: Here are two more.

Ms. Nina: "People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning

feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated."

Prof. Barry: What do you think Lamott means by "the uninitiated"?

Ms. Nina: People who don't know a lot about writing.

Prof. Barry: Good. It's like that observation by the artist Chuck Close we mentioned on the first day of class: "Inspiration is for amateurs—the rest of us just show up and get to work."

Ms. Nina: Right.

Prof. Barry: Or how about the following confession from Ernest Hemingway, in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Ms. Nina: "I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit."

Prof. Barry: There's more.

Ms. Nina: "I try to put the shit in the wastebasket."

Prof. Barry: Ed Catmull, who played a major role in taking Pixar from a little company nobody had heard of to one of the most admired movie studios in the world, is similarly blunt when talking about the drafting process Pixar's films undergo.

Ms. Nina: "Early on, *all* of our movies suck. That's a blunt assessment, I know, but . . . I choose that phrasing because saying it in a softer way fails to convey how bad the first versions of our films really are."

Prof. Barry: Think about Pixar movies like *Toy Story*, *WALL-E*, and *Finding Nemo*. Think about *Coco* and *Inside Out*. These are brilliant creations that have delighted millions of people. Yet according to Catmull, the initial versions were always terrible.

Here's a little more of his explanation. It comes, like the comment you just read, from *Creativity, Inc.*, a book he cowrote with Amy Wallace, a freelance journalist who used to write a column on innovation for the *New York Times*.

Ms. Nina: "This idea—that all the movies we now think of as brilliant were, at one time, terrible—is a hard concept for many to grasp. But think about how easy it would be for a movie about talking toys to feel derivative, sappy, or overtly merchandise-driven."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading. Catmull is about to talk about *Ratatouille* and *WALL-E*, both of which turned out to be huge commercial and critical successes.

Ms. Nina: "Think about how off-putting a movie about rats preparing food could be, or how risky it must've seemed to start *WALL-E* with 39 dialogue-free minutes."

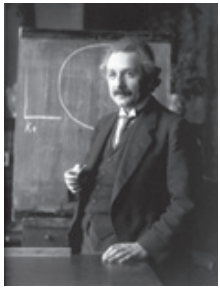
Prof. Barry: A little more.

Ms. Nina: "We dare to attempt these stories, but we don't get them right on the first pass. And that is as it should be."

Prof. Barry: I'm a big fan of *Creativity, Inc.*, but I know I promised you some music examples, Ms. Nina. So we'll move on to those soon.

First, though, I want to share a fun anecdote about Albert Einstein. It appears in a biography of him by Walter Isaacson, who has also written biographies of Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Benjamin Franklin, and Leonardo da Vinci.

Ms. Nina: "Einstein was given a corner office in a university hall that served as the temporary headquarters of the Institute. There



were eighteen scholars in residence then, including the mathematicians Oswald Veblen (nephew of the social theorist Thorstein Veblen) and John von Neumann, a pioneer of computer theory. When shown his office, Einstein was asked what equipment he might need."

Prof. Barry: Now read Einstein's response.

Ms. Nina: "A desk or table, a chair, paper and pencils," he replied. "Oh yes, and a large wastebasket, so I can throw away all my mistakes."

Prof. Barry: I love that story. A brilliant guy with simple needs and a whole lot of humility. That's a powerful combination.

8

Elvis Presley and Lou Reed

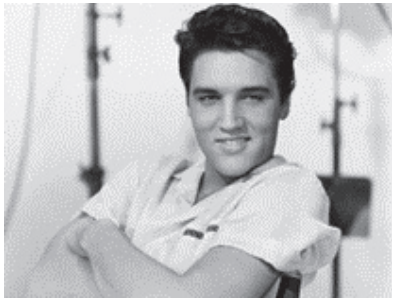
Prof. Barry: Einstein gives us a nice way to transition to the music examples of shitty first drafts. Do you know why, Ms. Nina? It has to do with something I mentioned two classes ago.

Ms. Nina: Yeah. You said Einstein was really into music—that he played the viola and the piano.

Prof. Barry: Good. We were talking about the importance of being "radically inclusive" and how a lot of great scientists, Einstein among them, have shown a genuine interest in the arts.

Ms. Nina: Right.

Prof. Barry: Given that Einstein's own tastes ran more toward Mozart than to rock 'n' roll, however, I am not sure whether he would have been a big fan of the musician we'll turn to first, Elvis Presley. But who knows, maybe the theory of relativity is expansive enough to include "The King."



We'll start with a song of Presley's that has the lyric "Ain't nothin' but a hound dog." Do you know it, Ms. Nina?

Ms. Nina: Of course. "Ain't nothin' but a hound dog / Cryin' all the time."

Prof. Barry: Exactly. Guess how many takes Elvis went through while trying to record that song?

Ms. Nina: I'm guessing more than one?

Prof. Barry: A lot more.

Ms. Nina: More than 10?

Prof. Barry: Yup.

Ms. Nina: More than 20?

Prof. Barry: More than 20.

Ms. Nina: More than *30*?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. Elvis made his band do 31 versions of the song before he settled on 1 that worked.

Ms. Nina: Which version did he pick?

Prof. Barry: Number 28.

Ms. Nina: The musicians in that band must have hated him.

Prof. Barry: Probably. But think about how many people have listened to and enjoyed that song over the years. Maybe 31 attempts is a bargain for something that remains popular for decades.

A different but related example involves Lou Reed, the legendary lead singer of

the Velvet Underground. His shitty first drafts extended not just to individual songs but to entire musical groups. Here is what he once said of some of his early ones.

Ms. Nina: "We were so bad we had to change our name every few weeks. No one would ever hire us twice."

Prof. Barry: Can you imagine that? Being so bad that you have to keep coming up with different names just to get additional gigs?

Ms. Nina: Yeah, that would suck.

Prof. Barry: But I guess sometimes you have to flail around a little before you find your groove—whether on the football field like Walter Payton and Terry Bradshaw or in the recording studio like Elvis Presley and Lou Reed. Here's the playful spin Anne Lamott puts on that process in the *Bird by Bird* book we've been referencing.

Ms. Nina: "The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later."

Prof. Barry: I guess things are a little different if you are Lou Reed's band and you're bombing in front of actual audiences. But the general idea still applies. So keep going with the passage, please.

Ms. Nina: "You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page."

Prof. Barry: Skip ahead a little bit to this next passage.

Ms. Nina: "Just get it all down on paper because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means."

Prof. Barry: You see what Lamott is advocating for there?

Ms. Nina: Yeah. It's sort of like your first draft is a jazz draft. It's free-form and associational.

Prof. Barry: Right. You can't expect linear progression. You're not going to get a direct line from idea to execution. You need to give yourself the time and space to play around a bit, to riff off sparks of inspiration, to welcome detours and discoveries.

Which, if any of you have seen highlights of Walter Payton and Terry Bradshaw, is kind of how they both played—Payton especially. He'd set off in one direction, bounce off some tacklers, and then head in a completely different direction. You couldn't really plan for what he was going to do or where he was going to end up.

Ms. Nina: Was he into jazz?

Prof. Barry: Maybe. I remember reading that Payton played drums for a rock-jazz band in high school, back in Mississippi.

Ms. Nina: Isn't that where Elvis was born?

Prof. Barry: Mississippi?

Ms. Nina: Yeah. Tupelo, right? Tupelo, Mississippi?

Prof. Barry: Right. Graceland, the massive shrine to Elvis, is in Memphis, Tennessee—but the singer himself was actually born in Tupelo.

Ms. Nina: How about Payton?

Prof. Barry: You mean was he born in Tupelo too?

Ms. Nina: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: No. Payton was born in Columbia, Mississippi, which is in the southern part of the state. Tupelo is in the north.

Ms. Nina: So it's not like Elvis played in that rock-jazz band you said Payton was in?

Prof. Barry: Not quite, no. Columbia is about 250 miles away from Tupelo. Plus, when Elvis was in high school, Payton wasn't even alive.

You look disappointed, Ms. Nina.

Ms. Nina: I just thought it would be cool if there was an additional connection.

Prof. Barry: Got it. How about this: both Payton and Elvis seem to have inherited the same skillfully swivelly hips.

Ms. Nina: Yeah?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. Payton used his hips to break tackles. Elvis used his to break hearts.

9

M. H. Abrams and Getting Started

Prof. Barry: An observation from M. H. Abrams might help crystalize a lot of what we have covered so far today. Has anybody heard of Abrams?

Mr. Farnoff (*jumping in*): Is he related to J. J. Abrams, the movie director?

Prof. Barry: Not that I know of. M. H. Abrams was a literary critic during the second half of the 20th century. He taught at Cornell for a while and had a big influence on the Norton Anthology of English Literature.

Wayne Booth, another important literary critic, called him "the best historian of ideas, as ideas relate to literature and literary criticism, that the world has ever known." And some of Abrams's students went on to produce influential works of their own: Harold Bloom at Yale, Gayatri Spivak at Columbia, E. D. Hirsch at Virginia, as well as the novelist Thomas Pynchon.

Perhaps all of them benefited from Abrams's approach to the drafting process, which is summed up in the observation I want to share with you. Can you please read it for us, Mr. Farnoff?

Mr. Farnoff: "I think the hardest thing to teach a student is that what he or she puts down on paper is changeable."

Prof. Barry: There's more.

Mr. Farnoff: "At first, students tend to freeze at the first effort. The breakthrough comes when they realize that they can make it better—can identify what their purposes were and realize better ways to achieve those purposes. That is the important thing in teaching students to write: not to be frozen in their first effort."

Prof. Barry: Abrams's view fits in well with what we have been saying about the importance of shitty first drafts. Can you make that connection for us, Mr. Farnoff? How might embracing the idea of a shitty first draft help students break out of the paralysis Abrams describes?

Mr. Farnoff: It's probably a lot easier to start writing when you know your first draft doesn't have to be perfect, or even good.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. Take a look at the writing schedule that accompanies each of our weekly assignments. You'll notice that I actually put "Due on Monday: Shitty First Draft."

I didn't put "Due on Monday: First Draft." I didn't put "Due on Monday: Initial Draft." I put "Due on Monday: Shitty First Draft."

What do you think that label is intended to communicate?

Mr. Farnoff: That we don't have to get things right the first time.

Prof. Barry: Yup. I really want to take the pressure off your initial attempts. I want you all to understand that this class is a safe place to experiment, to make mistakes, to fail.

That doesn't mean you are allowed to blow off the assignment. A shitty first draft isn't a thoughtless first draft. It's not a time to coast or simply go through the motions. Instead, it's a great opportunity to try out some preliminary ideas, fully understanding that

you'll get a chance to come back to what you've written and make a bunch of improvements.

Mr. Farnoff: Right.

Prof. Barry: Alexander Payne, the Oscar-winning writer and director of the movies *Election*, *Sideways*, *About Schmidt*, and *The Descendants*, has a nice way of capturing this process. He said that he treats the writing and filming part of movies as a means to "harvest material for editing."

Isn't that a great phrase? It makes the drafting process sound forward-thinking, like you are saving up for the future. So see if you can adopt it the next time you start a project. Think of your early drafts as a harvest—perhaps even a form of investment, one that you'll be glad you made once you eventually get to the editing phase.

Just remember: as with many kinds of investments, the earlier you begin, the better off you tend to be. The key to getting ahead, it is often said, is getting started.

10

Pixar and Getting Feedback

Prof. Barry: Once you've started your draft and produced a decent amount of material, it will be important for you to get some feedback on what you have written so far.

So let's return to the book *Creativity, Inc.* by Ed Catmull and Amy Wallace to see how the feedback process works at Pixar. Would you mind reading a little bit for us, Mr. Leigh? You're our movie guy.

Mr. Leigh: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. Start with the section where Catmull and Wallace say that candor is the key to collaborating effectively.

Mr. Leigh: "Our decision-making is better if we are able to draw on the collective knowledge and unvarnished opinions of the group. . . . A hallmark of a healthy creative culture is that its people feel free to share ideas, opinions, and criticisms."

Prof. Barry: Now read a bit about the mechanism Pixar created to cultivate and safeguard this candor. They call it the "Braintrust."

Mr. Leigh: "The Braintrust, which meets every few months or so to assess each movie we're making, is our primary delivery system

for straight talk. Its premise is simple: Put smart, passionate people in a room together, charge them with identifying and solving problems, and encourage them to be candid with one another. . . . [The Braintrust is] not foolproof . . . but when we get it right, the results are phenomenal."

Prof. Barry: Here is one of the Braintrust's key characteristics.

Mr. Leigh: "The Braintrust is made up of people with a deep understanding of storytelling and, usually, people who have been through the process themselves. While the directors welcome critiques from many sources . . . , they particularly prize feedback from fellow storytellers."

Prof. Barry: Why do you think that is? Why do directors particularly prize feedback from fellow storytellers?

Mr. Leigh: Fellow storytellers probably give more helpful advice.

Prof. Barry: Because?

Mr. Leigh: They've been in the director's position before.

Prof. Barry: So you think they might have struggled with some of the same issues?

Mr. Leigh: Yeah. And figured out ways to address them.

Prof. Barry: Sort of like a baseball shortstop giving advice to another shortstop.

Mr. Leigh: Right.

Prof. Barry: Advice from that person, who plays the exact same position, is probably going to be better than advice from someone who plays a completely different position—like, maybe the right fielder, or a pitcher in the bullpen.

And it is certainly going to be better than the advice of someone who plays no position at all, someone who has never even stepped on a baseball field.

Mr. Leigh: Like me.

Prof. Barry: You've never stepped on a baseball field?

Mr. Leigh: Maybe when I was a little kid, but I don't think I have been on one for a really long time.

Prof. Barry: Do you own a glove?

Mr. Leigh: No.

Prof. Barry: A bat?

Mr. Leigh: No.

Prof. Barry: But you know about shortstops?

Mr. Leigh: I mean, I know that it's a position.

Prof. Barry: And that it's a different position than a right fielder?

Mr. Leigh: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: But if we needed a Braintrust for a shortstop, you wouldn't be a good option.

Mr. Leigh: Not at all.

11

No Authority

Prof. Barry: So we just learned, Mr. Leigh, that you don't really meet the "fellow storyteller" requirement—at least for giving quality feedback to shortstops. But let's suppose you did meet that requirement. Let's suppose you were someone like Ozzie Smith, the longtime St. Louis Cardinal who was perhaps the best defensive shortstop to ever play that position. There'd still be a second Braintrust requirement you'd have to fulfill. Here's how it appears in *Creativity, Inc.*

Mr. Leigh: "The Braintrust has no authority."

Prof. Barry: Read a little more. We are about to get an explanation of what "no authority" means in the context of moviemaking and the feedback the directors of each film receive.

Mr. Leigh: "The director does not have to follow any of the specific suggestions given. After a Braintrust meeting, it is up to him or her to figure out how to address the feedback."

Prof. Barry: Ed Catmull, who has participated in many Braintrust sessions, adds something else.

Mr. Leigh: "By removing from the Braintrust the power to mandate solutions, we affect the dynamics of the group in ways I believe are essential."

Prof. Barry: Why do you think that is? Why do you think it helps that the feedback is coming from people who have no authority over the director?

Mr. Leigh: Because then the director doesn't have to worry about being punished for not following the feedback.

Prof. Barry: Good. Now apply that to the shortstop example. Who would you want to *exclude* from the Braintrust?

Mr. Leigh: The coach.

Prof. Barry: Why?

Mr. Leigh: Because you might worry that they'll bench you if you don't follow their advice.

Prof. Barry: And what about the advice from Ozzie Smith, particularly if Smith is retired and has no connection to your team?

Mr. Leigh: That's more appealing. Because if it is helpful, you'll use it.

Prof. Barry: And if it's not?

Mr. Leigh: You can focus on something else.

Prof. Barry: Without?

Mr. Leigh: Fearing any repercussions.

Prof. Barry: So the "no authority" rule helps protect the director in the movie example and the shortstop in the Ozzie Smith example.

Mr. Leigh: Right.

Prof. Barry: It also might protect something else—and here I am thinking especially about the movie example. It also might protect the integrity of the film, because nobody is pulling rank or using threats to get changes made.

Mr. Leigh: Yeah. They're just offering their honest opinions.

Prof. Barry: And then leaving it up to the director to make the final artistic choice.

Mr. Leigh: Right.

Prof. Barry: Sounds like a pretty good process, doesn't it?

Mr. Leigh: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Let's now look at somebody from a completely different line of work who recommends something similar: the chief justice of the Supreme Court, John Roberts.

12

Justice Roberts, Justice Stevens, and the Chicago Cubs

Prof. Barry: We've mentioned Justice Roberts in earlier classes. The first time was when we were talking about the idea that "to write good sentences, you need to read good sentences."

Here is the advice from him that you helped us with, Mr. Marshall.

Mr. Marshall: "The only good way to learn about writing is to read good writing."

Prof. Barry: We'll look at some other advice from Roberts in a little bit. But first I want to call attention to a baseball analogy he used when he was nominated to the Supreme Court back in 2005. We are about to see that certain members of the Supreme Court have a fun history with the sport.

Here's the analogy.

Mr. Marshall: "Judges are like umpires. Umpires don't make the rules—they apply them. The role of an umpire and a judge is critical. They make sure everybody plays by the rules, but it is a limited role. Nobody ever went to a ball game to see the umpire."

Prof. Barry: A lot of people have debated the merits of that analogy. An essay in the *Yale Law Journal* called "The Supreme Court (of Baseball)" even went through the history of it as a comparison.

The essay was written by a student at Yale who later earned a prestigious clerkship with a different baseball fan on the Supreme Court, John Paul Stevens. Since he was from Chicago, Stevens was a huge fan of the Cubs. You know the game in which Babe Ruth supposedly called his shot, pointing to the bleachers before hitting a home run?

Mr. Marshall: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Justice Stevens was at that game. It was the 1932 World Series. The Yankees were playing the Cubs.

Mr. Marshall: Seriously?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. He was also at the game three years earlier, in 1929, when the Cubs played their first World Series game at Wrigley Field. He went with his dad.

Mr. Marshall: Did the Cubs win?

Prof. Barry: No. That was during their 108-year-long World Series drought. But they did win in 2016—and guess who was at one of the games?

Mr. Marshall: Justice Stevens?

Prof. Barry: Yup. He had retired from the bench by that point and was 96 years old, but he was still there, cheering on his beloved Cubs and enjoying their extremely overdue rise to the top of the baseball world.

13

SCOTUS Notes

Prof. Barry: Justice Stevens isn't the only baseball fan to sit on the Supreme Court. Justice Sonia Sotomayor grew up rooting for the Yankees. Justice Brett Kavanaugh has season tickets to the Nationals. And there is a fun story about Justice Potter Stewart, who loved the Cincinnati Reds, sending the following note to another justice in the fall of 1973, while both were on the bench listening to oral arguments.

The note refers to two big events. The first was the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew. The second was perhaps even more important to Justice Stewart: a National League playoff game between the Mets and the Reds.

Read the note for us please, Mr. Marshall.

Mr. Marshall: "V.P. AGNEW JUST RESIGNED!! METS 2 REDS 0."

Prof. Barry: See? It's not just students who pass notes during class.

Mr. Marshall: Justice Stewart passed that while the Supreme Court was in session?

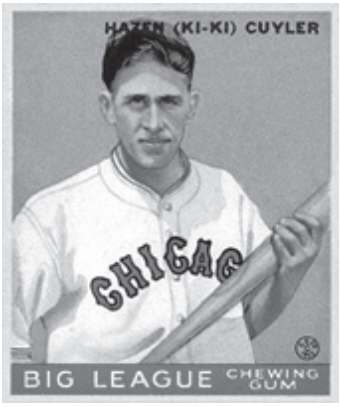
Prof. Barry: Yeah. And apparently, he's not the only one who did that kind of thing. In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article about a political science professor at the University of

Minnesota who has created a database of handwritten notes by the justices. Many were crafted while cases were being argued.

Here, for example, is one Justice Antonin Scalia sent to Justice Harry Blackmun during a case about the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, which is apparently not the most riveting of statutes.

Mr. Marshall: "Harry. Stay awake."

Prof. Barry: Another, from Justice Stevens—the Cubs fan we mentioned before—seems to have been responding to a trivia question from Justice William Rehnquist about a right fielder in the 1930s named Hazen "KiKi" Cuyler, who actually grew up here in Michigan.



Mr. Marshall: "Stole the most bases in Nat'l League (I think)."

Prof. Barry: If you are interested in seeing more of these notes, check out the *Wall Street Journal* article. It's written by a reporter named Jess Bravin. Or you can visit the database by the University of Minnesota political scientist Tim Johnson. It's called "SCOTUS Notes."

Do you know what "SCOTUS" stands for, Mr. Marshall?

Mr. Marshall: "Supreme Court of the United States"?

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And now let's return to the advice from Chief Justice John Roberts I mentioned, the one that aligns well with Pixar's "no authority" requirement.

14

Better Writer, Better Job

Prof. Barry: The advice from Justice Roberts is based on an editing habit he developed back when he worked as a lawyer for a firm now known as Hogan Lovells. He described the habit in an interview with legal writing expert Bryan Garner back in 2010. I want us to focus, Mr. Marshall, on what it shares with the idea of a Braintrust at Pixar.

Mr. Marshall: Okay.

Prof. Barry: Keep in mind that Roberts was one of the best Supreme Court advocates of his generation, maybe of any generation. Another top lawyer, Miguel Estrada, once joked that the middle initial "G" in "John G. Roberts" stands for "God."

Here's the first bit of Roberts's advice.

Mr. Marshall: "Before the brief is due or filed, in a little bit of time and comfortably before the argument, sit down with either a lay-person or a colleague in your firm or office that has had nothing to do with the case. A non-litigator is what I would look for."

Prof. Barry: Notice that Roberts takes the independence element in the "no authority" rule of the Pixar Braintrust and pushes it one step further.

Mr. Marshall: Right. He pushes it to "no expertise."

Prof. Barry: Exactly. Why do you think he does that? What's the benefit, for him, of getting feedback from someone who hasn't worked on the case?

Or let me ask the question this way: What's the drawback of getting feedback from someone who *has* worked on the case, someone who might have even come up with a few of the arguments?

Mr. Marshall: That person might not have enough distance from the draft to be helpful.

Prof. Barry: Good. Sometimes if you are too close to a project, you can't really see the flaws. You're too invested, too involved. You can no longer offer a helpfully critical eye. For example, when I've edited early drafts of briefs written by law students, I'll tell them to hand the final draft to somebody else for an extra round of review. By that point, I am not the best person to evaluate the document. It's better to get someone from the outside, someone who hasn't seen any of the drafts yet.

Mr. Marshall: Yeah. You want a fresh set of eyes.

Prof. Barry: And that's what Roberts suggests getting, right?

Mr. Marshall: Right.

Prof. Barry: Do you think he blindly accepts whatever feedback the fresh set of eyes gives him?

Mr. Marshall: No. That's not the purpose of the feedback.

Prof. Barry: What is?

Mr. Marshall: To see how his brief strikes an independent reader.

Prof. Barry: Good. We might think of it as doing market research. Roberts wants to know if the brief is user-friendly. A boring brief won't do. Nor will a confusing brief.

Mr. Marshall: Right.

Prof. Barry: During another part of the interview, Roberts actually says that you want to make the brief a bit of a page-turner. You want to give the judges some hook to keep them interested.

I recommend everyone try to do that. And not just with legal briefs. The ability to hold people's attention with your written words is one of the most valuable skills around, both here in school and even more so when you graduate.

Take Roberts, for example. Through his briefs as an advocate, through his opinions as a lower court judge, and through his professional and personal correspondences, there is a real sense in which he *wrote* his way to the position of chief justice of the Supreme Court. The same can be true for all of you.

Mr. Marshall: You think we're gonna write our way to becoming the chief justice of the Supreme Court?

Prof. Barry: Not literally, no—especially given that Roberts might have that spot locked up for a while. But the more general principle applies: Everyone in here has the potential to write their way to a better job.

I don't care what your career path turns out to be. It could be marketing. It could be medicine. It could be journalism, education, technology, or finance. In all of these fields and many others, you're going to have a chance to send an email, author a report, or craft a proposal that will materially affect your professional prospects.

If you are able to take advantage of that opportunity—because you've paid attention in class, because you've put in extra time out of class, because you've really committed yourself to becoming good with words—I guarantee that you'll improve your menu of professional possibilities.

With that goal in mind, let's turn to two questions Justice Roberts found helpful during his own development as a writer. We'll see that they can be adapted to other contexts as well.

15

Two Questions

Prof. Barry: The two questions from Justice Roberts are pretty straightforward. Would you mind reading them for us, Ms. Bart? I am calling on you because I eventually want you to help us apply them to the world of business.

Ms. Bart: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. Justice Roberts offers the questions as a way for lawyers to get quality feedback on the briefs they write. Find someone in your firm who is helpfully removed from the case, he says. Hand them your brief. Then, after they read it, ask them the following.

Ms. Bart: "What is this case about?"

Prof. Barry: And?

Ms. Bart: "Why should I win?"

Prof. Barry: Good. Roberts says that if the answers to these questions are not immediately clear from your brief, you've got some serious rewriting to do.

Ms. Bart: "If you can't explain what's this case about and why you should win, you've got to go back and practice it again. You're too

immersed in it, you're too much at the level of jargon, or you don't understand it."

Prof. Barry: He takes a similar position when it comes to being asked by family members about what you're working on. Keep reading.

Ms. Bart: "So you talk to your parents or your sister or your brother who is not a lawyer. So many times, they'll say, 'You've got a case. What's it about?' And you think, 'Oh, it's antitrust state action. It's too complicated. I can't explain it.'"

Prof. Barry: To Roberts, the inability to break down your case to a nonlawyer is a bad sign.

Ms. Bart: "You ought to be able to tell them in simple English . . . exactly what [the case] is about and why you should win."

Prof. Barry: If they can't answer those questions—if they don't say, "Oh I see why you should win" or "That's really not fair!"—then you need to go back and fix whatever was confusing and beef up what wasn't viscerally persuasive.

Roberts puts the point more succinctly.

Ms. Bart: "You've got to do some more work."

16

Cover Letters, Client Pitches, and Apologies

Prof. Barry: I mentioned that you don't need to be writing a legal brief to try Roberts's two questions. They're useful in other contexts too, as Ms. Bart is going to help us see. We'll start with something all of you will likely put together at some point, particularly when applying for jobs: a cover letter.

A perfectly sensible thing to say to someone you ask to help edit your cover letter is the following.

Ms. Bart: "Would you please read this and then tell me two things: What is the cover letter about?"

Prof. Barry: And?

Ms. Bart: "Why should the organization hire me?"

Prof. Barry: Now read the questions for an application essay.

Ms. Bart: "What is this application essay about? And why should the school accept me?"

Prof. Barry: A contract?

Ms. Bart: "What is this contract about? And why should both parties sign it?"

Prof. Barry: A grant proposal?

Ms. Bart: "What is this proposal about? And why should the donor fund it?"

Prof. Barry: A client pitch?

Ms. Bart: "What is this pitch about? And why should the client go for it?"

Prof. Barry: This next one may be my favorite, because it involves something that comes up so often: having to apologize.

Ms. Bart: "What is this apology about? And why should the person accept it?"

Prof. Barry: All of these questions sound simple. But it's amazing how frequently the person you show your writing to won't be able to answer them. Not because the person is a dummy. That's rarely the case.

Instead, the person will not be able to answer these questions because the writer, so absorbed in their own thinking, will not have clearly included the answers in the document.

Ms. Bart: I've been guilty of that.

Prof. Barry: We all have. So before submitting any assignment in school—or certainly before sending off any important document at work—make sure at least one other set of eyes reads it over. Your set is not to be trusted.

17

Personal Best

Prof. Barry: Another way to think about the need for some external feedback is to realize that writing often comes down to having a conversation on the page—only first, it sometimes helps to have that conversation with another person, like maybe your roommate, your parents, or your lab partner.

What I am trying to stress is that it is really important to talk to people about your writing. You don't have to follow all their suggestions. You can incorporate only what you find helpful and ignore all the rest. But as the surgeon and writer Atul Gawande is about to show us, if you want to keep improving, it is crucial to get a kind of "extra ear."

We mentioned Gawande earlier today, Mr. Carlos. Do you remember?

Mr. Carlos: Yeah. He's the guy who recommends getting a coach.

Prof. Barry: Right. In an essay called "Personal Best" about his development as both a tennis player and a doctor, Gawande says that a lot of top performers have coaches. Singers have coaches. Athletes have coaches. And so do stars in many other high-profile professions. He then wonders whether people in other industries should as well, especially people in his own industry: medicine.

Mr. Carlos: You said he is a surgeon?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. He performs both general and endocrine surgery.

Mr. Carlos: Where?

Prof. Barry: In Boston. He also teaches at Harvard Medical School. His essay begins, however, with a nice story about some helpful coaching he received on a tennis court in Nantucket. Here's how he describes the person who provided it.

Mr. Carlos: "He was in his early twenties, a recent graduate who'd played on his college team. We hit back and forth for a while. He went easy on me at first, and then started running me around. I served a few points, and the tennis coach in him came out. You know, he said, you could get more power from your serve."

Prof. Barry: Gawande, who qualified for a number of national tennis tournaments when he was a teenager and apparently brings his racquet with him whenever he travels, was initially skeptical. Here's what he wrote.

Mr. Carlos: "I was dubious. My serve had always been the best part of my game."

Prof. Barry: But he nevertheless listened and was soon glad he did. Keep reading.

Mr. Carlos: "He had me pay attention to my feet as I served, and I gradually recognized that my legs weren't really underneath me when I swung my racquet up into the air. My right leg dragged a few inches behind my body, reducing my power. With a few minutes of tinkering, he'd added at least ten miles an hour to my serve. I was serving harder than I ever had in my life."

Prof. Barry: An increase of 10 miles per hour in just a few minutes—I'd take that kind of coaching, wouldn't you?

Mr. Carlos: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: Gawande's insight into the power of coaching comes a little later, when he is watching superstar Rafael Nadal play a tournament match on the Tennis Channel.

Mr. Carlos: "The camera flashed to his coach, and the obvious struck me as interesting: even Rafael Nadal has a coach. Nearly every elite tennis player in the world does. Professional athletes use coaches to make sure they are as good as they can be."

Prof. Barry: Where do you think Gawande's mind goes next, especially if I tell you that in a different part of the essay Gawande worries that he may have plateaued as a surgeon?

Mr. Carlos: He thinks he should get a coach.

Prof. Barry: Exactly.

18

Itzhak Perlman

Prof. Barry: I encourage everyone to read the rest of Gawande's essay and find out how getting a coach affected his surgical skills. It was published in the *New Yorker* in 2011.

But I want us to focus on something slightly different for a bit. We're going to turn away from Gawande's experience acquiring a coach and look at a couple of people he interviewed who already had one. To help with that, I wonder if our music major, Ms. Nina, would mind jumping in again. The people I am talking about are—wanna guess, Ms. Nina?

Ms. Nina: Musicians?

Prof. Barry: Yup. One's a world-class violinist. The other is a world-class soprano.

Ms. Nina: Who's the world-class violinist?

Prof. Barry: You don't care about the world-class soprano?

Ms. Nina: I do. But I am more interested in the violinist.

Prof. Barry: Do you play the violin?

Ms. Nina: A little.

Prof. Barry: I see. Then maybe you've heard of this guy. His name is Itzhak Perlman.

Ms. Nina: Yeah, I've heard of him. He's one of the greatest violinists of all time.

Prof. Barry: Does that make it less or more surprising that he has a coach?

Ms. Nina: Maybe both less *and* more?

Prof. Barry: Why less?

Ms. Nina: Because it is probably tough to become as good as Perlman is without any outside assistance.

Prof. Barry: Why more?

Ms. Nina: Because it is also kind of weird to think that a superstar like him needs a coach.

Prof. Barry: Good. Gawande, in the essay we've been talking about, comes to the very same dual conclusion.

19

Extra Ear

Prof. Barry: Here's how Itzhak Perlman describes why he thinks he needs a coach—or what Gawande calls an "extra ear."

Ms. Nina: "The great challenge in performing is listening to yourself. . . . Your physicality, the sensation that you have as you play the violin, interferes with your accuracy of listening."

Prof. Barry: Do you buy that, Ms. Nina? Is what Perlman describes consistent with your own musical experiences?

Ms. Nina: Yeah. It's often really hard for me to know how I sound when I am playing.

Prof. Barry: So maybe you, like Perlman, need an extra ear. He uses his wife, Toby, as his. She's a classically trained violinist as well. They met while studying at the acclaimed Juilliard School in New York. After performances, she tells Perlman if his playing was too fast or too light or too mechanical.

But don't think you have to marry a musician to get an extra ear. It's not a skill set reserved for spouses. The other musician Gawande interviews, for example—

Ms. Nina: The soprano?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. The soprano. Her name is Renée Fleming. She's one of the world's most renowned opera singers. She's performed at the White House. She's performed at Buckingham Palace. She's even performed here at the University of Michigan.

Her extra ear, though, is not her spouse. It's a hired professional. Whenever she is getting ready for a performance, they practice together several times a week in 90-minute sessions. Here's why, according to Fleming.

Ms. Nina: "What we hear as we are singing is not what the audience hears."

Prof. Barry: What do you think she means by that?

Ms. Nina: Pretty much what Itzhak Perlman said.

Prof. Barry: That the great challenge when performing is listening to yourself?

Ms. Nina: Yeah. It's tough to know if how you *think* you sound matches up with how you *actually* sound.

Prof. Barry: So now apply Fleming's insight to writing. I'll help you get started. Here's a modified version of what she said.

Ms. Nina: "What <u>we hear</u> as we are writing is not what the <u>reader hears</u>."

Prof. Barry: Do you think that's true?

Ms. Nina: Probably.

Prof. Barry: Because?

Ms. Nina: Because I often think that my papers are really clear and compelling when I read them.

Prof. Barry: But then when somebody else reads them?

Ms. Nina: They have no idea what I am trying to say.

Prof. Barry: Welcome to the world of writing.

20

Intention vs. Effect

Prof. Barry: Another way to apply the idea of an extra ear to writing is to say that there is often a gap between intention and effect, between what you plan to write and what you actually produce.

Without someone to help fill that gap, without what we have been calling an extra ear, our writing risks becoming confusing, awkward, dull, repetitive, incomplete—the worst kind of music. So definitely put securing an extra ear on your to-do list.

But I also want to introduce you to a companion principle, or maybe more like a set of companion concerns. They come from an essay by Verlyn Klinkenborg, a longtime teacher of writing and a former member of the *New York Times* editorial board.

Would you mind reading from the essay for us, Ms. Henrietta? As an aspiring journalist, you might particularly appreciate his perspective.

Ms. Henrietta: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. We'll start with the title.

Ms. Henrietta: "The Trouble with Intentions."

Prof. Barry: Now read the opening sentence.

Ms. Henrietta: "On their own, sentences are implacably honest."

Prof. Barry: Keep going.

Ms. Henrietta: "They may be long, short, simple, complex, clear, ambiguous, even incoherent. But they don't try to hide those qualities. They are what they are and they say what they say."

Prof. Barry: The problem, Klinkenborg points out, is that it can be tough to see the flaws in sentences you yourself have written. A longtime teacher and editor, he has looked at countless constructions that are deficient in various ways—they're cumbersome, redundant, jumbled, contradictory—and he has often asked himself, "Why didn't the writers catch these mistakes? Why couldn't they see the obvious blunders the reader now has to suffer through?"

Here's his answer.

Ms. Henrietta: "The sentence, as written, was invisible to them."

Prof. Barry: Now try this slightly modified version of the same point. I have reframed Klinkenborg's observation using the language of an extra ear.

Ms. Henrietta: "It can be tough to hear yourself write."

Prof. Barry: I think that's the case, don't you? I think it can be really hard to get a sense of how our words sound when we're the person putting them together.

Fortunately, though, there is something that can help, something recommended by all kinds of professional writers—from lawyers, to poets, to journalists, to academics. It's sort of like an extra ear, and you can certainly do it with someone you've asked to be your extra ear. But it can also serve as a nice substitute if you are stuck without one and have to do some self-editing.

Want to know what it is?

Ms. Henrietta: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: To a certain extent, you already know. It's what I have you do whenever you come to my office to work on your drafts: read your sentences out loud.

21

The Tape Doesn't Lie

Prof. Barry: We talked briefly last class about the value of reading your writing out loud. But now is the time to really stress the point. Think, for example, of why college and professional sports teams spend a lot of time watching film. There's no better way to spot your mistakes and figure out places to improve.

In fact, have you ever heard someone use the phrase "The tape doesn't lie," Ms. Bristol?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah. My soccer coaches use it all the time.

Prof. Barry: What does it mean?

Ms. Bristol: It means that what you see on film after a game or practice tells the truth about your performance.

Prof. Barry: So if an offensive lineman on the Michigan football team misses his block on Saturday and the quarterback gets sacked as a result, that will show up on film during the team's next meeting?

Ms. Bristol: Yup.

Prof. Barry: Or if the goalie on the Michigan field hockey team costs her team a goal by letting the ball roll through her legs, that will also show up on film during the team's next meeting?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah. For everyone to see.

Prof. Barry: Including the goalie.

Ms. Bristol: Especially the goalie.

Prof. Barry: Watching that on a big screen can be really embarrassing.

Ms. Bristol: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: But it can also be really helpful, right?

Ms. Bristol: Right.

Prof. Barry: Explain why.

Ms. Bristol: You get to actually see what you did wrong.

Prof. Barry: Good. Mistakes announce themselves when you review game film, particularly the mistakes you didn't know you were making.

Ms. Bristol: Exactly.

Prof. Barry: Now connect that principle to reading your writing out loud.

Ms. Bristol: I guess when you read your writing out loud, your mistakes also announce themselves.

Prof. Barry: Good. You might hear an awkward bit of repetition. You might catch a jumbled stretch of syntax. You might notice all kinds of things that you otherwise wouldn't.

Here's how Francine Prose puts the point in *Reading like a Writer*, a book we've mentioned a few times this semester.

Ms. Bristol: "Read your work aloud, if you can, if you aren't too embarrassed by the sound of your voice ringing out when you are alone in a room. Chances are that the sentence you can

hardly pronounce without stumbling is a sentence that needs to be reworked to make it smoother and more fluent."

Prof. Barry: She then shares a funny story she heard from a poet about how reading your writing out loud might have an added benefit. It can scare off burglars.

Ms. Bristol: "A poet once told me that he was reading a draft of a new poem aloud to himself when a thief broke into his Manhattan loft. Instantly surmising that he had entered the dwelling of a madman, the thief turned and ran without taking anything, and without harming the poet."

Prof. Barry: Prose's conclusion?

Ms. Bristol: "So it may be that reading your work aloud will not only improve its quality but save your life in the process."

22

Simon Schama

Prof. Barry: Another funny story about reading your work out loud comes from Simon Schama. Ever read any of his stuff in your history courses, Ms. Franzoni?

Ms. Franzoni: No. But I watched a little of his *History of Britain* documentary.

Prof. Barry: On BBC?

Ms. Franzoni: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Well, if you like the way Schama presents information, you might check out some of his books as well. He's written on all sorts of topics—art, slavery, Zionism, and both the French Revolution and the Dutch Revolution. He's like a one-man history department.

But while recording the audio version of one of his books, *Rough Crossings*, he apparently got a pretty big shock when he tried to get through some of his own sentences. Here's how Schama described what he found.

Ms. Franzoni: "I did an audiobook for *Rough Crossings*, which I thought was one of the best books I had published. But it was an absolute embarrassment to read it. All these horrible mucked-up

bits of syntax, over-the-top adjectives. I found myself editing it while reading. Alert listeners will notice the difference."

Prof. Barry: Kind of funny, right? Schama has won tons of awards for his writing. He's taught at some of the best universities in the world—Harvard, Columbia, Oxford, Cambridge—and his books are usually real page-turners.

Yet even he can be helped by the simple act of reading his words out loud, of essentially sitting down and watching a bit of game tape.

Perhaps, though, we can learn from Schama's experience and make sure to read our writing out loud *before* publishing it—or in your cases, before handing it in to your professors. There's a real advantage to taking that step early on, don't you think?

Ms. Franzoni: Yeah. You can catch your mistakes before your readers do.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. It's a form of quality control. You want to inspect the goods you are sending out into the world, especially if they have your name on them.

Ms. Franzoni: Right.

Prof. Barry: Does that mean you'll spot every error?

Ms. Franzoni: Probably not.

Prof. Barry: Of course not—and we'll talk in a moment about how it would actually be too costly to try, particularly for all the informal writing you do every day.

But for the really high-stakes stuff—the stuff that might land you a job or preserve a relationship—you are going to want to scrutinize every word by reading each of them out loud. I make my law students do that anytime we have to file a brief, submit a visa application, or craft an important part of a contract. Not doing it, I tell them, is a kind of malpractice.

23

The Optimal Amount of Pollution

Prof. Barry: I said we'd talk about the cost of trying to catch every error in your writing. So let's do that now. We'll start by thinking about the environment. Which means maybe this is an area for you, Ms. Maat, our resident biologist.

Ms. Maat: Okay.

Prof. Barry: I want you to think of the person in your group of friends who is the most environmentally conscious—someone who is a big proponent of green energy, Greenpeace, and maybe even the Green New Deal. Do you know someone like that?

Ms. Maat: Yeah, definitely.

Prof. Barry: Good. My guess is that even that person, with their solar panels and electric cars and minimal carbon footprint, would agree with the following statement. Read it for us, please.

Ms. Maat: "The optimal amount of pollution is not zero."

Prof. Barry: What do you think I mean by that? Why isn't the optimal amount of pollution zero?

Ms. Maat: Because the earth can actually absorb some pollution.

Prof. Barry: And?

Ms. Maat: Getting rid of all of it would cost too much money.

Prof. Barry: As well as too much time, right?

Ms. Maat: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Especially given that at a certain point, both of those resources—time and money—could be better spent somewhere else.

Ms. Maat: Right.

Prof. Barry: Which isn't to say that the environment isn't important.

Ms. Maat: No, not at all.

Prof. Barry: You're pro-earth.

Ms. Maat: Very.

Prof. Barry: You want it to work well and look nice.

Ms. Maat: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: For a long time.

Ms. Maat: An extremely long time.

Prof. Barry: Yet you nevertheless acknowledge that there are trade-offs when it comes to reducing pollution and that it might not make sense, given those trade-offs, to try to eliminate pollution completely.

Ms. Maat: Right.

Prof. Barry: Good. Now let's try to apply that principle to writing—and specifically to proofreading, because there are trade-offs when it comes to that as well. Time spent trying to make one document perfect is time not spent completing other projects. And if, as people often say, "time is money," that means there is also an

economic cost involved, particularly if you bill in six-minute increments, as many lawyers do.

Ms. Ida (*jumping in*): Six-minute increments?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. It's not the most edifying aspect of the job.

Ms. Maat (*jumping in*): So does that mean lawyers don't proofread?

Prof. Barry: Sometimes it can seem that way, judging by the many poorly drafted documents that get filed. But it could also just be that, since they're always pressed for time, they prioritize other things. We all have to do that at various points. Just think of the last paper you handed in. You could have spent more time proofreading it. You could have read it another two, three, four, maybe *fifteen* times. You could have obsessed over every word and scrutinized every comma. But you didn't.

Ms. Maat: No.

Prof. Barry: Why not?

Ms. Maat: Because I had other things to do.

Prof. Barry: Like?

Ms. Maat: Finish my lab report.

Prof. Barry: And?

Ms. Maat: Study for biochem.

Prof. Barry: And?

Ms. Maat: Go to band practice.

Prof. Barry: You're in the band here?

Ms. Maat: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: The marching band? The one that plays at the football games?

Ms. Maat: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: So that means Ms. Nina isn't our class's only musician.

Ms. Maat: Nope.

Prof. Barry: It also means that you're even busier than I thought. Playing in the band here is a real commitment. You don't just play at the home games. You play at the away games too.

Ms. Maat: Right.

Prof. Barry: And the Bowl games?

Ms. Maat: Yup.

Prof. Barry: That's a lot of traveling and time away from school. So I'm guessing your "optimal level of pollution" for papers—by which we mean the imperfections you're willing to accept—is probably pretty high.

Ms. Maat: It's certainly been higher than I would have liked sometimes.

Prof. Barry: But out of necessity, right? Remember what we said on the very first day of class. You can't do everything. Sometimes you've got to assert a "positive no."

Ms. Maat: Right.

Prof. Barry: That's going to become even more important as you grow older. I have no doubt that you feel busy now. But just wait: things are likely only going to accelerate after you graduate. Your life is going to get more complex. Your number of commitments is going to increase. And so will constraints on your time.

Ms. Maat: That's why I don't want to graduate.

Prof. Barry: I doubt you're alone. I don't think a lot of college students look forward to experiencing the reality of words like

"mortgage," "child care," and "insurance premiums." But my hope is that your feelings about growing up and even growing old will at some point change, because I actually think adulthood is underrated.

Later in the semester, we'll talk more about what I mean. It has a lot to do with being in a better position to help other people. For now, though, I want to return to the idea that there is an optimal level of pollution and that it may be higher than you initially thought—in the environment, in your writing, and particularly as you get older, in your life.

Or, to paraphrase the welcome mat I once saw outside a friend's house, a tidy home might be a sign of a wasted life.

24

Perfectionism

Prof. Barry: Just to clarify, I'm not recommending you all become pro-pollution. No one should rush out of class today and thoughtlessly burn a bunch of fossil fuels. Nor should you impose a string of typos on your professors.

But what you should do is keep in mind that there can be a real cost to perfectionism. Anne Lamott, from whom we got the idea of a shitty first draft, talks about this cost in an essay called "Perfectionism."

Would you mind reading a little bit from the opening paragraph, Ms. Nina? I believe you helped us introduce some of Lamott's ideas earlier today.

Ms. Nina: "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft."

Prof. Barry: Here's a bit more, from later in the essay.

Ms. Nina: "Perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force."

Prof. Barry: Lamott, who was born in San Francisco, offers the following parenthetical qualification, recognizing that the last bit about a "life force" might sound a little too new agey for some readers.

Ms. Nina: "(These are words we are allowed to use in California.)"

Prof. Barry: But even if you still object to her choice of words, her overall message is worth absorbing: there can be a real cost to perfectionism.

Think of a point in your life when you wasted time trying to get something perfect. Maybe you missed a deadline. Maybe you neglected other obligations. Maybe you even prevented yourself from producing anything at all, falling victim to a pernicious strand of perfectionism paralysis.

Ms. Warsaw (*jumping in*): The perfect is the enemy of the good.

Prof. Barry: Exactly, Ms. Warsaw. Any idea who is often credited with coming up with that saying?

Ms. Warsaw: No. I just remember my French teacher always telling me that.

Prof. Barry: Maybe your French teacher was a fan of another French speaker, Voltaire—the Enlightenment-era philosopher and satirist. His name is often attached to the quotation, although in a poem called "La Bégueule," Voltaire attributes the words to an "Italian sage."

That said, Voltaire is definitely a good spokesperson for the phrase, given his literary productivity. Over the course of his career, he wrote everything from plays, to novels, to political pamphlets. He also composed over 20,000 letters, back when corresponding with people was a serious undertaking. We're not talking 20,000 hastily typed emails. We're talking 20,000 handwritten documents.

Were the letters all good? Probably not. But that's kind of the point. If Voltaire obsessed over each one, he wouldn't have sent nearly as many.

Ms. Warsaw: So you're a fan of quantity over quality?

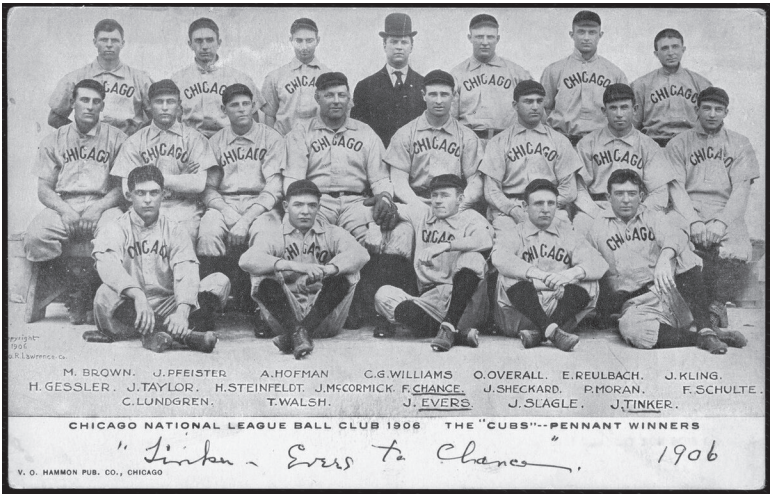
Prof. Barry: Not necessarily. I've just noticed, particularly among high achievers like the students here at Michigan, a not-always-healthy desire to be perfect. You want perfect grades. You want perfect bodies. You want perfect résumés and social media profiles.

Don't get me wrong: there are major benefits to having that kind of drive. You might not have ended up at Michigan without it.

Ms. Warsaw: Right.

Prof. Barry: But I also want you all to be aware of the costs, particularly if this desire to be perfect—to not mess up—prevents you from trying new things and challenging yourself. Life is less like the short, 13-game season of college football, where it is actually possible to amass a perfect record, and more like the long, 162-game season of Major League Baseball, where even the most dominant teams still lose about 40 or 50 games.

For example, the baseball team that won the highest percentage of their games, the 1906 Chicago Cubs, still lost 36 times that season—and that was back when each team played only 152 games.



They probably would have lost at least a few more had they played the now-standard 162 games.

Ms. Bristol (*jumping in*): When did the league switch to playing 162 games?

Prof. Barry: In 1961, the year Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's single-season home run record. John F. Kennedy—newly elected as president—threw out the first pitch.

Ms. Bristol: When Maris broke the record?

Prof. Barry: No, on the opening day of the season.

Ms. Bristol: Oh.

Prof. Barry: And guess how many games the Yankees, who won the World Series that year, ended up losing.

Ms. Maat (*jumping in*): How many?

Prof. Barry: I actually have no idea, but I guarantee that it was a heck of a lot more than zero!

25

Jeffer Mangels Moment

Prof. Barry: I want to push back on some of what we have been saying about the cost of perfectionism and acknowledge that there can also certainly be a cost to carelessness. Take one of the first cover letters I ever sent out, back when I was in law school.

Mr. Marshall (*jumping in*): You messed it up?

Prof. Barry: Big time. Through a friend of a friend, I learned of an opportunity to apply to a law firm called Jeffer Mangels in Los Angeles, even before the normal schedule for recruiting law students would begin. So I got my résumé together, I combined it with my transcript, and then I sent both documents along with my cover letter. Which is exactly what I was told to do.

But here's the problem. At the same time that I was getting ready to apply to Jeffer Mangels, I was also getting ready to apply to some other firms, including one called Sidley Austin. And I got careless.

Please read for us, Mr. Marshall, the beginning of the cover letter I sent to Jeffer Mangels.

Mr. Marshall: "I am a rising 2L at the University of Chicago Law School interested in a summer associate position at Sidley Austin."

Prof. Barry: You think Jeffer Mangels hired me?

Mr. Marshall: No.

Prof. Barry: You think the firm even gave me an interview?

Mr. Marshall: Probably not.

Prof. Barry: Definitely not. Would you?

Mr. Marshall: No.

Prof. Barry: Why?

Mr. Marshall: Because lawyers need to pay attention to details.

Prof. Barry: And what does my cover letter show?

Mr. Marshall: That you don't even pay attention to important details like the name of the firm you are applying to.

Prof. Barry: Good. My mistake suggested that I might do sloppy work, that I'm unprofessional, that I'm not exactly the type of person you would want corresponding with clients or a court.

Mr. Marshall: Right.

Prof. Barry: Maybe we'd want more data than just the opening sentence in a cover letter to confirm those judgments, but that kind of gaffe sends some pretty bad signals.

Mr. Marshall: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: Let's return to Chief Justice Roberts for a description of what it's like to slog through a poorly written legal brief.

Mr. Marshall: "We get some excellent briefs [at the Supreme Court]; we get a lot of very, very good briefs. And there are some where the first thing you can tell in many of them is that the lawyer really hasn't spent a lot of time on it, to be honest with you."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading.

Mr. Marshall: "You can tell that if they'd gone through a couple more drafts, it would be more effective. It would read better. And for whatever reason, they haven't devoted that energy to it. Well, that tells you a lot right there about that lawyer's devotion to his client's cause, and that's very frustrating because we're obviously dealing with very important issues."

Prof. Barry: A little more. Roberts is about to explain the bigger concerns bad writing raises.

Mr. Marshall: "We depend heavily on the lawyers. Our chances of getting a case right improve to the extent the lawyers do a better job. And when you see something like bad writing, the first thing you think is, 'Well, if he didn't have enough time to spend writing it well, how much time did he spend researching it? How much time did he spend thinking out the ramifications of his position?' You don't have a lot of confidence in the substance if the writing is bad."

Prof. Barry: I really like that last statement: "You don't have a lot of confidence in the substance if the writing is bad."

That pretty much sums up my Jeffer Mangels moment. Whoever read my terrible cover letter must have thought, "No sense wasting any time on this bozo." Then they probably just moved on to the next candidate.

Should we blame them for doing that, Mr. Marshall?

Mr. Marshall: I don't think so.

Prof. Barry: Neither do I. Our writing is empirical evidence of a lot of things—how thoughtful we are, how creative we are, how well we organize and evaluate information. And in that cover letter, the evidence was clear. I was someone who was, at best, quite error-prone and, at worst, capable of really poor judgment. Neither of those qualities screams "Hire immediately!"

26

Editing vs. Proofreading

Prof. Barry: We've just talked about a quality that doesn't scream "Hire immediately!" So now let's talk about one that *does* scream "Hire immediately!" Or one that at least should: being a good editor.

By "editing," however, I mean something more than "proofreading." A lot of students think editing and proofreading are the same skills. They're not. Proofreading involves catching typos and fixing formatting. It cultivates a host of admirable qualities—patience, thoroughness, attention to detail—but it doesn't require a whole lot of imagination.

Editing, on the other hand, is a fundamentally creative act. Good editors see not just the sentence that was written but also the sentence that *might* have been written. They can look past words that don't need to be there and at the same time summon ones that haven't yet appeared. Their value comes not just from preventing mistakes but by finding a place for style, structure, voice, insight, precision, clarity—all the things that make a piece of writing worth reading.

Does that distinction resonate with you, Ms. Toth? If I said I'd be happy to *edit* your work, would you expect me to do something different than if I said I'd be happy to *proofread* your work? Or let me frame the question a bit differently. If I said I'd be happy to be

your *editor*, would you expect me to do something different than if I said I'd be happy to be your *proofreader*?

Ms. Toth: I'd expect you to do more as an editor.

Prof. Barry: Like what?

Ms. Toth: Like maybe suggest some examples I haven't thought of yet.

Prof. Barry: What else?

Ms. Toth: Point out flaws in my reasoning.

Prof. Barry: How about comments on the overall structure of what you've written?

Ms. Toth: Yeah, that too. An editor might rearrange entire sections if they don't seem to flow together well.

Prof. Barry: Would you expect a proofreader to do that?

Ms. Toth: Probably not.

Prof. Barry: Good. Perhaps one way to capture this difference is to return to the theme of "coaches" we've been exploring today. Only now I want you to think of two types of coaches. The first is a football coach who can spot when the quarterback hasn't set his feet correctly. The second is a football coach who can certainly do that but can also reimagine an entire offensive system.

For an example of the second type of coach, think of someone like NFL legend Bill Walsh, who dreamed up the "West Coast Offense" that helped the San Francisco 49ers win three Super Bowls in the 1980s and 1990s. Or maybe our friend from the very first day of class, Amos Alonzo Stagg. Remember how many innovative changes he brought to the game?

Ms. Toth: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: I think we mentioned Stagg's role in creating the "huddle" and sending players in motion. But he has been linked to other innovations as well. The end around. The quarterback keeper. The forward pass. He was a real visionary—which is the kind of thing you'd be more likely to say about an editor than a proofreader, right?

Ms. Toth: Right.

Prof. Barry: Take Max Perkins, who helped nurture authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. He was a visionary editor. Same with Tina Brown, who had influential stints at both *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*. She, too, was a visionary editor. And so is, in a slightly different realm, Ira Glass of the NPR show *This American Life*.

Ms. Ida (*jumping in*): I love that show.

Prof. Barry: Then you might like what Glass said about editing when he gave a commencement speech at the Columbia School of Journalism in 2018. Here's a sample.

Ms. Ida: "Editing is crucial because in my experience anything you try to make—what you want is for the story to be *amazing*. But what the story wants to be is mediocre or worse. And the entire process of making the story is convincing the story to not be what it wants to be, which is *bad*."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading.

Ms. Ida: "And turning it from the bad thing it's trying to be, where the sources are inarticulate, and you don't know how to structure it, and the structure you make doesn't work, into the shining gleaming jewel that you have in your heart—that is editing!"

Prof. Barry: Ira Glass makes editing sound kind of magical, doesn't he? Like it's this amazing opportunity to transform something ugly, or at least ordinary, into something beautiful and spectacular—"a shining gleaming jewel," as Glass puts it.

Ms. Ida: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Imagine if you could do that to all the writing you touch. Imagine what that would mean not just for the words you yourself produce but for what others give you to improve. Wanting to benefit from the value you add, people might start to give you more important and interesting projects—especially because that value is not simply cosmetic. It's not grammatical mascara. It's an entire makeover.

Ms. Ida: Right.

Prof. Barry: Which means what about the amount of skill and effort involved in becoming a good editor? How much expertise is required?

Ms. Ida: A lot. You don't want just anybody doing your editing.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. You want someone you can trust, someone who can take your words and give them an upgrade. Good editors do that for you. They help you become, at least in your writing, a better version of yourself.

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Joe Montana, Unedited

Prof. Barry: The idea that good editors help you become a better version of yourself is partly why I liken them to visionary coaches. To understand this connection a little more, let's talk about one of the visionary coaches we already mentioned, Bill Walsh of the San Francisco 49ers. Do you know anything about him, Ms. Bristol?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah. He won a bunch of Super Bowls.

Prof. Barry: Any chance you know who some of his best players were?

Ms. Bristol: Joe Montana.

Prof. Barry: Yup.

Ms. Bristol: Jerry Rice.

Prof. Barry: Yup.

Ms. Bristol: Ronnie Lott.

Prof. Barry: Good. We could add more to the list—Roger Craig, Charles Haley, Randy Cross—but the ones you picked are excellent examples, especially because as talented as each of those players was, Walsh played a big role in making all of them even better.

Joe Montana has explicitly said that about his own development as a quarterback. In an interview in 2014, he described how Walsh taught him a whole new level of playing and precision. It isn't enough, in Walsh's view, for Montana to just complete a pass to a wide receiver like Jerry Rice. Montana should also look at where the defender is and aim for the side of Rice's body that is farthest away from danger, leading Rice to turn in a certain direction. Montana had never thought of doing that before.

Ms. Bristol: Had anybody?

Prof. Barry: I'm not sure. Walsh was pretty innovative. His nickname was "The Genius." So I wouldn't be surprised if he was the first. But even if he wasn't, what set him apart was how well he could teach that kind of strategy. That's what a lot of people focused on in their tributes to him when he died, at the age of 75, in 2007. Here's what the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, said about him.

Ms. Bristol: "The essence of Bill Walsh was that he was an extraordinary teacher."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading.

Ms. Bristol: "If you gave him a blackboard and a piece of chalk, he would become a whirlwind of wisdom."

Prof. Barry: This teacherly quality of Walsh's is another reason I liken him to an editor, because that is what great editors do: they teach. They get you to see patterns and possibilities that you wouldn't otherwise notice, while at the same time showing you, in big ways and small, how to improve and develop. Here's how the writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks, whom we talked about

once before, described the pedagogical powers of his own editor, Colin Haystack.

Ms. Bristol: "Colin had to pick among many versions, restrain my sometimes overabundant prose, and create continuity. Sometimes he would say, pointing to one passage, 'This doesn't go here,' then flip the pages over, saying, 'It goes here.' As soon as he said this, I would see that he was right, but—mysteriously—I could not see it for myself."

Prof. Barry: Sounds like a teacher, right?

Ms. Bristol: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: And it also kind of sounds like Walsh, particularly in his tutelage of Montana. I mean, just imagine what the career of an "unedited" version of Montana would have looked like. Unedited Montana would probably not have won four Super Bowls.

Ms. Bristol: Right.

Prof. Barry: Unedited Montana would also probably not have been named to the All-Decade Team. Or made ESPN's list of greatest athletes of the 20th century. Or, ultimately, ended up in the NFL Hall of Fame.

Which is not to say that Montana was a slouch. Highly regarded by several pro teams when he finished his college football career at Notre Dame, he had a tremendous amount of talent and poise. So he likely would have had a successful career with any number of coaches.

But because he got to learn from Walsh—because he found the right editor—he became much more than just a success. He became one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time.

28

Too Much Talent

Prof. Barry: The success achieved by Walsh, Montana, and the rest of the 49ers provides a nice transition to our next topic: teams.

Perhaps our business major, Ms. Bart, will help us out with it, given that a lot of helpful research on teams comes from a renowned business professor.

Ms. Bart: A business professor at Michigan?

Prof. Barry: No, the professor I'm thinking of, Roderick Swaab, teaches at a place called INSEAD. Like Michigan's Ross School of Business, it's often ranked as one of the best programs in the world. There's a campus in France. There's a campus in Singapore. And there's also one in Abu Dhabi. To enroll in any of them, I'm pretty sure it's a requirement that you speak at least two languages.

Ms. Bart: Really?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. And you have to gain a basic understanding of a third by the time you graduate. INSEAD's motto is "The Business School for the World."

Ms. Bart: What country is the professor from?

Prof. Barry: The one who does research on teams, Roderick Swaab?

Ms. Bart: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Holland. But he spent several years at Northwestern University here in the United States, and the teams he and his collaborators have studied included ones in the NBA and Major League Baseball. What they found is pretty interesting and has implications for the way teams are formed in corporate America as well: there is apparently such a thing as having *too* much talent.

That's actually the name of one of Swaab's papers.

Ms. Bart: "Too Much Talent"?

Prof. Barry: Yup. But add the word "the" at the beginning and the word "effect" at the end.

Ms. Bart: "The Too-Much-Talent Effect"?

Prof. Barry: Exactly. "The Too-Much-Talent Effect." Here's a small section of it.

Ms. Bart: "Our findings reflect the disappointing fact that teams of superstars often fail to live up to expectations."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading. We are about to get a couple of examples.

Ms. Bart: "Consider the disappointing performances of the French national [soccer] team in the 2010 World Cup, the Dutch national [soccer] team during the 2012 European championship, or the Miami Heat during the 2010–2011 NBA season. All these teams were brimming with individual talent. The current data suggest that selecting fewer top-talent players may produce a better team."

Prof. Barry: A little more.

Ms. Bart: "Indeed, Louis van Gaal made a bold move when he took over as coach of the Dutch

national team following the 2012 European championship: He completely reassembled the team and significantly reduced the number of the team's top-talented players (i.e., the number who had contracts with the world's elite clubs). His actions suggested that he understood the too-much-talent effect that we have documented here. The Dutch qualified for the 2014 World Cup without losing a single game."

Prof. Barry: And now for an observation about the Miami Heat.

Ms. Bart: "Likewise, the Miami Heat won the championship in 2011–2012 when two of their All-Stars were hobbled by injuries, which lowered their overall talent but created a clear pecking order."

Prof. Barry: Notice, though, the nature of the sports being studied: soccer and basketball. Both require a lot of cooperation. Both, to use a term from the paper, are highly "interdependent."

But not every sport is like that. Take baseball, for example. There are certainly aspects of baseball that require a lot of teamwork—double plays, sacrifice bunts, any hit-and-run situation. But compared to soccer and basketball, baseball is much less interdependent. One player could still hit a lot of home runs even if another strikes out all the time.

Ms. Bart: Right.

Prof. Barry: So what do you think that means for the too-much-talent effect?

Ms. Bart: It's probably not as strong in baseball.

Prof. Barry: Good. The paper found that the effect didn't even exist there. Read the summarizing sentences.

Ms. Bart: "The effect of top talent never turned negative in baseball, a sport in which task interdependence is relatively low. Thus, there was no too-much-talent effect in baseball, unlike in [soccer] and basketball."

Prof. Barry: So when interdependence is low—and in addition to baseball, we might add sports like team gymnastics or a competition like the Ryder Cup in golf—the too-much-talent effect isn't a huge concern.

Ms. Bart: Right.

Prof. Barry: But when interdependence is high, what should we be thinking about?

Ms. Bart: That having too many superstars might be a problem.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And the effect is not just limited to sports. It has also been found in corporate teams, financial teams, and teams tasked with coming up with creative ideas. Here's the conclusion of an article in the *Scientific American* that summarized a whole bunch of this research.

Ms. Bart: "Before breaking the bank to recruit superstars, team owners and industry experts might want to consider whether the goal they are trying to achieve relies on individual talent alone, or a cooperative synergy from the team. If the latter, it would be wise to reign in the talent and focus on teamwork."

Prof. Barry: So here's our next question: How should we think of the too-much-talent effect when it comes to writing?

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Writing Is a Team Sport

Prof. Barry: I'll make the question more concrete, Ms. Bart. Suppose you're trying to assemble an editorial team to help with a big project or even put together a whole book or magazine. Should you worry about the too-much-talent effect?

In other words, do you think that editing is a highly <u>in</u>dependent activity, like baseball and gymnastics, or do you think it is a highly <u>inter</u>dependent activity, like soccer and basketball?

Ms. Bart: I'm not sure.

Prof. Barry: Well, let's at least clarify the options. If it is a highly independent activity, we might try to stack the team with superstars, right?

Ms. Bart: Right.

Prof. Barry: But if it is a highly interdependent activity?

Ms. Bart: Then we'll want a more balanced team.

Prof. Barry: Good. By "balanced," though, we are not talking about intentionally recruiting incompetent people. We're talking about making sure we have some role-players, people who work well as complements to other members of the team. These folks won't

necessarily be competing for a bigger and bigger share of the limelight, as superstars might.

Ms. Bart: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: So then take a shot at an answer. Either editing is more like baseball and gymnastics, in which case we don't need to worry as much about the too-much-talent effect, or it is more like soccer and basketball, in which case we do.

Ms. Bart: I still don't know. I can see reasons on both sides.

Prof. Barry: Would it help if I came back to you? Do you want a little more time to think?

Ms. Bart: Yeah. Is that okay?

Prof. Barry: Definitely. Just because I pepper you all with questions each class doesn't mean I expect everyone to always have an answer. We're just testing out ideas, seeing what's helpful and what's not. "The art of teaching," famed Columbia professor Mark Van Doren once said, "is the art of assisting discovery."

Ms. Ida (*jumping in*): Maybe that's another way to think about editing—that you are "assisting discovery."

Prof. Barry: That's a nice connection, Ms. Ida. But which way does it cut in our current conversation about teams? Does "assisting discovery" require a lot of interdependence or not much at all?

Ms. Ida: I think it probably requires a lot.

Prof. Barry: Why?

Ms. Ida: Because it seems like it would take a mix of skills.

Prof. Barry: And probably not a clash over egos, right? You don't want editors fighting over who gets to "assist discovery" more.

Ms. Ida: Right. You want everybody working together.

Prof. Barry: Good. The edits someone makes to one section of a document might affect the edits another person can make to a different section.

Ms. Ida: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: But then what about proofreading? We said before that editing is different from proofreading. Do we have the same concern over interdependence there?

Ms. Ida: I don't think so.

Prof. Barry: Why not?

Ms. Ida: Because proofreading seems like an activity where you actually want to *discourage* interdependence.

Prof. Barry: So if I said, "Look, I am going to ask four students to proofread your paper"—you would want each of them to work separately? You wouldn't want them to collaborate?

Ms. Ida: I guess they could collaborate at the end. They could compare the mistakes they found.

Prof. Barry: Okay. But for the actual task, you would want them to operate on their own, so they didn't influence each other. You would want four independent forms of quality control.

Ms. Ida: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Because if one of them doesn't do a good job, the other people won't be dragged down as a result.

Ms. Ida: Right.

Prof. Barry: And if all the proofreaders are individually excellent, they can max out their effort without stepping on other people's toes.

Ms. Ida: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: What do you think about Ms. Ida's view, Ms. Bart? Are you ready to jump back into the conversation and offer an opinion?

Ms. Bart: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. So do you agree with Ms. Bart that editing is more interdependent and proofreading is more independent?

Ms. Bart: I am leaning that way, yeah.

Prof. Barry: You'd want an ensemble approach to editing. But you'd be fine with just a bunch of individual superstars doing the proofreading.

Ms. Bart: Right.

Prof. Barry: Either way, though, you'd probably want multiple people involved. You'd want a team.

Ms. Bart: Yeah. The more eyes, the better.

Prof. Barry: Ever hear of Linus's Law: "With enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow"? It comes from the world of open-source computer programming and is named after the software engineer Linus Torvalds.

Ms. Bart: I didn't know it was called Linus's Law, but I've definitely heard the phrase.

Prof. Barry: What do you take it to mean?

Ms. Bart: That if you want to spot errors in a program, it's good to have a lot of people review it.

Prof. Barry: Do you think that also applies to errors in a piece of writing?

Ms. Bart: Probably.

Prof. Barry: Me too.

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Social Support: Functional

Prof. Barry: It will soon be time for us to close today's class with our Notes on Nuance lesson. But first I want to give you all a way to think about the set of people I have recommended you begin to assemble on your editorial team—or at least some guidance on the roles those people might play.

Any chance you'd be willing to help me out with this, Ms. Amos? The framework comes from your major: psychology.

Ms. Amos: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. What we are going to look at are four components of *social support*, by which I mean the network of people you can call on to help you grow and improve.

We'll start with *functional support*. Think, for example, of the person you would call if your computer crashed during finals week and you needed to borrow a laptop. Or the person who would let you print from their student account if you exceeded your own quota for the semester.

Ms. Amos: That happened to me last term.

Prof. Barry: The printing thing?

Ms. Amos: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: It sucks, right?

Ms. Amos: Big time.

Prof. Barry: That's why you need people to provide this kind of "functional support." They help you carry out specific tasks. A ride to the airport. A charger for your phone. Little favors like that.

But also big favors. Someone who will let you crash on their couch for a week. Someone who will take care of your dog when you're out of town. Someone who will loan you $50 if you're in a jam.

Ms. Amos: Got it.

Prof. Barry: So what I want everybody to do right now is take out a piece of paper and list all the people in your life that fill that role. Who in your life provides you with some much-needed functional support?

Ms. Amos: Do you want us to write down all the people here at Michigan or all the people from where we grew up?

Prof. Barry: Where did you grow up?

Ms. Amos: California.

Prof. Barry: Nice. I've spent a lot of time there, particularly around Los Angeles and a town called Manhattan Beach.

But let's stick with Michigan for now. We'll focus on your life here on campus because I really want you to think about how you might strengthen your immediate social support network. The students who really thrive in college—and in life—are the people who don't try to do it alone.

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Social Support: Informational

Prof. Barry: On that same piece of paper where you listed people you can rely on for functional support, I want you to add people you can rely on for a second form of support: *informational support*.

Want to take a guess, Ms. Amos, at what informational support is? How might it differ from functional support?

Ms. Amos: Maybe informational support is less about doing something for somebody and more about tracking down some fact or detail.

Prof. Barry: So like research?

Ms. Amos: Yeah, like research.

Prof. Barry: Does the person offering informational support have to do research, or could they also simply provide some facts or details they already know?

Suppose I've never been to campus and I need help finding the law quad. If you gave me excellent directions, you'd be providing me with informational support, right?

Ms. Amos: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: What would functional support look like in that situation?

Ms. Amos: Me actually walking you to the law quad.

Prof. Barry: Good. Informational support is sharing knowledge. Functional support is doing a task.

Now try applying that distinction to editing. What kind of functional support could a good editor provide?

Ms. Amos: Maybe they could fix some clunky sentences.

Prof. Barry: Yup. What else?

Ms. Amos: Rearrange a few of your paragraphs.

Prof. Barry: Good. Any other ideas? Think of what a good editor could do to the title.

Ms. Amos: They could suggest a better one.

Prof. Barry: Right. Remember when we talked about the book *Freakonomics*? It was back on our third day of class, when we were learning about the Rule of Three.

Ms. Amos: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Well, the now very recognizable—and often imitated—title *Freakonomics* didn't come from either of the authors: Steve Levitt or Stephen Dubner. It came from Steve Levitt's sister, Linda. Here's how she tells the story on an episode of the *Freakonomics* podcast.

Ms. Amos: "So I'm on vacation, and Steve hands me a sheaf of papers and he tells me, 'I've written a book. I've gotten a tremendous amount of money for doing it. I'm feeling a little guilty, because really all that's going to happen is it's going to end up on the remainder tables of college bookstores across America. So to make me feel a little less guilty, let's give this book a chance.'"

Prof. Barry: Keep reading. We're about to get Steve Levitt's specific request.

Ms. Amos: "If you could take your creative powers and give it a really imaginative name, I could sleep at night."

Prof. Barry: Here's his sister's response.

Ms. Amos: "So of course I was happy to do that. And I was happy to read the manuscript, which I thought was very good. And pretty much the minute I was done reading it, the name 'Freakonomics' came to me."

Prof. Barry: Keep going.

Ms. Amos: "When Steve called me to see if I had anything, and I said, 'I've got a few things, but I'll tell you, the leader is 'Freakonomics.' He said, 'That's brilliant, thank you.' I said, 'Oh, it's alright, it only took me ten minutes.'"

Prof. Barry: I love that last part about how little time it took to come up with a title. It shows that functional support doesn't have to be super labor-intensive. Ten minutes, that's all Levitt's sister needed—and now *Freakonomics* is its own powerful international brand. It's a series of books. It's a podcast. It's all kinds of things.

Ms. Amos: Right.

Prof. Barry: Let's consider what informational support might look like in that kind of situation. Suppose the sister wasn't able to come up with a title herself. What could she have provided that would have still been helpful?

I'll let anyone offer answers to this one. There's no single right response.

Ms. Warsaw (*jumping in*): She could give him a list of books that have good titles. That might help him generate his own ideas.

Prof. Barry: Good. Maybe she'd even focus on economics books in particular, since that's the subject of his book as well.

Ms. Warsaw: Right.

Prof. Barry: What else? Think beyond just *what* the sister may know and also consider *who* she may know. Couldn't informational support be connecting her brother with someone who has a knack for thinking of good book titles? Isn't a referral or recommendation a form of informational support?

You don't always need to know how to do stuff to be helpful. Sometimes it's enough to simply know someone who knows how to do stuff. Have you ever heard the phrase "It's not what you know. It's who you know."?

Ms. Warsaw: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: In what context do you typically hear it?

Ms. Warsaw: To describe when someone uses their connections to get a job—or maybe a table at a fancy restaurant.

Prof. Barry: So it often involves advancing your own interests?

Ms. Warsaw: I think so, yeah.

Prof. Barry: Well, let's consider a different, more generous approach. If we think in terms of informational support, maybe "who you know" becomes a great way to help people. Maybe what one of your friends or coworkers will need in a particular situation is not your expertise. Maybe what they'll need is your social network.

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Social Support: Emotional

Prof. Barry: The third of our four forms of support, Ms. Amos, is *emotional support*. Why might that be an important form of support to have, particularly when writing?

Ms. Amos: Because writing can be frustrating.

Prof. Barry: How so?

Ms. Amos: I don't know—I just never really like what I write. And it always takes me a long time to get going.

Prof. Barry: You're not alone. I think that on the day that writing came into the world, "procrastination" came tumbling along too. It was a twin birth.

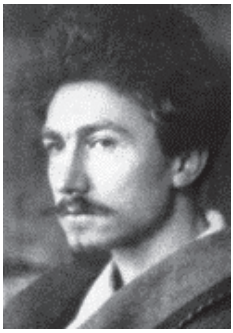
Ms. Amos: My problem isn't procrastination so much as that perfectionism thing we talked about before.

Prof. Barry: You have a tough time moving on from "good enough" sentences?

Ms. Amos: I have a tough time moving on from *any* sentences. I get stuck trying to make each one sound perfect. And they rarely do.

Prof. Barry: A lot of writers have that problem, which is why, in addition to surrounding yourself with people who know their way around a sentence, you should also surround yourself with people who know their way around your psyche. You're going to need encouragement as you write. You're going to need people with patience, empathy, and compassion.

The modernist poet and editor Ezra Pound provided those things to T. S. Eliot as Eliot wrote his masterpiece, *The Waste Land*. Similarly, Michael Pietsch, who became the CEO of a major publishing company, provided them to someone we talked about a lot last class: David Foster Wallace.



But perhaps the clearest example of this kind of support comes from an editing relationship we mentioned earlier today—the one between the neurologist Oliver Sacks and his editor, Colin Haystack.

Here's how Sacks describes the important role Haystack played for him.

Ms. Amos: "It was not just unmuddling [of sentences] that I demanded of Colin at this time; it was emotional support when I was blocked or when my mood and confidence sagged, as they did, almost to the point of collapse, after the first rush was over."

Prof. Barry: In a memoir called *On the Move* that Sacks published toward the end of his life, he even includes a letter he wrote to Haystack. Would you mind reading an excerpt for us, Ms. Amos? It helpfully captures the familiar feeling of struggling to finish a writing project.

Ms. Amos: "Dear Mr. Haycraft,

I seem to be in one of those dry, dead depressed phases where one can only do nothing or blunder round in circles. The damn thing is

that it needs only three days of good work to finish the book, but I don't know whether I am capable of this at the moment."

Prof. Barry: My guess is that everyone here can relate to that feeling—though maybe instead of trying to finish a book, you've been trying to finish a paper, trying to finish a lab report, or trying to finish an application essay. At one point or another, we've all felt like we were in one of those "dry, dead depressed phases" Sacks describes. Your only option seems to be, as he says, to "do nothing or blunder round in circles."

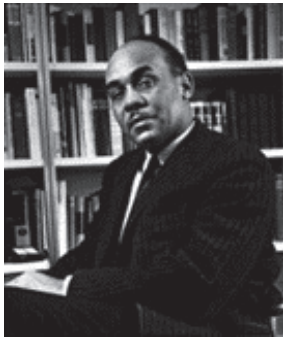
Ms. Cawlow (*jumping in*): I feel like I have been in one of those all semester.

Prof. Barry: That's perfectly normal. Remember Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet whose phrase we used to define good writing way back on the first day of class?

Ms. Cawlow: Yeah, "The best words in their best order."

Prof. Barry: Exactly. He once wrote in his notebook that he felt like he labored for an entire year and barely produced anything at all.

Ms. Cawlow: That sucks.



Prof. Barry: Or take Ralph Ellison. He's an even more extreme case. After publishing his masterpiece *Invisible Man* in 1952, he never published another novel. Six years into his drought, he wrote to Saul Bellow—the Nobel Prize–winning author we talked about in the class on the Rule of Three—that he had "writer's block as big as the Ritz," which is a grand, fancy hotel.

That comparison might even be an understatement, especially given that Ellison's writer's block lasted almost four more decades, until 1994.

Ms. Cawlow: What happened in 1994?

Prof. Barry: Something really sad, especially for anyone who, like me, thinks Ellison produced some of the most lyrically beautiful and morally powerful sentences around: he died.

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Social Support: Sophomore Slump

Prof. Barry: I'm not suggesting that better emotional support would have solved Ellison's writer's block—or the writer's block of anybody else. A lot of factors contribute to that kind of mental paralysis.

It's also helpful to remember, especially in Ellison's case, that living up to the expectations set by your first success can be hard. *Invisible Man* was a huge hit. It won the National Book Award. It sold well. And other writers really admired the sophisticated style and inventiveness Ellison displayed in it.

Here, for example, are some of the words Saul Bellow—the guy Ellison wrote to about his writer's block being the size of the Ritz hotel—used in a glowing review of *Invisible Man* published in *Commentary Magazine* back in 1952. Read them for us please, Ms. Toth.

Ms. Toth: "Superb," "poetic," "the tone of the very strongest sort of creative intelligence."

Prof. Barry: Not bad for a first book, huh?

Ms. Toth: No. Not at all.

Prof. Barry: Yet as flattering as that kind of praise can be, it might also create a lot of pressure to follow up with a second book that is equally good. Have you heard of the "sophomore slump"?

Ms. Toth: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: What is it?

Ms. Toth: Isn't it when a really good debut performance—like a rookie season or I guess, in this case, a first book—is followed up by a not-so-good performance?

Prof. Barry: Right. A musician could break onto the scene with a hit album but then follow it up with a dud. Or a running back might have an outstanding first year in the NFL but then really struggle the next season.

Sometimes you'll even hear the term *sophomore slump* used to describe what can happen in your second year of college. Your grades drop. Your motivation disappears. You, in many ways, sink into a funk.

Mr. Wild (*jumping in*): That definitely happened to me.

Prof. Barry: Don't worry. You're not alone—though it would be interesting to see if anybody has done a rigorous analysis of the sophomore slump across a number of fields. Finance. Medicine. Filmmaking. All kinds of things.

I worry that in a lot of cases it might just be something that sounds explanatory but isn't actually supported by a whole lot of evidence. Yet I still think it's useful for us to be aware of it as a possibility, particularly as we look at our fourth and final form of social support: *belonging*.

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Social Support: Belonging

Prof. Barry: If you don't feel like you belong on a team, at a company, or even here at Michigan, it can be hard to perform at your best—don't you think, Mr. Boh?

Mr. Boh: Definitely.

Prof. Barry: Along those lines, have you ever heard of something called "impostor syndrome"?

Mr. Boh: Yup.

Prof. Barry: What is it?

Mr. Boh: It's when you feel like a fraud and think you don't really deserve to be somewhere.

Prof. Barry: Good. What are a few places that might trigger that feeling? Maybe college? Or a new job? Or how about just being around a bunch of really accomplished people?

Mr. Boh: All of those.

Prof. Barry: Do you think students at Michigan have impostor syndrome?

Mr. Boh: Big time.

Prof. Barry: Which is another way of saying?

Mr. Boh: They don't always feel like they belong here. They don't think they are smart or talented enough to keep up.

Prof. Barry: Good. I think a perceived lack of belonging is a key component of impostor syndrome. So let's talk about ways to address it.

Suppose one of your friends had the feelings you described. Suppose they worried that they couldn't compete against all the high school valedictorians, science olympiad engineers, and state-champion athletes that go to Michigan. What could you, personally, do to help them?

Mr. Boh: I could try to make them feel welcome.

Prof. Barry: By?

Mr. Boh: Encouraging them.

Prof. Barry: What else?

Mr. Boh: Saying that it's normal to feel insecure at a place like this, that everyone doubts themselves at times.

Prof. Barry: What about simply smiling at them when you see them in class or pass them on the quad? Could that help?

Mr. Boh: Probably.

Prof. Barry: How?

Mr. Boh: It'd make them feel like they belong, that they know people and have support.

Prof. Barry: I think that's right. Noticing that someone always smiles when they see you can give you a nice mental boost, like a shot of caffeine to your confidence and self-worth.

John Roberts, the Supreme Court justice we talked about earlier, hit on a similar idea in 2017 while giving a graduation speech at his son's boarding school in New Hampshire. Read his advice for us please, Mr. Boh. Roberts is addressing a bunch of ninth graders and has just told them that when they get to their new school, they should introduce themselves to the person who is raking the leaves, shoveling the snow, or emptying the trash.

Mr. Boh: "When you pass by people you don't recognize on the walks, smile, look them in the eye and say hello. The worst thing that will happen is that you will become known as the young man who smiles and says hello, and that is not a bad thing to start with."

Prof. Barry: Roberts's speech includes a lot of other good advice, much of it designed to help the boys deal, not with "impostor syndrome," but with what we may think of as "entitlement syndrome." The school they are graduating from, which goes from sixth grade to ninth grade, costs around $65,000 a year.

Ms. Bart (*jumping in*): That's more than most college tuitions.

Prof. Barry: I know. As Roberts told the students, "You are also privileged young men. And if you weren't privileged when you came here, you are privileged now because you have been here. My advice is: Don't act like it."

Earlier in the speech, he even tells them the following.

Ms. Bart: "From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of

justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading.

Ms. Bart: "Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either."

Prof. Barry: Roberts offers more of these counterintuitive "hopes." If you want to hear them, search for the speech on YouTube. It's pretty easy to find. Just type in "John Roberts commencement speech."

But right now, I actually want to return to the concrete pieces of advice Roberts gives, because his final tip highlights another way to provide "belonging" support. It also reinforces the importance of writing skills.

Ms. Bart: "The last bit of advice I'll give you is very simple, but I think it could make a big difference in your life. Once a week, you should write a note to someone. Not an email. A note on a piece of paper."

Prof. Barry: Keep reading.

Ms. Bart: "Put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it, and send it."

Prof. Barry: A little more.

Ms. Bart: "By the end of the school year, you will have sent notes to forty people. Forty people will feel a little more special because you did, and they will think you are very special because of what you did. No one else is going to carry that dividend during your time at school."

Prof. Barry: I actually teach a course at the law school called "Law and Letters" that helps students better craft notes like the ones Roberts describes, as well as the many professional correspondences that attorneys compose. I know it may seem a little old-fashioned, but learning how to put together a well-written letter is a great investment.

It's also a wonderful way to, as the historian Jacques Barzun once put it, "combine solitude and good company." You often feel like you are having a conversation with the recipient while you are writing, almost like they are right there with you, listening to the thoughts and ideas you are putting down. In this way, perhaps letter writing is its own form of "belonging" support, one you can helpfully generate both for yourself and for others.

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Density and Intensity

Prof. Barry: Let's wrap up our discussion of these four forms of social support with a way to think about each of them in two dimensions. The first dimension is *density*. The second is *intensity*.

Would you mind helping me talk through the difference, Ms. Carroll?

Ms. Carroll: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. Suppose you wrote down all the people here on campus that you can count on for functional support. And suppose I did the same thing.

Ms. Carroll: Okay.

Prof. Barry: If your list ended up including 20 people and my list only contained 2, whose functional support network would you say was more "dense"?

Ms. Carroll: Mine.

Prof. Barry: Why?

Ms. Carroll: Because there are more people on it.

Prof. Barry: Good. We can think of those people sort of like trees in a forest. The more trees you have, the denser the forest.

So then what do you think *intensity* is? Stick with the forest analogy.

Ms. Carroll: The height of each individual tree?

Prof. Barry: Yeah, that might be a good way to conceptualize it. Take each of those 20 people we said were on your list. To what degree do they provide you with functional support? A lot? A little? Somewhere in between?

Are they the kind of people who would give you a kidney if you needed one? Or are they instead only good for something small, like letting you borrow a pen when you forget to bring one to class?

What I'm getting at is a question about the strength—the intensity—of the support each of those people provides. An incredibly dense network of minimally intense functional support may be okay for minor favors like a ride to the airport. But what happens if you need something really big?

Thousands of tiny shrubs might not really be much good in a crisis.

Ms. Carroll: Right.

Prof. Barry: At the same time, there are certainly downsides to having an incredibly intense network of minimally dense functional support. What happens if the person you can rely on for everything isn't available? What if they themselves are going through a really hard time? Who do you turn to then?

Ms. Carroll: So I'm guessing you want us to have networks that are both dense *and* intense?

Prof. Barry: Ideally, yeah. But pursuing that goal is going to involve some tough trade-offs. If you focus on density—if you try to assemble as many people to support you as possible—you're going to sacrifice some intensity. Why?

Ms. Carroll: Because not everybody is going to provide the same high level of support.

Prof. Barry: And if you focus on intensity?

Ms. Carroll: You're going to sacrifice density.

Prof. Barry: Good. You'll want to keep this balance in mind as you weigh different opportunities for internships and postgraduate employment. Is this a city, organization, or practice group in which you will have a dense network of social support? Does it even need to be, given that your best friend will be nearby and the intensity of support they can provide will more than make up for the lack of it from other sources?

I tell my law students to think hard about these kinds of questions when they go on the job market. How many legitimate candidates for mentors can you identify at each place you are considering? And what happens if your main mentor leaves—do you have a backup? Do you have two or three?

If their answer is "No," I start to worry.

36

Impostor Syndrome: Reality-Testing

Prof. Barry: Now that we have introduced the idea of social support and how you want a mix of density and intensity, I want to return for a moment to something Ms. Amos and I were talking about earlier: impostor syndrome.

Would you mind helping us do that, Mr. Marshall? I think there will be some parallels to the form of social support we called *belonging*.

Mr. Marshall: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Here's what I want to suggest: impostor syndrome is an insult.

To explain what I mean, let's talk about one of the more beloved figures over at the law school, Dean Sarah Zearfoss, the longtime head of the admissions office. We call her, affectionately, "Dean Z."

Mr. Marshall: I know Dean Z.

Prof. Barry: I figured you might. Most people who are thinking about going to law school at Michigan do.

Mr. Marshall: She was on a panel I went to.

Prof. Barry: Was the panel about the application process?

Mr. Marshall: Yeah. She talked about what she looks for in the personal statements people write.

Prof. Barry: Good. Let's imagine you end up writing a really good personal statement and that the other parts of your application are strong too. So strong, in fact, that Dean Z decides to offer you a place in the next entering class.

Now if that were to happen, I think you could feel confident that you belong at Michigan Law, especially because Dean Z and her team do an incredible job vetting the students they accept. Everyone who gets an offer to enroll deserves to be here.

Mr. Marshall: Right.

Prof. Barry: I try to remind law students of that fact when they start to doubt themselves, as they often do. I tell them to write Dean Z's name down on a piece of paper, and then I tell them to include a couple of other names as well.

In fact, let's do the exercise now. Write down the name of the dean of undergraduate admissions here at Michigan. Then add the names of people who wrote your recommendation letters back when you were in high school and decided to apply to college here.

Mr. Marshall: You want their full names?

Prof. Barry: Last names are fine. The point is to fill the page with people who have vouched for you. That includes anybody who has recently agreed to be one of your references.

Ms. Ida (*jumping in*): Do professors we currently have count?

Prof. Barry: Yup. And former ones do too. You should be building a big list of people. For each person, remind yourself that if you think you are an impostor, you also have to think that they are an idiot. Or a liar. Or at least have bad judgment.

Explain what I mean by that, Mr. Marshall. Imagine again the scenario we outlined before: you get accepted to Michigan Law.

Mr. Marshall: I like this scenario.

Prof. Barry: I thought you might. Now suppose that a few weeks into the first semester, you start feeling like an impostor, and you tell yourself that you don't deserve to be here.

Why is that sort of like calling Dean Z an idiot?

Mr. Marshall: Because Dean Z is the one who let me in.

Prof. Barry: Which means?

Mr. Marshall: She must think I deserve to be here.

Prof. Barry: So by insisting that you don't deserve to be here, you are, in a way, telling her that she made a mistake. That she's not good at her job. That you know better—even though she, and *not* you, is the one with the title "dean of admissions."

You see where I'm going with this?

Mr. Marshall: Yeah. You're saying that sometimes we need to check our self-doubts against the judgments of other people.

Prof. Barry: Yup. Especially when the other people have a lot more experience with making those types of judgments than we do.

37

Impostor Syndrome: Exhausting

Prof. Barry: I don't mean to make light of impostor syndrome. It can be a really rough thing to shake. Even top athletes experience forms of it. I remember hearing three-time Olympic gold medalist Kerri Walsh, one of the best beach volleyball players of all time, tell an interviewer that she experienced self-doubt every time her career advanced to a new level. Here is how she described the experience.

Would you please read her comments for us, Ms. Bristol?

Ms. Bristol: "At every kind of leveling up from eighth grade to high school, high school to college, college to the Olympic team—there was a moment, there were many moments of insecurity in the transition, many moments of, 'Oh, shit. Can I do this? Am I good enough?' It's exhausting. It's really exhausting."

Prof. Barry: And that's from someone who won more tournaments and prize money than any other player in her sport.

Or take Sheryl Sandberg, the longtime Facebook executive and author of bestselling books like *Lean In* and *Option B*. She recalls feeling like a huge impostor back when she was an undergraduate at Harvard.

Ms. Bristol: "Every time I was called on in class, I was sure that I was about to embarrass myself. Every time I took a test, I was sure that it had gone badly. And every time I didn't embarrass myself—or even excelled—I believed that I had fooled everyone yet again. One day soon, the jig would be up."

Prof. Barry: That Walsh and Sandberg both identify as female reflects the origins of the term *impostor syndrome*. The original research behind it started in the 1970s, when two psychologists at Oberlin College started noticing that many female students reported feeling that they didn't deserve to be there.

The students got good grades. They did well on tests. Each of them was very accomplished. Yet they all nevertheless battled persistent thoughts that they didn't belong, that their success was a fluke, that they'd soon be discovered as frauds and kicked out of school. Please read what one of the psychologists, Pauline Rose Clance, remembers observing.

Ms. Bristol: "I saw these people who had gone to the best schools, often private schools, had highly educated parents and excellent standardized test scores, grades, and letters of recommendation. . . . But here they were saying things like, 'I'm afraid I'm going to flunk this exam.' 'Somehow the admissions committee made an error.' 'I'm an Oberlin mistake.'"

Prof. Barry: So Clance teamed up with a second psychologist, Susan Imes, and the two of them published a paper with the following title.

Ms. Bristol: "The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women."

Prof. Barry: See how the original focus was on women?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: But don't let that fool you. The phenomenon they describe can happen to anybody. It stretches across gender, race, and geography, as well as all manners of professions, skill sets, and educational levels. Here's a sample of some of the groups in which impostor syndrome has been found, according to the Harvard social psychologist Amy Cuddy. She includes a big list in her bestselling book *Presence*.

Ms. Bristol: "Teachers, accountants, physicians, physician assistants, nurses, engineering students, dental students, medical students, nursing students, pharmacy students, law students, doctoral students, undergraduate entrepreneurs, high school students, people new to the Internet, African Americans, Koreans, Japanese, Canadians, disturbed adolescents, 'normal' adolescents, preadolescents, old people, adult children of alcoholics, adult children of high achievers, people with eating disorders, people without eating disorders."

Prof. Barry: That's a lot of different kinds of people, isn't it?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Which is why Clance, one of the original two Oberlin psychologists, regrets that the term *impostor phenomenon* has been replaced by the new term *impostor syndrome*. Here's how she explains her position.

Ms. Bristol: "If I could do it all over again, I would call it the impostor experience, because it's not a syndrome or a complex or a mental illness, it's something almost everyone experiences."

Prof. Barry: That shift in language—from "impostor *syndrome*" to "impostor *experience*"—is a nice reminder of something we stressed all the way back on our first day of class, when we were talking

about word choice and framing. Do you remember the key takeaway, Ms. Bristol?

Ms. Bristol: Yeah. We said that "the words you choose can change the world people see."

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And what's the concern with choosing the word *syndrome*? What does that word make people see?

Ms. Bristol: An illness.

Prof. Barry: Good. The term may make you think something is wrong with you—that if you were "normal," you wouldn't have it.

Ms. Bristol: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: What's better about *impostor experience*?

Ms. Bristol: It's less alienating. Everyone can have an experience.

Prof. Barry: Right. We might even think of an "impostor experience" as a kind of professional puberty. Yes, it can be stressful. Yes, it can bring out a lot of insecurities. But pretty much everyone goes through it at some point. So there's no need to feel weird or defective if you struggle with those feelings at the moment.

Ms. Maat (*jumping in*): How long do feelings of being an impostor usually last? If it's like puberty, we should only have to deal with it for a few years, right?

Prof. Barry: That's a good point. But I imagine that the range varies a bit. College and graduate school seem like pretty good breeding grounds for it, unfortunately. You won't, however, be alone if it creeps up later in your life. Remember the writer Neil Gaiman? We talked about him on the first day of class as well.

Or actually, I'll ask Ms. Carroll. She helped introduce him.

Ms. Carroll: Yeah. I remember.

Prof. Barry: Great. Would you mind reading a little more from the commencement speech he gave at the University of the Arts? We looked at a section of it once before.

Ms. Carroll: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Wonderful. Here's the part where he talks about feeling like an impostor.

Ms. Carroll: "The first problem of any kind of even limited success is the unshakable conviction that you are getting away with something and that any moment now they will discover you."

Prof. Barry: A similar observation by Gaiman appears in that *Presence* book by Harvard's Amy Cuddy that Ms. Bristol read from. Gaiman shares a recurring nightmare he has about some official-looking man showing up at his door to tell him that he's been discovered as a fraud and will no longer be able to work as a writer.

Please read the exchange he imagines, beginning with what the official-looking man says to him.

Ms. Carroll: "Well, I'm afraid we are on to you. We've caught up with you. And I'm afraid you are now going to have to go out and find a proper job."

Prof. Barry: At this point, Gaiman's heart sinks, he is forced to abandon his writing career, and he has to start applying for a new line of work. Here's how he concludes.

Ms. Carroll: "Because once they've caught up with you, you can't argue with this: they've caught up with you."

38

"I Just Went Where I Was Sent"

Prof. Barry: A couple years after Gaiman's fears about being discovered as a fraud appeared in Amy Cuddy's book, he shared another impostor-focused story—this time in response to a letter he received from someone who was struggling with very similar feelings.

Would you mind reading it for us, Ms. Warsaw? The lesson it includes may help all of us the next time we doubt our worth.

Ms. Warsaw: "Some years ago, I was lucky enough [to be] invited to a gathering of great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things. And I felt that at any moment they would realize that I didn't qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things."

Prof. Barry: Keep going.

Ms. Warsaw: "On my second or third night there, I was standing at the back of the hall, while a musical entertainment happened, and I started talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman about several things, including our shared first name ['Neil']. And then he pointed to the hall of people, and said words to the effect of,

'I just look at all these people, and I think, what the heck am I doing here?'"

Prof. Barry: Anybody want to guess who this other "Neil" is? He's pretty famous.

Ms. Nina (*jumping in*): Neil Diamond?

Prof. Barry: Nope.

Mr. Farnoff (*jumping in*): Neil Young?

Prof. Barry: Nope.

Mr. Boh (*jumping in*): Neil deGrasse Tyson?

Prof. Barry: Nope. Maybe the following bit of information will help. Here's the next thing that the Neil we are trying to identify said.

Ms. Warsaw: "They've made amazing things. I just went where I was sent."

Prof. Barry: So think: what famous "Neil" could say of himself, "I just went where I was sent"?

Here's a hint: the place he was sent turned out to be . . . the moon.

Ms. Warsaw: Neil Armstrong, the astronaut?

Prof. Barry: Yup, the astronaut. Isn't that wild?

Back on the second day of class, when we were talking about the Power of the Particular, we mentioned that President Kennedy set this ambitious goal of putting a man on the moon before the end of the decade. And it turns out that

the rockstar astronaut who ended up taking the first steps there had some of the same impostor-ridden worries as the rest of us. Gaiman suggests this should be kind of comforting. Here's why.

Ms. Warsaw: "Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an impostor, maybe *everyone* did. Maybe there weren't any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for."

39

Notes on Nuance: "If"

Prof. Barry: There's another reason I bring up Neil Gaiman. He's going to help us introduce today's Notes on Nuance move. But first, let's use him to review some of the moves we have already covered this semester. Here's an example from Gaiman's breakout novel *American Gods*. It's one of the first moves we learned: "almost."

Would you mind reading it for us, Ms. Carroll? You've helped us out with Gaiman's writing before.

Ms. Carroll: "He saw a covering of brown kudzu over three winter-dead trees, twisting them into strange, almost human shapes: they could have been witches, three bent old crones ready to reveal his fortune."

Prof. Barry: See the little bit of nuance the "almost" adds? It gives the description some extra texture and gradation.

We can notice something similar in the move we paired with "almost." Remember it?

Ms. Carroll: I think so. Was it "even"?

Prof. Barry: It was. Here's Gaiman using it in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, which started out as a story for his wife, the singer Amanda Palmer.

Ms. Carroll: "She saw the expression on my face then, worried. Scared even."

Prof. Barry: The syntax of that particular example is a little unorthodox. Typically, "even" comes before the word it shapes, not after—like in this gem from *Our Souls at Night*: "We were kind, even affectionate."

Ms. Carroll: Did Gaiman write that book too?

Prof. Barry: No. *Our Souls at Night* was written by a different author, Kent Haruf. I couldn't find a good example from one of Gaiman's books, but that's probably just because I need to read more of them. I'm guessing he uses it. Just like I'm guessing he uses all of the other Notes on Nuance moves: "un-," "to," "as," "without being," the whole set.

But what I want to focus on now is a new move—or actually a series of moves. Each involves the word "if." Here's an example from the foreword Gaiman wrote for his novella *Coraline*, which was later turned into a stop-motion animation movie. Perhaps our film major, Mr. Leigh, can read it for us?

Mr. Leigh: Sure.

Prof. Barry: Great. It's a short sentence, but it has a nice, staggered rhythm.

Mr. Leigh: "Flat number Four, where we lived, was a good place, if a little odd."

Prof. Barry: See how "if" works there at the end of the sentence?

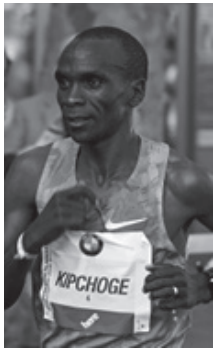
Mr. Leigh: Yeah. It adds a helpful qualification.

Prof. Barry: Exactly. And it also adds something else: depth.

A place that is "good . . . , if a little odd" is different and more complex than a place that is just "good."

Mr. Leigh: Right.

Prof. Barry: Let's check out how some other writers have used the move. We'll start with an article in *WIRED* magazine by the award-winning journalist Ed Caesar about Nike's attempt, back in 2017, to help some of the best runners in the world run a marathon in under two hours.



At the beginning of the 20th century, the fastest marathon was around three hours. In the middle of the 20th century, it dropped to around two-and-a-half hours. But at the time of Nike's attempt, a select group of racers was approaching the previously unthinkable goal of two hours, an achievement that was actually reached a couple years later by the Kenyan runner Eliud Kipchoge.

Nike's newly designed shoes were supposed to help Kipchoge and others break that two-hour barrier, as the excerpt Mr. Leigh is going to read makes clear.

Mr. Leigh: "That means an athlete wearing the new footwear should, in theory, be able to run a marathon 4 percent faster (or, for an elite athlete with less room for improvement, 3.4 percent faster) than an athlete wearing a Streak 6. The real-world results were promising, if slightly less astounding."

Prof. Barry: A similar example appears in a piece the magazine *Fast Company* did on the marketing strategy of the Portland Timbers, the Major League Soccer team whose waitlist for season tickets rivals many of the top college football teams. The author, Josh

Dean, is describing one of the early ways the team created a fan-centered sense of community in its stadium. Check out how he builds in an "if."

Mr. Leigh: "When the Timbers made their home debut in 2011, the team chose not to have a celebrity sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' Instead, the national anthem would be sung by the fans—all 18,627 of them. The ensuing rendition was thunderous, if occasionally off-key, and as it trailed off, three gigantic banners unfurled from the second deck in the stadium's north end, where the Timbers Army had set up camp."

Prof. Barry: Now that we have gone over a few examples, are you starting to get a sense of how this "if" move works?

Mr. Leigh: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: Good. Then we're ready to add some variations. We'll begin with "if not."

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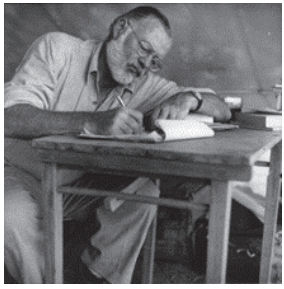
Notes on Nuance: "If Not"

Prof. Barry: A good example of the "if not" move I'm talking about can be found in a short story by Ernest Hemingway about bullfighting. It's called "The Capital of the World."



Would you mind reading it for us, Ms. Ida? You helped us out with some of Hemingway's writing before, back when we learned about the Power of the Particular in our second class.

Ms. Ida: "It is necessary for a bullfighter to give the appearance, if not of prosperity, at least of respectability, since decorum and dignity rank above courage as the virtues most highly prized in Spain, and bullfighters stayed at the Luarca until their last pesetas were gone."

Prof. Barry: Notice the order? The "if not" phrase comes first in the combination, followed by a related word or set of words. In this case, that set of words is "at least of respectability."

Ms. Ida: Right.

Prof. Barry: More often, though, at least from what I've seen, the "if not" phrase comes second—like in this sentence from the novel *The World According to Garp* by John Irving.

Ms. Ida: "Garp was such a fool about his running that he imagined he could outlast, if not outrun, any horse."

Prof. Barry: Or in this next example, from that article on Nike's effort to break the two-hour marathon we were just talking about.

Ms. Ida: "He was also aware of the skepticism, if not venom, that many obsessive running fans felt toward the Breaking2 project."

Prof. Barry: Try out both versions. Sometimes put the "if not" first. Sometimes put it second. Sometimes even vary the punctuation you use to surround it. So far, we've only seen examples that use commas, but you can use dashes as well.

The legendary Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges opts for a dash in a short story called "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*"—or at least his English translator does. Here's the passage.

Ms. Ida: "There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is in the beginning a seemingly true description of the universe; as the years pass, it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a noun—in the history of philosophy."

Prof. Barry: Of course, plenty of writers just stick with commas. Remember that book *Peak* by the psychologist Anders Ericsson and the journalist Robert Pool? We've referred to it a few times this semester.

Ms. Ida: The one about "deliberate practice"?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. Those authors rely on commas when they write the following statement about the high jumper Donald Thomas.

Ms. Ida: "It's worth noting that Thomas is six feet two, which is a good, if not ideal, height for high jumping."

Prof. Barry: The point is that you have a lot of options with this move. You can play around with the order. You can play around with the punctuation. And as we are about to see, you can also play around with putting "if" at the very beginning of the sentence, particularly if you drop the "not."

41

Notes on Nuance: "If" (Beginning)

Prof. Barry: Using "if" at the beginning of a sentence is a little different than the situations we've already looked at. The effect, we'll see, is airier and more playful.

Here's an example from a 2018 short story by Gish Jen. Would you mind reading it for us, Ms. Franzoni? It's taken from a work of fiction, but we'll soon be bringing in some writing from your major: history.

Ms. Franzoni: "If my father-in-law likes to make points, my mother-in-law likes to score points."

Prof. Barry: See how Jen used the "If" there? Had she dropped the "If," we would just get "My father-in-law likes to make points, and my mother-in-law likes to score points."

That's not nearly as stylish and charming.

Ms. Franzoni: Right.

Prof. Barry: Notice, too, the comparison the "If" creates. The comparison in the example we just looked at is between a father-in-law and a mother-in-law. In this next example, however, the comparison is between Winston Churchill and George Orwell. It appears in a book by the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Thomas Ricks.

Ms. Franzoni: "If Churchill spent his early years in the pursuit of power and prominence, Orwell spent his own in pursuit of a core theme. Ultimately, he would find it: the abuse of power."

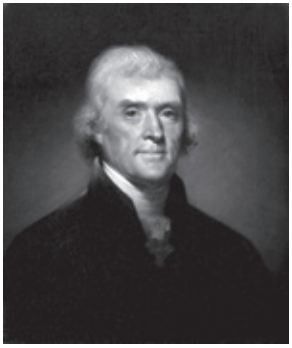
Prof. Barry: See how the "If" links Churchill and Orwell together? There's an elegant indirection to the way Ricks highlights and balances each figure's contrasting qualities.

You might have also noticed that both Gish Jen and Thomas Ricks combine the move with some helpful repetition and parallel structure. From Gish Jen, we get "my father-in-law likes to _____ points" and "my-mother-in-law likes to _____ points." From Thomas Ricks, we get "Churchill spent his _____" and "Orwell spent his _____."

Each author repeats both the word choice and the syntax.

Ms. Franzoni: Does that always happen?

Prof. Barry: No—or at least not to the same extent. You'll see a bit more variation in these next two examples. The first comes from the renowned historian Annette Gordon-Reed. She's describing the house Thomas Jefferson stayed in when he was living in Paris in the years following the American Revolution.



Ms. Franzoni: "If Jefferson's English-style garden was 'clever,' so was the house designed by Jean Chalgrin, one of France's premier architects, who later created the Arc de Triomphe."

Prof. Barry: And here's the second, from an equally renowned historian, Christopher Browning. He's comparing three authors who have written biographies of Adolf Hitler: Alan Bullock, Volker Ullrich, and Eberhard Jäckel.

Ms. Franzoni: "If Hitler's first postwar biographer, Alan Bullock, treated him as a tyrant seeking power for its own sake, Volker Ullrich embraces the research of the late 1960s, especially by Eberhard Jäckel, who laid out how, over the course of the 1920s, Hitler's worldview crystallized around race as the driving force of history."

Prof. Barry: See how that Hitler example has a very asymmetric syntax? The second part of that "If" sentence doesn't really mirror the first part. It has a lot more dips and digressions.

Ms. Franzoni: And commas.

Prof. Barry: Right. The commas add an extra twist. Yet the "If" still manages to hold the comparison together.

So keep this new variation in mind. It helpfully prepares your audience for a powerful pairing.

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Notes on Nuance: "If Not" (Beginning)

Prof. Barry: Given that the word "if" can be used at the beginning of a sentence, you might wonder if the same is true of "if not." What do you think, Ms. Franzoni? Do you think "if not" might be just as versatile as "if"?

Ms. Franzoni: I don't know.

Prof. Barry: Well, let's see. Try to think of how a sentence could start with "If not." Or actually, I can give you an example. It involves the person sitting next to you.

Ms. Franzoni: "If not for Ms. Warsaw, I would have never made it through last semester."

Prof. Barry: What might that mean?

Ms. Franzoni: That Ms. Warsaw really helped me at some point. Without her, I would have been in rough shape.

Prof. Barry: Good. That's actually the structure of the examples the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary uses. Describing "if not for" as an idiom, it offers two sample sentences. Here's the first.

Ms. Franzoni: "If not for modern medicine, fewer babies would survive."

Prof. Barry: And here's the second.

Ms. Franzoni: "If not for him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Prof. Barry: See how close that second example is to the one you read about Ms. Warsaw?

For both, you could substitute "Without" and get basically the same meaning. Try doing that for the second *Merriam-Webster* example.

Ms. Franzoni: "Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Prof. Barry: Now try it for the Ms. Warsaw example.

Ms. Franzoni: "Without Ms. Warsaw, I would have never made it through last semester."

Prof. Barry: Pretty much the same, right?

Ms. Franzoni: Yeah.

Prof. Barry: The use of this "If not for" move is usually straightforward and not that notable. But I encourage you all to go check out a more playful example. Some of you may have read it already, when you were little kids. It's one of the haikus Jack Prelutsky includes in his children's book *If Not for the Cat*. In fact, that's the name of the haiku.

Ms. Franzoni: "If Not for the Cat"?

Prof. Barry: Yeah. I can't remember exactly how it goes, but I do remember it being a clever use of language in general and of "If not for" in particular. So do a quick search for the poem online. You're bound to find it.

Plus, learning a little bit about haikus—how structured they are, how condensed—will be great preparation for our next class, when we'll continue our conversation about drafting and editing and focus our attention on two very important topics: clarity and coherence.

See you then.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

Chapter 1

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