

Mapping Personal & Scholarly Motive

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Help students see how their personal motivation for researching a topic relates to the intellectual context they establish for their scholarly audience.

Writing Focus: *motive, methodology, conventions*

Project Stage: *brainstorming, drafting*

Teacher Preparation: *low*

Student Preparation: *none*

Estimated Time: *45-65 minutes*

EXERCISE

Prep Work: Prepare two handouts: 1) Gordon Harvey's definition of motive; and 2) an excerpt of professional writing.

Step One: (5-10 minutes) Begin with a careful reading, together as a class, of Gordon Harvey's definition of motive (handout):

Motive: the intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued—why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses (that you think are wrong). Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it's where you suggest that your argument *isn't* idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is usually introduced by a form of the complicating word "But."

From Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay"

For the purposes of this exercise, it's helpful to pay particular attention to sorting out the key terms at play in the definition (e.g., intellectual context, audience, motive, personal motivation, private, idiosyncratic) and focus on the distinction that Harvey offers midway through: "Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic."

Step Two: (10-15 minutes) To delve more deeply into the discussion, ask students to skim a brief excerpt of professional writing that has traces of personal motivation along with scholarly

motive. Explain that their goal is to analyze the decision the author has made about integrating the autobiographical in his/her scholarly work. As they read, ask them to keep track—on a separate sheet of paper—of moments in the text where they see the scholarly motive articulated (in one column) and moments in the text where they see traces of personal motivation appearing (in a second column). These notes can serve as a useful springboard into discussion of questions like: How does the author implicitly or explicitly make the link between personal motivation and scholarly motive? How commonly in their experience as readers have they seen personal motivation made visible in different kinds of texts? What might be the arguments for including it? For excluding it?

Step Three: (15-20 minutes) Next, transition to the relevance of the discussion for their own work as writers, suggesting that regardless of how visible the personal motivation ends up being in the final argument for their intended audience, it can be useful to reflect on it during the writing process. In a variation on the exercise used in Step Two, ask students to take a fresh sheet of paper and draw a line across the middle of the page. Give them the following prompt: “Above the line, articulate the scholarly motive—the intellectual context—for your own project. Below the line, articulate the personal motivation, perhaps grounded in your own experiences.” They’re welcome to start either above the line or below the line, whichever feels more comfortable. After about 4-5 minutes, ask for a volunteer to share what he or she has written, and facilitate a discussion about the connections between the two kinds of motive for the particular project; how the purely personal might be translated into a more generally accessible, scholarly issue; and how much, if any, of the personal motivation to make visible in the final document for a given audience.

Step Four: (15-20 minutes) Have students work in pairs to give each other feedback according to the conversation modeled as a full group. The student who has volunteered can join another pair as a third voice.

REFLECTIONS

A few sample texts that I’ve found work well as excerpts for discussion in Step Two: *The Great War and Modern Memory*, by literary scholar Paul Fussell (dedication and afterword); *Nature’s Metropolis*, by historian William Cronon (opening five pages and final two pages of the Prologue); and *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, by social psychologist Claude M. Steele (the opening sections of chapters 1 and 2). One thing to keep in mind as you’re choosing your excerpts and leading discussion of them is the frequency with which traces of personal motivation are cordoned off in a foreword, introduction, dedication, or afterword. The insistence with which these borders are often maintained raises a range of interesting questions about the extent to which academic argument limits the visibility of the autobiographical, personal dimensions of motive.

Gordon Harvey’s definition of motive would suggest that it depends on audience, which means we have to ask ourselves both about our own individual tolerance for traces of personal experience in the scholarship we read and about the tolerance of our respective disciplines. In leading workshops with interdisciplinary groups of faculty about precisely this question, I’ve

been struck by the range of views about the extent to which it's appropriate for traces of the personal to appear in academic work. From the medieval historian who said that signs of the personal in the scholarly filled him with a sense of "epistemological despair" to the scholar of folklore who saw it as an ethical breach *not* to show oneself to be a presence in the project, the vehement reactions have revealed deeply held disciplinary beliefs and assumptions about how we know what we know.

While a detailed exploration of disciplinary beliefs is beyond the scope of the exercise, even a brief discussion can be a valuable way to sensitize students to the issues at stake where the academic and the autobiographical intersect, equip them as readers to observe how different authors handle those issues, and equip them as writers to make thoughtful choices about the ethos they want to cultivate in relation to their own readers.

Ultimately, though, whether we have a high tolerance or zero tolerance for explicit traces of personal motivation and personal experience in academic argument, the premise of the exercise is that to reflect on the personal dimension influencing our choice of (or argument about) a topic is an invaluable part of the writing process. It can give writers struggling for any sense of investment in an assignment the chance to find a way in. I've also found the exercise helps me as a teacher understand the underlying source of confusingly emphatic or ambivalent elements in an argument, as was the case, for instance, with a student whose highly charged interpretation of a literary text turned out to be entangled with difficult memories of his older brother enlisting in the Marines. This should not be, it's important to say, an occasion for intruding on what's private. Rather, it's an opportunity to frame your feedback on a piece of writing with respect for the personal experience, but ultimately with explicit focus on how to make the argument work based on the shared textual evidence that both writer and reader have equal access to.

A third context in which I've found the exercise helpful is for students who have a great deal to say about a topic personally but find they have trouble building toward a broader intellectual context or translating into a scholarly motive. That was the case for a student who had selected his grandfather's grave as the memorial site he would research for his paper. While not impossible to imagine a version of the project that would use this particularly personal site of memory as a window into larger historical and cultural issues, the exercise ended up clarifying that the center of gravity for the student was so far on the side of personal motivation that the topic would likely be most at home in another genre—the personal essay, for example, rather than the researched argument.

My most recent time teaching this exercise reminded me how important it is that the concept of personal motive remains flexible through the discussion. If its meaning gets closed down to one particular kind of experience or narrative, not everyone will be able to connect to it. The students were preparing to write graduate school application essays, and many in the group readily began to reflect on the links between their personal histories and the direction of their research. The pattern was logical and recognizable: having witnessed—or having themselves undergone—an experience of injustice, discrimination, illness, or another form of difficulty or alienation, they wanted to understand the issues better through the scrutiny of scholarship. The hope in the room seemed to hinge on the ideal that by gaining a combination of knowledge and stature they might be better positioned to help amend what needed amending in the world. After numerous similar

accounts that tightly threaded personal history and social identity together with scholarly motive, one student spoke up in a combination of anxiety, frustration, and confusion, saying, in effect, “I guess I don’t have a personal motive.”

Our subsequent exchange (with apologies to my scientific readers) went something like this: “What do you study?” “Ice cores.” “Why?” “So we can learn from them about the possible composition of other planets.” “So cool! But why are you interested in other planets?” “Since I was a kid I’ve always been obsessed with Space.” “Hmm. So you study Earth because you’ve always been obsessed with Space. What’s so great about Space?” “Well, for me it’s the thing we all ultimately have in common. The common denominator, the place where all our differences get reduced down to nothing.” Which sounded like a pretty amazing personal motive to me, and an invaluable reminder that they do not all come in the same form.