

Like Ramus, she never said anything in ten words that she could say in fifty.

"I'm not following your drift here, Dr. Noyes. Could you explain?"

"When one is an undergraduate, teachers are thrilled with the unusual. Bored out of their minds, having taught American Fiction from 1910 longer than their students have been alive, they suddenly come to life when a student turns in a paper on *The Color Purple* written in dialect. They write long notes in the margins and want to talk to you after class. They call you a breath of fresh air and say you should consider graduate school.

You feel as if you could burst with ideas. You aspire to be the consummate Rhetorician and bring feuding camps back together again. You want to be on the cutting edge. You dream of being famous.

Then you turn in your first paper. Suddenly, those people who wanted you to be unusual want you to conform. But they still want to be perceived as open-minded since they teach one of the 'liberal' arts, so they tell you to attempt a more 'academic voice' next time. But the next time, you're that much farther across the prairie, that much more out of touch with what they want, expect, have to have in order to squeeze you into their value system that you never asked to fit into in the first place. You thought you were going to graduate school to perfect being wild and free with your ideas. You never expected to be bridled. None of us ever did."

I thought I noticed a trace of nostalgia in Dr. Noyes' eyes, perhaps a bit of lost idealism or a long-stilled memory of running free on the prairie herself.

"I don't like the dichotomies, the either/or choices I'm presented with, Dr. Noyes. I'd rather be an academic Barthelme, a true postmodernist, without a need for traditional forms, blending and merging a whole range of eclectic forms."

"Barthelme doesn't write for academe. If you aspire to be Barthelme, seek a creative writing program."

"But I'm not interested only in fiction, but the intersections where fiction and non-fiction meet; where rhetoric and literature blur; where composition and creativity become one. Just like Barthelme thinks of life as a collage, so learning comes from the inside and the outside both. You, and the academic traditions you represent, are forcing students to choose, and only accepting the outside (your side) as the right choice."

"We're not alone in this. Corporate America makes you choose. Banks make you choose. Law school makes you choose. If anything, we're merely preparing students for that what they will encounter when they graduate."

Somewhere, something had gone terribly wrong. It was like getting on a boat supposedly bound for Hawaii and ending up in Iceland. Hey, they both have volcanoes; what difference does it make? Write the papers the way they want you to write the papers and be yourself when you get out of graduate school. But what if I'm not the same by the time I graduate. What if I look in the mirror three years from now and can't remember who I was or how to become that person again. What if I'm like the chalk written on the backs of first graders in "Trout Fishing In America Terrorists," that slowly fades, like the imagination itself, out of existence?

"Remember the wild horses, Miss Beckelman, and tame yourself. Your future, your career, are in your hands."

"But I want to be a wild horse."

"No, you want to be an academician."

"I do?"

"That's why you're faced with this dilemma."

"I thought I was seeking the truth about darkness and light."  
"Haven't you found it?"

## OCCASION AND NEED IN WRITING: An Annotated Essay

Jim W. Corder  
Texas Christian University

I wrote the little essay that follows, "Cheerio," as part of an assignment in my freshman composition class. No credit is owed for that, and I feel no special guilt. We had been talking about whether or not some subjects are inherently more interesting than others. I got carried away in the course of the discussion and claimed that there was no such thing as a dull subject. One thing led to another. The students were pretty sure that there are dull subjects, began to list some, and before the class period was over, I had drawn the assignment to describe a single Cheerio. A single Cheerio had turned out to be their favorite dull subject. "Cheerio" is the result. I reproduce it here, with the annotations that follow, because it turned out later to be moderately useful for teaching purposes, because I think I learned in writing it what I had not quite learned from composition textbooks or elsewhere — a little about how writing both creates and rises from occasion and need, a little about how occasion and need come together. I have numbered the paragraphs for later reference.

### CHEERIO

1. For a long time, until she came to suspect that my character was not susceptible of correction, my mother tried to get me to eat Raisin Bran for breakfast. I was young then, and she thought they were healthy, as such things go. But I couldn't face the dead bugs floating among the bran flakes in the milk — earlier my big brother had told me that the dark things in raisin bread were dead bugs, and I reasoned that the dark things in the cereal must be dead bugs, too. I chose Post Toasties instead, imitating my brother, but after a while I realized that they were given to instant sogginess. Then for a long time I ate Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions. I cannot tell whether or not I actually liked Wheaties, but the box had nifty baseball stories and pictures. But by and by, in the fullness of time, I lost all those pictures and discovered Cheerios.

2. But that was not until later, when I discovered that I had children of my own. In the meantime, I had given up cereal for coffee and toast, usually cinnamon toast. But then, with my children, I found Cheerios. It wasn't easy: we spent a lot of time in the cereal aisle of the grocery store, looking at all the boxes, and we tried first one and then another. But we stayed with Cheerios a long time, though there was a brief flirtation with Captain Crunch. I can't remember whether or not there was anything on the Cheerios box that they saved, and I can't remember what the box itself looked like when they were young. I wish I could. I do remember that one of my daughters made a necklace of Cheerios, and my son played checkers with them, though it was a little hard to distinguish one side from the other. As they grew older, they mostly gave up Cereal, and I went back to having coffee and toast, or coffee and a bagel, or coffee and a granola bar, or coffee and coffee.

3. The current Cheerios box is mostly yellow. The one on my desk is ten and three-quarters inches high, seven and a half inches across, and two and three-eighths inches deep. On what I

think of as the front, there is a General Mills logo, and a big, black-print Cheerios, the *i* dotted with a Cheerio. Below that, this: Toasted Oat Cereal Made from the Grain Highest in Protein. Below that is a picture of a bowl of Cheerios and strawberries, and a sign that says Free Inside Two Hugga Bunch Easy-Paint Postcards (seems a long way from pictures of Joe DiMaggio and Dizzy Dean and Charley Gehringer), with pictures of Hugsy and Impkins (oh, how far we've fallen). Two other signs betoken the dietary interests of the day. One says Only 1 Gram of Sugar Per Serving; the other says No Artificial Colors or Flavors Whole Grain – Good Source of Fiber. In the bottom left corner, I read Net Wt 10 Oz (283 grams). On what I think of as the back of the box, there is a big display about the Hugga Bunch postcards, with notice that it is possible to collect twelve of them, if you eat fast and choose boxes cagily. One side of the box has testimony about why pediatricians recommend Cheerios for your toddler. The other side has a word about fiber, nutrition information per serving, percentage of U.S. recommended daily allowances, and a list of ingredients: whole oat flour, wheat starch, salt, sugar, calcium carbonate, trisodium phosphate, vitamin C (sodium ascorbate), niacin (a B vitamin), iron (a mineral nutrient), vitamin A palmitate, vitamin B<sub>6</sub> (pyridoxine hydrochloride), vitamin B<sub>2</sub> (riboflavin), vitamin B<sub>1</sub> (thiamin mononitrate), vitamin B<sub>12</sub> and vitamin D. The bottom of the box has on it a logo again, another Cheerios, another notice of free Hugga Bunch postcards, and the mystical bar sign for the magic machine to read at the check-out stand. The top of the box has a Betty Crocker coupon, another Cheerios, and two last signs. The first says To Open Lift This Tab. The second says To Keep Your Cheerios Fresh, Refold Inner Bag After Each Use and Close Package Flaps. A price tag also appears on the top. Inside the box, there is a sealed white waxed paper bag. Inside the sealed paper bag there are approximately 2600 Cheerios. Inside there is also a lie: it is not Hugsy and Impkins that wait, but Bubbles with Chumley and Huggins with Hug-a-bye.

4. If there are indeed about 2600 Cheerios in the bag, then each single one must weigh something like 0.0038461 ounces or 0.1088461 grams. Each single Cheerio is an O in about the same way that each doughnut is an O—that is to say, the individual Cheerios are O-like, but irregular. Diameters appear to range from about three-eighths of an inch to about one-half an inch; thickness seems to average at about three-sixteenths of an inch.

5. Any single Cheerio, then, seems to weigh in at about 0.0038 + ounces, to measure  $\frac{3}{8}$  + inches in diameter, about  $\frac{3}{16}$  inches in thickness. A side view, near actual size, shows this:



A top view, or it might be a bottom view, near actual size, shows this:



Another view, the Cheerios somewhat enlarged, shows this:



Since I do not have a keen or an accurate sense of smell, I cannot report on the smell of Cheerios. The taste of a Cheerio, unadorned with either milk or strawberries, gives me a faint sense of walnuts mixed with a faint recollection from old days when I was a little boy. Sometimes, when my mother wasn't looking, I took a mouthful of uncooked oats (meant to be cooked and hot for morning cereal) and pretended it was chewing tobacco. The color is a sort of dun, verging on muckledy dun, verging on sand, verging on the color of soft buckskin, verging on the color of my hushpuppies, verging on the color of the horse Marshal Dillon rode on "Gunsmoke."

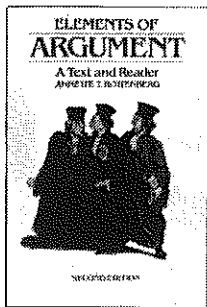
6. I doubt that I would ever have come to write about Cheerios were it not for a sorry episode in my freshman class, where we set each other dull subjects to write about. Now that it's happened, I find I don't mind. There's a little something to learn if you look closely at just about anything, and an archaeologist friend once told me that he thought he could learn more about a culture by digging in a kitchen midden than by exploring a cathedral.

7. Did I learn anything? Not much. I was reaffirmed in my present conviction that, after all, coffee and pipe tobacco make a better breakfast. I learned that in 1986 people pay more attention—or want to think they pay more attention—to diet and nutrition than they did in 1943 or in 1958. I learned that cereal makers, or at least the makers of Cheerios, aim their product at a much younger audience now than they did in 1938 or 1941, judging from the replacement of Charley Gehringer by the Hugga Bunch kids. I learned that almost anything, including Cheerios, can become a token setting off reverberations of other times, other places, and so I remembered the necklace my daughter made. I'm glad of that. But that's all for now. So long and cheerio.

*Paragraphs 1 and 2.* When my students foisted the single Cheerio upon me, they did not know—and I did not tell them (a little dishonest, but wanting some advantage)—that, while I have never been an eager cereal eater, I did have some casual, more or less regular, knowledge of Cheerios. Breakfast cereal sets off some associations for me, though a single Cheerio doesn't do all that much, and what I knew, taken with the triggered associations, wasn't at any rate enough, because I had no reason to describe a single Cheerio. I didn't at first understand all that meant. I had the assignment, of course, but that was scarcely reason. I wasn't willing simply to do the assignment. I had no reason to do so. I wouldn't, perhaps couldn't.

Of course, if I had been a student, I would not, probably, have assumed that I had any liberty. Had I been a student, I would in all likelihood have felt obliged to describe a single Cheerio, no more, no less. But there is no reason to do that. I can think of only a few specialized settings in which describing a single Cheerio might seem worthwhile. One is a dietetics or nutrition

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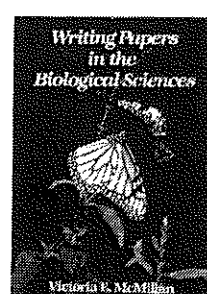
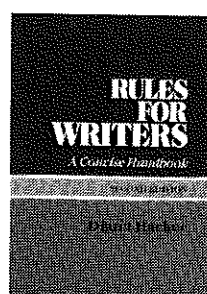
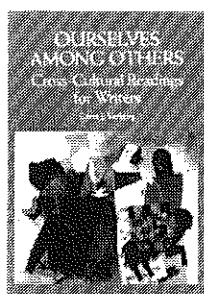
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laboratory. Another is the kitchen or quality control center at General Mills. A third is any place where an archival necessity seizes someone to record and to preserve what things look like, in which case a camera might be the better instrument.

I had no need to write about a single Cheerio, no occasion. I did what I could do—I vamped and ooched. These are not terms commonly found in composition textbooks, but they name ways of proceeding that I find uncommonly useful. *Vamp* (noun or verb) is a musical term for a phrase or series of phrases—variations are possible in some—that can be repeated while one is waiting for the next line of development. For example, the pianist seated below stage in a vaudeville house could vamp as one act ended, waiting to begin the music for the next act. The principal song in “A Chorus Line” is a vamp. *Ooching* is another matter, and I don’t know its origins. To *ooch* along is to move gradually, to go slowly, to sidle along, checking things out until one begins to know the territory. Pity the terms aren’t in composition textbooks.

In paragraphs 1 and 2, then, I vamped and ooched. Until a little while ago, I had no other name for what I was doing. But then I began to see that I was trying to create a context for writing about a single Cheerio.

No, that’s not all of it. Breakfast cereal does set off some associations for me, and I wanted to follow them for a little while, though I didn’t know exactly where they might go. I had written all of paragraph 1 before I began to see a direction, and I still didn’t know how to get to that single Cheerio. So, I was following tentatively some vague associations, and I was looking for a context.

Later—not while I was actually writing—I began to see that *context* wasn’t the right word. I had no need to write about a single Cheerio, no occasion. *Occasion* seemed the better word. Beyond those particular settings I mentioned a little earlier, why on earth would one write about a single Cheerio? I could see no reason. I needed an occasion, however trivial it might seem to others. A single Cheerio won’t stand alone. Later—not while I was actually writing—I began to think that it’s seldom useful or interesting or valuable to write except to occasion (and occasions occur, of course, both externally and internally). I began to think, as others have thought, that a good part of what’s wrong with freshman essays is that they are occasionless. Looking back later, I began to understand that I had to write myself into a set of circumstances, had to catch hold, if you will, of some kind of community, had to have a history against which to write, had to have an occasion.

By the time I had gotten into paragraph 2, I began to have a small history to work from. I had begun to remember Cheerios:

*Paragraph 3.* But I still wasn’t there. You don’t, for God’s sake, just start off to describe a single Cheerio, though my students might have, had that been their assignment, for they mostly did not know that they had liberty to invent. Paragraph 3 is another stage in the ooch toward discovery, if it turns out that there is discovery. From personal recollections about Cheerios to description of a single Cheerio is still a jump, and besides, I didn’t know how to describe a single Cheerio. I went to the nearby grocery store, bought a box of Cheerios, took it back to my office, and set out to find a way to get to the single Cheerio. *Occasion* wasn’t quite it, not yet. *Occasion* had to generate *need*, which comes with, is borne by, rises from, and creates occasion. Describing the box gave occasion or need for describing a single Cheerio. Once I had done paragraph 3, paragraph 4 was very nearly inevitable.

*Paragraphs 4 and 5.* I had finally come to the assignment. The assignment was no good. A single Cheerio won’t stand alone, even under the archival necessity I mentioned a little earlier. A setting is necessary. A setting gives a context. A context provides an occasion. An occasion calls up and rises from a need. It’s okay to describe a single Cheerio, but not, I think, to claim omniscience in such matters as smell or taste or color.

*Paragraphs 6 and 7.* The students saw that paragraph 7 had in it further occasions, public occasions, that I did not want to think about—the question, for example, whether or not advertisers had really changed their target audience. I trusted to memory, probably errant, and didn’t want to deal with such matters, but the occasion for research is there.

I didn’t want to deal with such matters because I had other things to do. I had to get the assignment completed. I had to begin to understand that whatever the thing is that we call a personal essay, it isn’t simple, or monolithic. Depends, I guess, on what occasion/need calls up. Some essays, I know, are declarative; they know their proposition, tell it early, and insist upon it thereafter. More, however, are exploratory than we’ve allowed (see William Zeiger, “The Exploratory Essay: Enfranchising the Spirit of Inquiry in College Composition,” *College English*, September, 1985, pp. 454-466). And more are probably doubtful, hesitant, and revelatory than we’ve admitted, recognizing that on some matters all we can do is to try to show our thoughts to each other, to try to reveal how we came to say whatever we came to say, to try to put our living/composing time into another’s reading time. Sometimes we need to declare, to insist; sometimes we need to explore, sometimes to reveal. Might we learn a new taxonomy for non-fiction, from personal to professional and technical, if we charted its diversity against occasion and need?

And there was more to do. I wanted to save myself from the assignment, to try to make it count somehow, at least to myself. More: I wanted to save myself from the silly moment. The silly moment is where we live and what we have; silly moments give us the details and images we prize so much. But then they pass. A single Cheerio, after all, is not just an item in my personal scrapbook. It belongs, whether they think about it or not, to others, and whatever is personal is always becoming public. One way or another, that’s how we last, if we last.

## BETWEEN WRITERS

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To read literature is to traverse its vacancies. There is that inevitable distance at which one work stands from another, a distance created by the very fact of difference, its extent determined by further differences: psychological, cultural, historical. Yet there is also interaction, the closing of that distance through the activities of a reader who has engaged both works. The works are measured against each other, intermingled in the reader’s memory, perhaps even revised in terms of each other. In a literature course, the situation I have in mind, the reader is also a writer: she must eventually “do a paper on” what she has been assigned to read. For the sake of conceptual simplicity, let us keep the focus narrowed to two works and one reader; and in order to demystify the situation, humanize it, let us regard it as one involving three writers—one writer “between” two others. But if the course is an introduction to literature—and that is specifically what I have had in mind all along—then one of these three writers is quite inexperienced. So much so that she must rely heavily