



THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE PERFECT ESSAY

By Laura J. Oliver

They were perfect. Seriously perfect. It's not often that a prospective writing client sends sample pages that are flawless, but as I finished the essay, I couldn't think of a thing that would improve the work. Articulate, expressive, original—maybe this writer didn't need a writing coach or developmental editor. Maybe she'd be better served with submission guidance. True, I hadn't been moved, I hadn't laughed. I hadn't had my understanding of myself, or the world enlarged in any way, but the fault didn't lie in the execution of the prose.

It was one of those August afternoons where you thank God for air conditioning, out loud, but I decided to brave the heat of the brick-walled garden that is my backyard to let the essay and my lack of emotional response to it percolate. *The holly tree is overgrown... the squirrels are leaping about as if on Adderall... the neighbor's pool pump never stops humming. Nice guy, though. Super nice. Never takes his trash cans in...but he always says hi. Parks in my spot a lot. Wait. Do I actually like this neighbor?* And with that questioning of assumptions, that dawning awareness of contradiction, that willingness to consider that maybe what I thought I'd felt for years wasn't what I felt at all...the essay puzzle started to come together.

As polished and professional as it was, there was no discovery made in the process of the writing, no moment of alchemy in which the writer's new understanding of self, shifted my self-awareness as well, made me recognize we are members of the same tribe. What was missing was the life force we call curiosity.

Without the energy of wonder, even good work can fall flat. There's no electrical charge of anticipation, no chance of spontaneous insight. Without a puzzle to pursue, in fiction or nonfiction, the work feels done from the outset. Readers are not along for the ride, sharing your experience, they're in the café doodling on their napkins while you recount where you've been.

So what's the process? Mary Lee Settle says, "I start with a question then try to answer it." I say, back up: "Pay attention to what you pay attention to." This means *assume* that the images, the conversations, the relationships and interactions on your radar have caught your attention because in some way you don't yet recognize, they are significant. Discount nothing.

And start small. It's my big bang theory of story writing. Stories often lack impact simply because

they start too broad. They're too general, too abstract. So, begin dense and irreducible. Begin with an observation but frame it as a question. (What is it I dislike about the guy trying to sell me this dog?) Or reframe a contradiction. (I love this vacation house, why am I consumed with dread when I see photos of it?) Pursue a mystery. (Why did my farmer grandfather not come in from the fields the day his only daughter got married in the front parlor?) Target a compelling memory. (Why do I remember the tail-lights of a Volkswagen disappearing down the lane at dusk?) Accept that memory is not fact. (Were those headlights?)

Start with an atom that will contain all the story matter in the universe. Start with an exploration of one *moment*, not one year, of one *conflict*, not one relationship. Allow your wise inner writer to lead you to the next thought, the next incident. Stories are built exactly as rocky planets are formed. One tiny dust particle attracts another, then another. They become magnetic, accreting on details, heating up as they spin through space until those particles have taken on mass and there is a smoldering body of story potential orbiting its parent star.

Then? Give curiosity full reign. My youngest daughter, at age 7, was driving me crazy carrying around an ant farm she'd been given as a birthday present. "Mom, have you seen the ants? Mom! Look at the ants!" I tried headphones. I locked my office door. Finally, instead of turning away from the annoyance, I turned toward it. I put it on the page, curious to see what would happen.

"After Brian moved out," I wrote, "I bought our daughter Erica an ant farm. I thought it would distract her." I stared at those lines, gazed at the trail of ants trapped between two sheets of glass, and then, intrigued.... picked up the booklet that came with the farm.

Fact: Every worker has a full-time job to help everyone else in the colony.

Fact: All the workers are female.

Fact: A new colony begins with the marriage flight. Females and males mate in the air and then land. Afterward the female scrapes off her wings and enters the nest forever.

Paydirt.

One of the reasons writers forget to be curious is because you have been told to write what you know, but no one cares what you know. Seriously. No one. Readers care about what you don't know but would like to. Readers care about what you fear, long for, find hilarious, love, or are bound to lose. Readers want to see you, or your character, brought to your knees—they're going down with you. They want to see and feel the moment you spontaneously leap for joy. Which brings us to vulnerability.

When you write from curiosity, you necessarily write from a place of not knowing, which means you are vulnerable to what you are going to find. You are at risk, which means now the piece carries tension which is necessary to keep us engaged. You may discover something unexpected, scary, alarming, or super-unflattering.

Readers love that. We all love that. You just proved we're not as weird as we have secretly feared we are, and we're not alone.

So, pay attention to what you notice. Some scrap of conversation, someone's nickname, the mailman's posture, your sense of anxiety when you expected joy. Capture something small and specific. Be curious, then brazenly courageous. Write till you get that ah ha moment—where suddenly you feel the piece come to life under your fingertips as the story tells you what it has been about. Delight in your own surprise. Then show what you found. Good writers will then begin to close the story, to bring it full circle, to echo the beginning from a place of transformation, to bring us home. But great writers, like James Baldwin, know the story needs to *open back up*: "Drive to the heart of every answer... and expose the question the answer hides."

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