"I'm scared and I like it": Using Fear to Empower the Freshman Writer

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Imagine a class of engineers and math majors, many of whom are military veterans, all hoping to fly, design, or repair airplanes. This group has been forced to take a developmental writing course that many of their peers will have placed out of. As a result, making the case that writing has value becomes even MORE challenging for teachers. Many a required composition course has begun with the instructor trying to convince a class of disgruntled business or biology majors that they actually WILL have to write in some stage of their careers. Although attempting to persuade students that they can benefit from the skills gained through a composition course has merit, perhaps the more important gesture comes in acknowledging students' feelings, even their resistance to writing, and attempting to meet them where they are. One common way to do this involves shaping the course around a basic theme. This approach also adds continuity to a course that, to students, can seem like a confusing mix of mechanics exercises and arbitrary writing prompts. An instructor has countless options when selecting a theme, but, for the particular population with which I work and potentially any diverse group of novice writers, fear has proven to be a particularly effective theme and speaks to the power of themed teaching of composition in general.

Susan B. Chaplin and Jill M. Manske discuss the value of the thematic approach in their article "A Theme-Based Approach to Teaching Nonmajors Biology," in which they define theme-based learning as "the linking of different disciplines or subdisciplines to a central idea so that students identify the 'big' or important ideas as a framework for learning" (48). In a typical college-level writing course, this framework focuses on the effective application of argumentative and analytical strategies. Perhaps Jan Allister, in her essay "Building on Self-Centeredness: Structuring a Composition Course around 'Family,'" best captures the ideal theme as "a topic for students to consider throughout the term that is at once individual and universal, particular and abstract, that will allow students to write easily out of both personal experience and formal reasoning…something all students would care about and find relevant to their lives" (70). Further emphasizing the value of theme-driven composition courses, Stephen Wilhoit, in "Critical Thinking and the Thematic Writing Course," argues that a theme can provide the focus needed for more effective development of critical thinking skills in students (128). Rather than having to adapt to the shifting topics of each assignment or unit, students working within a consistent theme have more time to strengthen critical thinking as they work within a familiar topical framework for the duration of the course. The theme of fear, inherently relatable even in a diverse student group, can effectively provide this structure so essential for struggling writers.

While the concept of a theme-based composition course is in no way a novel idea, it is important to understand how a theme can work and if it should be applied at all. A theme, once chosen, does have the potential to alienate students if the primary goal centers on presenting the instructor's favorite theme rather than on engaging the instructor AND students. An enthusiastic

teacher may drive students away if her enthusiasm stems from a desire to share her obscure literary interests with students by broadening their horizons through, for instance, an in-depth look at Midwest farming practices in the 18th century or an exploration of marriage contracts during the Renaissance period. The instructor's passion, while always helpful in encouraging student engagement, can only go so far and only be so contagious. For this reason, theme development should balance the instructor's and students' interests and allow students the freedom to make the topic theirs, even if in a limited way, within the parameters of a particular assignment. For example, students writing about fear in film get to select a scene from a movie of their choosing, as long as the scene demonstrates or elicits fear or anxiety. With the help of clear assignment guidelines and in-class modeling, students become invested in the assignment by getting to make it their own.

Many themes can function like that of fear in fostering interest and cohesion in a course, especially if that theme is broadly concept based and versatile. However, I have found fear to be particularly effective because it can relate to things ranging from career planning to entertainment, from politics to science, and it resists being categorized or stereotyped according to gender, race, or economic status. As cynical as it may be, not all students can relate to a general subject like love, for example, a topic complicated by fluctuating societal expectations and personal values, but ALL can relate to, have known, and can recognize fear, within themselves and in their environments.

Fear is a more common experience and, as a course theme, even surpasses other frequently used universal themes. "Working," Philip Snyder notes, certainly has that

"universal appeal" (315), as all students likely have or will have worked. However, not all students necessarily will be familiar with the experience of working formally or have as rich and complex a history of work as they have of fear. Although a topic like family, the theme Allister chose for her writing-intensive course, may be more universal than the theme of love, her application of the theme seems better suited for the goals of a general writing course like hers, covering a range of writing styles from personal narratives to research papers. In comparison, the theme of fear proves to be as flexible and engaging as these other themes while being better suited for a class focused primarily on analysis and argumentation. Confronting "fear" in the classroom even acknowledges many students' resistance or suspicion toward writing in general and a developmental course in particular. What's more, the complexity of a topic like fear allows not only self-reflection or even increased self-awareness, but an exploration of why and how individuals seek out fear-inducing scenarios. Furthermore, this theme can be used to show how fear can be a manipulative tactic in politics and media. Additionally, adoption of a broad theme like fear can be applied to and update the most common composition assignments. For example, the traditional advertisement analysis assignment can be revised to require students to not only identify the target audience but to identify the fear tactics at work in student-selected advertisements. The universality and flexibility of fear make it an ideal theme, particularly if the instructor faces the added challenge of finding productive common ground in a writing-resistant class.

Naturally, the thematic approach can be of use in any writing-intensive class, but it has particular resonance in the remedial, or what has more sensitively been identified as the developmental, writing course, where students often face challenges with even basic

sentence construction and can benefit from the clear structure and consistency a thematic approach provides. A themed course can allow students to distance themselves from their anxiety about writing by allowing them to first immerse themselves in a topic that piques interest and curiosity. In-class discussion of topics with which students feel somewhat familiar often encourages critical thinking and engagement before the formal writing even happens. In a sense, a sort of organic communal drafting happens as peers reflect on subjects and share their thoughts in class. With intentional questioning and direction, the instructor can push students to challenge one another and even their own preconceptions as they develop the sort of critical thinking and communication skills they will practice in progressively more formal written assignments. An effective, engaging theme challenges students' previous (mis)conceptions and can be a very effective tool in promoting the development and practice of what Richard Paul identifies as "dialectical thought," something essential for "all rational experience and human emancipation" as well as a way to encourage open-mindedness (14). Additionally, once the students become familiar with the thematic framework and critical tools of the course, they will feel confident moving forward and applying these strategies to new topics and writing challenges.

The theme of fear has been especially successful not only in the developmental course but with my typical student population—predominantly male students, most of whom have career goals in fields related to math; engineering; and, most distinctively, flying, designing, or repairing aircraft. A significant number of students participate in ROTC programs or have served multiple tours of duty around the world. Prior to our writing program developing parallel courses

for non-native speakers, my developmental courses also reflected the University's high number of international students, a particular segment of the student body that can also benefit from the consistency of a thematically structured course. Approaching writing with a theme of fear can resonate with any college freshman new to the college experience, but it also strikes a chord with those non-traditional students who have served on frontlines and confronted "real" fear, only to find themselves in a wholly unfamiliar college classroom setting. Both groups bring their own fears and anxieties, but they all enter college and the writing classroom with a degree of vulnerability. Perhaps more importantly, however, they enter this environment with distinctive experiential knowledge, and a broad theme like fear can allow them to confront singular and shared anxieties even as they apply this knowledge to a variety of accessible topics.

Tapping into the subject of fear, a sort of common ground for all students (and their instructors), in the context of a freshman developmental-writing class can be a very effective way to not only provide an accessible framework for the course but to meet students where they are, acknowledging the many pressures that weigh on them, while finding a way to engage their interest. The goals of such a course focus on developing skills in communication and critical thinking, as students engage with a variety of media to study traditional notions of fear and expand the definition of the term to consider how it applies to their lives in more unconventional and often insidious ways. Students apply the thematic lens to three different media—advertisements, movies, and news reports—as they practice analysis and strengthen skills in writing mechanics in each of the course's three units. For this progression to work, however, the instructor must first introduce the theme in a way that emphasizes its relatability and establishes

the classroom as a space for shared ideas and growth.

Acknowledging the value of student experience and creating assignments that both push students out of their comfort zones analytically but allow them to act as authorities on selected subjects help to ensure the success of the theme. This dynamic can begin during the first week of class, as informal class discussions encourage students to share their past experiences and future plans. Such dialogue validates the knowledge base each student brings to the course and often exposes the real fears or anxieties they share about the developmental writing class in which they find themselves as well as the "long game" and pursuing individual career goals. In this way, the topic of fear, unlike other themes, allows the retired soldier and the fresh-faced, more traditionally-aged student to find common ground, even as they recognize the value of one another's perspectives in the shared space of the writing classroom. Making this space a safe zone for open discussion and that most vulnerable of class activities, the writing workshop, can, ironically, be fostered by an initial engagement with personal fears before progressing to a more objective look at the role of fear at work in the world at large.

The first unit applies this theme to the familiar medium of advertisements, as students analyze ads of their choosing for tactics manipulating common fears in the target audience. From toothpaste ads that promise clean teeth and improved heart health, tapping into fears about not only social acceptance but death, to commercials for home-security systems guaranteeing protection of property and loved ones, interestingly represented most often by vulnerable wives and daughters shown walking in on a nefarious male intruder, options for analysis clearly abound.

Peter N. Stearns's book *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety*, particularly Chapter 8, "Self-Scaring and Advertising: The Commerce Factor," provides a solid context for introducing scare tactics in advertising and can help engage students in the subject from the start. Stearns traces early evidence of what he calls "scare copy" in the nineteenth century to more recent advertising (151), pointing out that, beginning in the late twentieth century, "the goal was still to claim that risks could be reduced, if not eliminated, with the proper product," but that "the emotional overtones were stronger than before, and the desire to point to vulnerabilities more explicit" (155). Engaging with Stearns's work gives students some background on the subject, certainly, but it also incorporates reading comprehension, something particularly useful in a developmental course.

Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, and Joel Bakan's documentary *The Corporation* has proven to be an effective supplement to the Stearns excerpt, as multiple sections of the film, particularly those titled "Basic Training, "The Triumph of the Shill," and "A Private Celebration," highlight many strategies, sometimes sinister and often insidious, that companies use in image development and advertising. Having students think about material with which they are familiar but with which they may never have engaged critically helps develop critical thinking skills in the ways Paul describes as "ideal," by "testing for inferences that explicitly do or do not follow, for recognition of assumptions and clear-cut contradictions, for initial formulations of reasons to support conclusions, for consideration of evidence rather than reliance on authority" (7).

Additionally, introducing the subject matter through multiple media creates a more

complex picture for students and helps ensure sustained interest. Even Marilyn Manson, interviewed by Michael Moore for his documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, enriches the material and appeals to student interest when he insightfully describes the dynamic between fear-mongering in the news and appeals to anxiety in advertising as a "campaign of fear and consumption." Students, all too familiar with the variety of ways modern technology bombards them with advertisements, enter into this assignment already knowledgeable about the subject matter but end up as more savvy consumers through a critical analysis of fear tactics and their target audiences. In addition to encouraging student engagement simply by shifting media, having students analyze visual "texts" like advertisements and movies—media with which students already are quite comfortable—allows them to feel more at ease when practicing analysis. As with the use of a familiar theme like fear, making use of a familiar medium empowers students to already feel a degree of comfort or a sense of authority, even as they ultimately find their previous conceptions or "readings" of such texts to be somewhat superficial or lacking in complexity.

Film analysis, which, like ad analysis, relies on more familiar visual "texts," represents another popular assignment in a freshman composition course, and for good reason. As most instructors would concede, incorporating a variety of media when exploring a topic can help maintain students' interest and amounts to speaking their constantly multi-tasking, cross-media language. In a class based on the theme of fear, this common assignment gets another tweak in the second unit, as students analyze the ways in which technical elements of filmmaking come together to reflect or evoke fear in characters and the audience, respectively.

The same Stearns chapter related to advertising can also serve to promote reflection on the appeal of what he terms "self-scaring." Stearns begins by describing the common practice of cultures throughout human history to scare themselves via stories and rituals and traces this development all the way from the 18th century Gothic novel to the 20th-21st century "slasher" films and a sub-genre of reality shows (143-147). Of course, as Stearns highlights, and what students come to acknowledge, is that this "media fear [is], ultimately, controlled fear in itself" (150), and students generally find that line between something that is satisfyingly realistic and something that is too real quite thought provoking.

The introduction of this new subject matter often leads to lively discussion, first as the class considers why people seek out frightening experiences and then as it debates the power of movies in general to influence viewers. This frequently develops into a consideration of the potential of horror movies, in particular, to mitigate, even as they exaggerate, common fears and anxieties. As in all activities, modeling analysis remains crucial, and, to prevent alienating or even scarring students who do not find the horror genre appealing, clips viewed as a class must be chosen carefully, and related assignments should allow at least a degree of freedom in film selection. The broad nature of a theme like fear, however, justifies modeling analysis with movies ranging from *Alien* to *The Elephant Man*, from *Rear Window* to *American History X*— any film that features heightened emotion approximating fear or anxiety.

In this unit, students master some basic film terminology, what Wilhoit describes as a "specialized vocabulary" (128) and Joanne Kurfiss refers to as "domain-specific procedural knowledge" (40). In the context of the developmental writing course, such vocabulary building

can help build confidence when conducting analysis. This type of assignment helps improve critical thinking and prepares students for subsequent writing-intensive courses, specifically required research-based composition and technical report classes. Students learn terms like "on-screen sound," "cross-cut," "low-key lighting," and "close-up," as they apply technical film terminology to a subject on which feel they are authorities. Practicing skills in analysis and communication allows students to rediscover, even defamiliarize, popular media.

A sample paper from this unit might involve a student analyzing the impact of close-up shots and over-the-shoulder shots that compel viewers to understand John Merrick's fear as a caged animal while also making the audience complicit members of the pursuing crowd in the train-station scene of *The Elephant Man*. The introduction of such terms as "close-up shot" and "over-the-shoulder shot" strengthens the students' sense of mastering the subject through the use of field-specific vocabulary while providing them with tools of analysis when outside research is neither required nor permitted. In this way, students facing particular challenges not only in writing but often in critical thinking become armed with a vocabulary that provides them with a degree of direction and focus when engaging with the supposedly familiar and straightforward movie clips they select.

The final, and most challenging, unit incorporated into this themed course involves fear mongering and bias in news. Again, assignments focus primarily on visual "texts," easily accessible and often already familiar to students. Returning to the documentary *The Corporation*, particularly the section titled "Unsettling Accounts," in which network representatives shut down a story that could make a prominent network sponsor look bad, highlights the complicated

business interests that can compromise truth in reporting. An honest look at news as a business—one constantly trying to draw in and keep "customers"—reveals the prominent role that fear can play in "selling" the news. As Barry Glassner points out in *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things: Crime, Drugs, Minorities, Teen Moms, Killer Kids, Mutant Microbes, Plane Crashes, Road Rage, and So Much More*, "From the point of view of journalists and editors an ideal crime story—that is, the sort that deserves major play and is sure to hold readers' and viewers' attention—has several elements that distinguish it from other acts of violence… Details of the crime, while shocking, are easy to relay. And the events have social significance, bespeaking an underlying societal crisis" (24). The recent exposure of lies and embellishments in reporting by Brian Williams and Bill O'Reilly exemplifies this blending of reality and entertainment, and when networks throw fear in the mix, audiences tune in and hang on to every word and image, swept away by the idea that their lives might just depend on it.

The culminating essay of the course centers on this tactic and what it reveals about bias in the media today. Students select a current event or controversial public figure as covered in contemporary reports from two different news sources. The medium and style of reporting have to be similar, as students look for indicators of bias, fear mongering being one possible indicator, to support a larger claim about which report demonstrates a greater degree of bias. For example, a student might find two reports, one from CNN and one from Fox News, covering a particular presidential candidate or the Iran nuclear deal. While preconceived notions of the networks' political leanings might influence students in their selection of these sources, evidence from each specific report must be used to support the writers' claims about which source shows

more bias. From leading questions directed at guests and edited video clips to word choice and on-screen headings and images, students identify bias cues and explain their significance. The assignment is both complex and subtle, and it centers on first acknowledging that the lack of simple facts and unedited information constitutes, at least to some degree, a betrayal of the public trust. Too often, reporters or networks claim to be the absolute source of truth, the place to turn for the "real" picture of what is happening, yet they fail to live up to these promises. As Ross Douthat points out in his *New York Times* op-ed piece "Balance and Bias," "[A]n official journal-istic commitment to neutrality coexists with the obvious ideological thrust of a thousand specific editorial choices: what kinds of questions are asked of which politicians; which stories get wall-to-wall coverage and which ones end up buried; which side is portrayed as aggressors and which side as the aggrieved party, and on and on and on." It is these "specific editorial choices" that students analyze and break down, challenging not only individual story coverage but the standard operating procedures of the media today. In doing so, they confront their own, and the public's, complicity in this dynamic of production and consumption, often linked with manipu-lating viewers' fears and anxieties. Breaking down and exposing the complexities of this media exchange, as in the other assignments, often proves eye opening for students, who frequently end up pushing their peers outside of class to similar realizations, all while becoming more proficient writers and communicators.

Teaching composition with a thematic approach has myriad benefits, and the theme of fear, in particular, has proven especially effective in the context of a developmental writing course. It resists gender and age classifications and emphasizes the value of individual

experience and unique knowledge bases, even as it encourages student sharing and connection because of its relatability. As a topic that relies, at least in part, on personal associations, it encourages a greater degree of student investment than a more distant, objective theme like media or technology today. Such timely subjects can actually factor into the fear-themed course, as the assignments discussed here indicate, because the broad nature of the theme is as all-encompassing and versatile as it is distinctive to the individual. Additionally, by having students engage with the subject of fear and become critics of its use in the world around them, they not only strengthen critical thinking and communication skills but come to a better under-standing of the emotion and its psychological impact when confronting the challenges and anxieties that can characterize not only the mechanics of assignments and the writing classroom but the campus environment at large. Whether an eighteen-year-old enthusiastic aeronautical science major just out of high school or a war-weary, middle-aged soldier returning to the classroom after years in that most "real" of worlds, each student can enjoy, learn, and, ultimately, be empowered by embracing and mastering fear in the challenging but safe space of the composition classroom.

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