'When the Ocean Begins': Personal Narrative, Shifting Roles, and a Teenage Woman's Search Through the Wreckage

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‘WHEN THE OCEAN BEGINS’: PERSONAL NARRATIVE, SHIFTING ROLES, AND A
TEENAGE WOMAN’S SEARCH THROUGH THE WRECKAGE

by

Lauren Michele Fazzio

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ABSTRACT

‘WHEN THE OCEAN BEGINS’: PERSONAL NARRATIVE, SHIFTING ROLES, AND A TEENAGE WOMAN’S SEARCH THROUGH THE WRECKAGE

I will argue that as the young women in this study approached graduation from high school, writing became a venue to write their identities in a safe space free from the expectations of others. The writing included in this study will show that early-adolescent identities, written from a senior-year perspective, value silence and passivity over confidence and voice. They were eager to use the written space provided to them in an elective writing course to script and negotiate their contradictory identities and ultimately transition into a more informed sense of self. Through personal writing completed in and out of school, each young woman in this study found a method of resistance to rules the culture placed on her, and in doing so, established her place on the continuum between silence and voice. Once they tried on identities in writing, many longed to connect their written identities with other women. The feedback I gave them on these personal narratives in Art of Writing created a teacher identity that validated and supported them, and so they began to seek connection with me. This bridged my written identity and theirs and challenged the traditional roles of teacher and student. While I perceived this as a meaningful relationship established within the safety of a writing classroom, other language arts teachers saw it as dangerous. In fact, many colleagues leave personal writing out of language arts all together, and so for most Accrede Regina students, Art of Writing is the first class where students at my school can use writing to shape their identities. Despite the tension this method of teaching writing creates with colleagues and the challenges I experienced as a teacher, I argue that it is valuable, even necessary, to
offer teenage women the chance to write their identities in personal narrative as they transition into adulthood.
‘WHEN THE OCEAN BEGINS’: PERSONAL NARRATIVE, SHIFTING ROLES, AND A
TEENAGE WOMAN’S SEARCH THROUGH THE WRECKAGE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

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Montclair, NJ

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WHEN THE OCEAN BEGINS: INTRODUCTION

In September, Jessie chose to write about love. The word, tattooed on her tiny wrist after her eighteenth birthday a week earlier, means a lot to her, she said. Even through the murky details in her vague one-page essay, the message was clear. She said love can come from places a person may not expect, and her tattoo was a constant reminder that even though she lacked a loving family, love still existed all around her.

Reading something so candid so early in the school year shocked me, though it shouldn’t have; these revelations happen all the time. Still, it was only a glimpse, a fragment of the life of a troubled student. The essay, though general, prompted me to ask her if she was okay; I wondered if she needed to talk to someone and tried to show my support. “It’s fine,” she said quickly. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Then she took her paragraph and left.

October’s assignment was a reflective essay that students could submit with their college applications. I asked for a life-changing experience. An epiphany. Jessie showed me a brainstorm about her family scribbled on loose-leaf paper. In brainstorming what she had learned from her childhood, she realized she had found enough strength in herself to follow a different path than her sister. Three days later, she turned in an essay about her role as the varsity cheerleading captain. “I didn’t like my other topic anymore,” she said.

In November, she completed a scrapbook of descriptive essays, including one about her car. She described it as the only place she could be alone, the place she escapes to cry, the place that is solely hers, since she worked three jobs just to buy it. Then, in December, Jessie submitted a narrative titled “Starlight,” her sister’s street name. In the
story she described her memory of Christmas Day at twelve years old. As she remembered it, she waited with a babysitter for her mom to return from the police station with her sister, who had stolen from their family to buy heroin, taken to the streets, and disappeared for several weeks.

In April, Jessie’s journal entries—which in the first half of the year read more like after-school to-do lists—were now pages long, and discussed her future, her family, her friends, betrayal, self-assurance, and the person she hoped to be. Her final out-of-class essay in June compared how she and her older brother handled their tumultuous household. The first line reads, “The smell of alcohol drifts off my mother’s breath as my dad walks into the house at 3 in the morning.”

This progression happens often. Grace’s September journal entries discussed swim practice and working at a cookie store; her May ones discussed her mother, whose depression left her so immobile that Grace had to dress her for work. Giovanna started the year talking in her journal about her role in the school musical. She ended explaining how content she was with herself despite her desire for a boyfriend. Samantha’s September writing referenced “issues” she’d had growing up that were “crazy”; by March I knew those “issues” meant depression, anxiety, and bulimia. In the setting of a writing classroom, one that lasts only forty-two minutes for only 180 days, I’ve watched young women discover, explore and create themselves far more quickly—and deeply—than most do in a lifetime.
It is late June, the time when we teachers struggle to meet end-of-the-year grading deadlines. I walk out with a colleague, carrying the last stack of journals to my car—a literal weight on my shoulders this time—and plan to devote the next seven hours to grading them. “Wait, you mean you actually read all their journal entries?” my colleague asks me—the same colleague, I should add, that is the only other teacher to teach this same course, Art of Writing, a senior elective in creative and academic writing. Journals are part of the curriculum. “And you comment on them too?”

“Well, yeah,” I respond. “You don’t?”

“I mean, I check that they did all the entries…but I don’t read them. I just count them.”

“I don’t know,” I backpedal. “They just write such heartbreaking, personal things, that I feel like I need to give them journal pep talks.” At “pep talk” I realize how ridiculous I sound.

“Oh, well that’s the difference then. My students just don’t write personal things.”

She proceeds to ask what topics I use for journaling.

Compare your past and present self. (“Yeah, I use that.”) What has your life taught you? (“That too.”) Free choice. (“Yeah, I use a lot of those.”)

“Well,” she says, “because of scheduling you do always get the smarter kids, so that must be it. My students are just different.”

But are they?

I heave the stretching sack of journals into the back seat and rub my left shoulder, realizing this pain is one I will feel for a while. These personal stories—mere snapshots of the lives and thoughts of teenagers—weigh on my heart to the point that I lie awake at
night, that I spend my free periods talking to teenage women about what they’re going through, that I find far more gray hairs than I should at twenty-seven. But apparently this burden is not universal among teachers, so am I doing something wrong?

Or, am I doing something right?

When I began this research, I sought to understand the relationship between teenage women and writing. Despite warnings that high schoolers were reluctant writers, I found so many teenage women who felt comfortable with personal writing. Some of my male students were candid in their writing too, but the majority didn’t come into class as eager to write as the young women did. Why was this? Why did my female students in Art of Writing enter the room hoping I would assign a free-choice journal task so they could pour their souls out on paper? Why did so many diverse personalities have such similar experiences as teenage women, and similar relationships to writing? And then, what made them willing—even eager—to share this candid writing with me, their teacher?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing research provides some insight into these questions. For those students who did not know the power of writing before taking Art of Writing, Peter Elbow’s theory about freewriting is most useful. According to Elbow, to freewrite is to write without stopping for ten minutes, even if the thoughts are incoherent or nonsensical. The point is to keep writing. He believes freewriting breaks down barriers between a person and a blank piece of paper. Elbow calls freewriting an “outlet,” a way to get down all the thoughts in our head and think through writing, not before writing. Writing nonstop is a
way to expel these roadblocks, a way to get over the hurdle of the blank page. To explain this, he equates freewriting to speaking, since speaking can occur in the absence of forethought. When integrating this type of writing into a school setting, often teachers find students write more willingly and candidly. Elbow insists that freewriting shows students what they think, what maybe they didn’t realize they thought in the first place. This experience can be enlightening, he says, and it helps students to improve as academic writers (Elbow 15).

In her 2003 article “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-Ends Composition,” Wendy Bishop addresses a shifting focus in writing study at universities. She explains how writing studies are often marginalized by literary studies, and even within writing studies, composition carries more weight than personal narratives and essays; these are often referred to as part of the “other” genre. Whether for fear of an overcrowded curriculum or the informal nature of the personal narrative, “clearly there is a deep historical and institutional fissure between the courses designated CRW and ENC that we have long lived with” (Bishop 262). However, recently academics have seen greater merit in creative nonfiction as a field. To highlight this new appreciation, Bishop relates a contrast between herself and a colleague: during one year, she taught a course called “Lifewriting” that included autobiography, memoir, and personal narrative, while her colleague taught more formal nonfiction like “organized sorts of articles and essays” that avoided the personal entirely (Bishop 262). She was energized by her course; he was crushed by his, mainly because he couldn’t keep his students from writing personally (Bishop 262).
But according to Bishop, professors should no longer fight this battle, because the benefits of creative nonfiction as a course extend to other composition as well. Scholars are now more apt to embrace "the personal scholarly voice" when they read it from others, and many have found what Bishop calls "an academic second wind" when they write with personal presence in an academic setting (Bishop 264). The push toward this writing in the academy has in turn led to a more accepting view of student writers. As Bishop explains, for years composition teachers viewed their students as ones who "don’t have the skills to write well, [because] they aren’t yet members of the academic discourse community, or they’re plain too young to have had experiences about which to reflect that could possibly interest their older instructors" (268). But through the emergence of creative nonfiction, professors find this new generation does have something to say, and Bishop calls upon them to listen. She supports creative nonfiction as a field that can help students make sense of their lives and mature their thinking (269). Creative nonfiction is now more often embraced as a teachable subject, as it offers students the chance to look back on their own lives and understand their experience.

Don Wolfe noticed this opportunity over thirty years before the push towards personal narrative at universities, impressed in his own classroom by the way teachers can bring life and writing together. In his essay, "The Gold of Writing Power," Wolfe cites opportunities writing teachers provide to their students, topics like "a day of discovery in my life; a moment of hope in my life; a moment of love; a moment of understanding my father," which are topics similar to ones I’ve seen and prompted in Art of Writing (938). He goes on to say that through these writing experiences, teachers lead their students to discovering or sorting out their innermost thoughts. Such
autobiographical writing is a place where "life and the classroom come together," and he believes as English teachers it is not just our privilege, but our duty, to make this happen (Wolfe 946).

While some of the young women in this study have used a form of personal narrative writing, others found the most solace in poetry writing. The difference with poetry writing is in both the freedom to write without form and the chance to look back during revision. Gillie Bolton introduces this in her essay, "Every Poem Breaks a Silence," a study of the therapeutic nature of poetry writing. According to Bolton, the "initial outpouring" of self into an original poem is only part of the therapy—the other part comes in the redrafting, because revising a poem helps the writer attain "clarity of thought and understanding" of her experience (Bolton 120). Bolton explains that if a poet attacks her outpourings of emotion as a writer rather than a "feeler," it provides her with distance from her feelings. She changes from subjective participant to objective reader, and in doing so can better deal with her emotions (Bolton 122). Because of this, poetry writing can be most therapeutic at times of deep emotion or transition, and while her study follows elderly patients on the verge of death, she does say that "poetry is particularly appropriate at certain milestones such as adolescence" (Bolton 123). It should come as no surprise, then, that high school seniors approaching graduation choose to pour out emotions in this way, more than the freshmen or juniors I’ve taught. Art of Writing is a process-driven class that is heavily focused on revision; many senior students in the course will write a story of themselves and then revise that story with new eyes. The process helps them cope with a change in life, to reflect upon and merge their past and present selves, to clearly see where they’ve been and gain a better sense of where
they’re headed. As seniors, most finally have the perspective to see their lives in this way, and writing and revising gives them the chance to do so in a classroom setting.

Professor of psychology James Pennebaker studies the therapeutic power of writing. For over twenty years, Pennebaker has conducted scientific studies in which subjects write about emotional experiences. He and his colleagues sought correlations between overall health and written disclosure. In one article, “Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process,” Pennebaker relates writing about emotional experiences to the common process of any therapy, “labeling the problem and discussing its causes and consequences” (162). His study asked participants to write every day for up to a half hour about their thoughts and feelings evoked from something that affected them emotionally (Pennebaker 162). One sample prompt Pennebaker used read, “For the next three days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feeling about an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts” (Pennebaker 162). So, he explicitly asked for participants to dive deep within themselves and reflect—the soul searching was not an accidental byproduct of freewriting. Pennebaker found that when prompted to write about emotional experiences, almost all participants disclosed something traumatic, like death, lost love, abuse, and failure. Still, they were eager to write, given this opportunity, and even though some were visibly upset, they called the experience “valuable and meaningful” (Pennebaker 162). Like Bolton, Elbow, and countless others, Pennebaker’s study found psychological and emotional value in writing, though his study was much more scientific than the others. After the writing experience, participants reported "long-term improvements in
mood and indicators of well-being compared with writing about control topics,” and they also reported less distress (Pennebaker 162).

These studies about the therapeutic and self-discovery aspects of writing prove that when given the right conditions, people will write, and perhaps learn things about themselves and their experiences that they didn’t know before. But how does this tendency intensify when the people writing are females in high school? Few of these studies have been separated by age or gender, but there is merit in examining the impact of writing on women particularly. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” written in 1972, Adrienne Rich says writing is an outlet for women because of the male-dominated world they live in; they are under a microscope and carry more baggage than men because of it. She says, “For women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us” (Rich). Rich sees writing as a way for women to explore their lives, especially because we are relative newcomers to the discussion. Even though women have written journals and poetry for years, the trend has only recently risen to the surface in recent generations.

I say “risen to the surface” because it is likely that teenage women have been writing their lives for decades; it just occurred in a much more private space than it does now. For example, around the same time as Adrienne Rich pioneering her ideas about women writers, Janet Emig announced hers about high school writers. In The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Emig found that teenage women, like her case studies Lynn and Victoria, felt stifled by school-sanctioned writing, and so they kept their
personal writing behind closed doors (Emig 50). They wrote to please their teachers, which at the time meant using proper grammar and spelling. So uninspired by the surface level of their writing instruction, often these young women—especially Victoria—would write satirically as a form of subversion (Emig 87). But now, because of the cultural changes America’s younger generations have experienced, more and more young women are speaking out and writing about issues they face as females, and they often bring these voices public in a school setting. Three volumes have been published that support this point. The first, Dr. Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, published in 1994, provides advice to teachers and parents by placing teenage women in context of the society they are forced to live in. As a therapist, Pipher sees the many issues young women deal with, and wonders why those today struggle more than those thirty years ago (Pipher 12). Her book sheds light on what is causing young women of this generation to hold so much angst; she attributes much of it to a “girl-poisoning culture,” and cites the media as one of the main contenders in the downward spiral of teenage women’s self-esteem (12). Also, the developmental window these young women are in—adolescence—is a transition like no other because it bridges childhood and adulthood. According to Pipher, “Sometimes they are four years old, an hour later they are twenty-five. They don’t really fit anywhere. There’s a yearning for place, a search for solid ground” (Pipher 52). This may be a reason young women lose such a sense of themselves during adolescence—in that search for solid ground, they often split into what Pipher calls “fragmented selves” because of social pressure to become someone who will be accepted by others (Pipher 22). It isn’t until much later—
towards their senior year of high school if they’re lucky—that young women may begin to rediscover who they are and who they wish to be.

In trying to find this out, though, many women this age find that their public and private identities are often in discord. This tension translates into the writing classroom, where the most common topics young women select for expressive writing involve body image, relationships, and popularity. *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self*, compiled by teenaged Sara Shandler, is a reaction to Pipher’s book, and lets teenage women speak in their own voices about many of the same issues. A teenage woman herself, Shandler examines their plight:

> We have all been told to love ourselves. We are all intelligent. We are all aware that we have been raised in culture that cradles double standards, impossible ideals of beauty, and asks us to listen. But we are caught in the crossfire between where we have been told we should be and where we really are….So-called perfect girls feel trapped by others’ expectations. (xii)

Her book, a collection of poetry and personal narratives written by teenage women, shows not only the issues they are facing, but also the tendency to put these issues in writing. To generate this collection, Shandler sent letters to adolescent women through their high school principals.¹ The message explained, “I am collecting personal writing from girls, ages twelve to eighteen, about our experiences being young and female,” and she listed possible topics like body image, friendships, death, depression, and pride in being female. Some of the entries included in *Ophelia Speaks* were written specifically

¹ For the complete letter Shandler wrote to solicit writing, see Appendices A and B in *Ophelia Speaks.*
in response to Shandler’s request; others were existing poems or journal entries that young women around the country sent in to her. After compiling all of the submissions, Shandler’s original manuscript was 437 pages—many young women responded to this chance to write their lives. The resulting book, which was cut down almost in half, reflects the major issues plaguing teenage women, as expressed in personal writing samples from across America.

Amy Goldwasser’s collection is similar to Shandler’s, though it is almost ten years more recent. Titled Red: The Next Generation of American Writers—Teenage Girls—on What Fires up Their Lives Today, it chronicles the deepest issues of today’s generation of teenage women. What is significant about this ten-year update, however, is the change in writing culture. Though she only alludes to this shift, Goldwasser’s book comes after new trends like text messaging, the Internet, Facebook, and blogging. Teens no longer have writing inhibitions like those Peter Elbow had to overcome; as Goldwasser says, this is “a generation, perhaps the first, of writers. If you’re one of the 33 million Americans between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, you are a writer. It’s how you conduct your friendships, get to know people, break a heart, manage your family, flirt, lie, make plans, cancel them, announce big news, and, most important, present yourself to the rest of the world” (xiv). Whereas Pipher introduced America to the issues, and Shandler introduced America to the young women themselves, Goldwasser shifted the discussion to the Internet generation, a generation comfortable with exposing themselves through writing. All three of these books illuminate the internal and external issues plaguing America’s teenage women and imply their need to share them with an audience.
So in this generation, students are writing, in some form, on their own time; however, once this exposure occurs within a classroom, the teacher as an audience providing feedback to the writer becomes strikingly important. In “Between the Drafts,” Nancy Sommers shows that students often surprise themselves between drafts of their writing—that in trying to explain themselves in response to a teacher’s questions, they may unearth stories that they didn’t include in the first place. Many teachers fear such uncovering, and for that reason they are reluctant to blur the line between personal and academic writing, an “either/or” that should remain intact. Sommers disagrees. She, instead, wants her students to understand “how to bring their life and their writing together” (30). Like Sommers, Lad Tobin encourages this gray area between academic and personal writing, and he will even go so far as to call himself part-therapist, because of his role as a writing teacher. He believes in pushing students’ thinking through teacher response, helping them “say what we think they really mean” (Tobin 336). But when personal topics and expressive writing enter the picture, the “stakes are higher” (Tobin 339). This is when the writing teacher’s role may look very similar to a therapist’s role. Because of what students reveal, teachers are tempted “to deal directly with these psychological issues” (Tobin 342). Most composition theorists warn against such meddling, Tobin says, but he insists that it is hard to avoid in a personal writing course because of the nature of the subject. Because we are dealing with writing, it is inevitable that we will deal with our students’ emotions.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As Amy Goldwasser noted in her introduction to Red, the teenage years are a shaky time, perhaps the most formative in a person’s life, and within the last few years, young women in high school are beginning to openly explore that through their writing, both in and out of school. However, the scholarly research about such writing is disjointed. Few have begun to explore how these less inhibited voices affect the culture of a writing classroom, especially among female students. The authors of compilations like Reviving Ophelia and Red can listen to these teen voices and praise them for their candidness. They do not have to also be their teachers. I am interested in the gray area between roles—teacher, counselor, sister, friend. The place I often find myself.

Beyond this, I want to hear more about the motivations of the teenage women themselves. All eight young women in this study have used writing—whether school-assigned or self-motivated—as a method of coping. For most, the act of writing itself is a way to release stress, sadness, or anger. In Art of Writing, Giovanna uses her June portfolio reflection letter to say how much she “adored writing in [her] journal — A.K.A Therapy Session — practically every day.” She’d often come into class eager to write, and on some days when I gave a specific journal prompt, she’d ask if she could write a “free choice” entry because she had something on her mind. Grace, who usually chooses to write outside of school when she is “frustrated,” explained in a personal interview that writing “relieves [her] stress.” “The poetry may not show it, but in my head the situation’s rationalized and I don’t have to do anything I’d regret,” she says. Beth had a similar explanation in her personal interview, saying, “Sometimes when I’m upset, I’ll write to myself.” She actually types her self-motivated writing on her computer, then
deletes it, so there is no evidence of the writing anywhere—it is solely a way to “release anger,” and Beth feels “it’s the safest way to do that.” After writing, Beth feels “like a weight is off [her] shoulders.” Like Grace and Beth, Taylor says writing helps her emotionally because it gets her feelings out. “If something’s bothering me I can write it and be done with it,” she said. But why do so many young women in high school choose to write through their pain? The need to write and the writing itself both speak volumes, but I sought to understand how their writing serves a deeper purpose than an emotional release. I wondered if writing was also a vehicle to dive into the depths of themselves and help them make sense of their place in the world.

Given the existing research, several questions prompted further study:

1. How does writing manifest itself in the life of a teenage woman in and out of school, and why does it hold such power?

2. What is the connection between the personal writing teenage women do and their search for their identities? To that end, how might writing serve as a safe space for trying on or sorting out multiple identities at once?

3. How does the deeply personal relationship teenage women have with writing complicate traditional roles of teacher versus student, or teacher versus teacher? And in what ways is the work we do in Art of Writing at odds with—or perhaps protected from—typical school-sanctioned writing?

METHOD

Given the existing research, my informal observations, and the many questions that remained about the complicated relationship between young women and writing, I
sought answers of my own. I chose to focus on an elective course, Art of Writing, because it is solely devoted to writing, whereas standard language arts classes are more literature-based. As a writing class, Art of Writing yields time to devote to feedback, multiple drafts, and conferencing, pedagogical methods that other language arts teachers dream of but have trouble practicing due to time constraints. Though the genres of writing (reflective, descriptive, narrative, analysis, comparison-contrast, among others) are set in the school's curriculum, the topics are student choice, and many choose to write about themselves. The course has a required journal component, which opens up a dialogue between student and teacher that is unique to a writing classroom, especially with journal topics such as “What has your life taught you?”, “How do boys and girls differ in the problems they face at school?” and a “Memory Lane” day where students revisit stories and places of their childhood through writing. I read all the writing assigned throughout the course, but otherwise students only share their writing with classmates if they choose to, and most don’t. In their journal entries and graded assignments, many write about what they face as juniors and seniors on the verge of graduating high school. They have endured their adolescence and lived to tell about it—and they do. Many young women finally, at seventeen and eighteen, have the language to talk about their experiences, the perspective to view themselves as an outsider would, and the courage to know what they want from themselves and from others. All of these variables, together, make this population so interesting and worthy of study.

All of the teenage women I have taught over the years—from freshmen to seniors—gave me clearer insight into this study, just in knowing them. But there were many I could not include. The young women I chose all sought writing as a release; all
came in eager to write in their journals in class. But I'd be hard-pressed to find a teenage woman who never had that experience in Art of Writing—some just had them more than most. There were many others who had a significant connection to writing like the young women in the study, but for various reasons I could not include them: they were not yet 18, they were still in high school, or their situations were too risky to explore any further than in a classroom setting. After all these restrictions, I was left with eight young women who were similar in their relationship to writing, but who differed in almost every other way. They ran in different social circles, they were involved in different activities, they even took my class during different years and at different ages. In that way, they are representative of what it means to be a teenage woman in high school, and representative of the young women who took this class.

The eight young women in the study have taken my Art of Writing class at Accrede Regina High School—three during their junior year and six during their senior year—and all are white middle- to upper-middle-class teenagers who have since graduated from high school, one in 2008, four in 2009, and three in 2010. Of the eight young women, all can be considered successful, highly involved students. At Accrede Regina, four were two-season varsity athletes, three were singers, two were actors in the school plays, one was a musician, and another was a competitive figure skater outside of school. One was the senior class president and one was the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. All eight come from two-parent households of varying stability. All have at least one sibling. Two struggle with health problems, three with depression, three with anxiety, and one with bulimia. One of the eight has self-mutilated, another is bisexual. Two of the young women box in their free time to release anger. Three see therapists.
And all underwent a major transformation between their adolescent and their eighteen-year-old identities.

Once the young women agreed to be in the study, I conducted an interview with each of them after they graduated where we discussed their relationship with writing both in and out of school. During the interview, which we held at Accrede Regina High School, we examined samples of assignments they had submitted in Art of Writing when they were still students at the school. I hoped from the interviews to find more explicit explanation of the young women’s relationship with writing, both in and out of school. I asked about the conditions under which they were motivated to write at home, and also asked for more explanation about certain pieces they completed in Art of Writing. Finally, I asked them about their relationship with teachers of writing. I wanted to know how a teacher’s feedback—both positive and negative—impacts teenage women writing their identities.

The personal writing included in this study is comprised of assignments the young women completed during their time in high school. For each student, I examined several pieces of writing I had assigned and graded in Art of Writing: a get-to-know-you essay from the first week of school, a reflective essay they use for college admissions, descriptive vignettes of important people or places in their lives, a personal narrative, and a comparison-contrast essay, where many chose themselves as a topic. I then studied a letter they wrote in June where they looked back at their writing and reflected on how they developed throughout the year. All of this writing was completed outside of school and handed in for a grade. Even though the genres were assigned, the topics were student choice. In addition to graded assignments, I also studied the in-class journals of each of
the eight students. Some journal entries were "free choice" where students could write about whatever was on their mind; for other entries I posed a specific question on the blackboard that students were instructed to answer. All of these journal entries were completed as freewrites in the first ten minutes of class. Journals are never evaluated in Art of Writing. Students earn full credit based on completeness and adherence to the task, not based on the quality of the writing. It is their space to write freely without restrictions, so my feedback in the margins only praises them or asks them questions. To unpack all of this writing, I analyzed the writing's content, style, and organization. I looked for patterns not only in what they wrote, but in how they wrote it. I was especially interested in the language the young women used to present versions of themselves in writing.

In addition to the writing and personal interviews from these eight young women, I also conducted interviews with two guidance counselors and the school psychologist at Accrede Regina. I hoped the interviews with guidance counselors and the school psychologist would shed light on the issues plaguing teenage women within the high school culture. I also wondered how writing had been used as a counseling tool. Lastly, I distributed an anonymous survey to ten teachers in the language arts department at Accrede Regina. The survey evaluated their level of agreement to eight different statements, all of which addressed how they incorporated personal writing into their language arts classes and how personal writing affects their relationships with students. Two teachers chose to elaborate on some of their responses to the statements, so their opinions are included in the study, too. From these surveys, I hoped to better understand the roles of writing in the standard high school language arts classroom, which is
typically focused more on literature than writing. Also, I wanted to know if language arts teachers spend time on personal narrative assignments, and for those that have, I wondered if they ever felt uncomfortable providing feedback and a grade to something personal. See the figure below for a list of student and faculty participants, which excludes the anonymous language arts teacher survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of teenage participant</th>
<th>Year enrolled in Art of Writing, Graduation year</th>
<th>Writes in a journal outside of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Giovanna”</td>
<td>Senior, class of 2008</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Beth”</td>
<td>Senior, class of 2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Alex”</td>
<td>Junior, class of 2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Samantha”</td>
<td>Senior, class of 2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Courtney”</td>
<td>Senior, class of 2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hannah”</td>
<td>Junior, class of 2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Grace”</td>
<td>Junior, class of 2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Taylor”</td>
<td>Senior, class of 2010</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What I’ve Learned

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which teenage women used writing as a coping mechanism throughout high school, but the young women in my study taught me much more than that. From their writing, it is evident that in early adolescence, these young women learned to be attractive, passive, and dependent on others, and by mid-adolescence these rules of femininity became their way of life. But by the time these young women hit seventeen or eighteen, they realized the culture had silenced them, and they found the courage to stand up for themselves through writing. I will argue that during the later years of their adolescence, writing became a venue for the young women in this study to write their past and present identities, understand the pressure they’ve faced as female teenagers, decide on an identity they could adhere to, and ultimately connect that identity with others.
The young women in this study have told me they write to calm down, or that writing makes them “feel better.” But the reason writing calms them is because it is a safe space to try on identities before sharing them with their peers. They can finally speak on the page, free from expectations, and so they are eager to use the space to reconstruct and negotiate their contradictory selves, and ultimately establish more informed identities. Even though in Art of Writing I read the personal writing these young women do, the class still fosters their safe space because I present myself as a non-judgmental listener. Once they learn through my feedback that I will validate them and share with them on a human level, they seek connection with me as a fellow female, fellow writer, ex-teenager, and confidant. Even though colleagues tell me that I am challenging the conventional teacher-student relationship, I find it crucial that teenage women are given the chance in a school setting to seek identity and break their silence through writing. And I find it crucial that they know I can hear them.
DIVING IN: A YOUNG WOMAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH WRITING

The experiences, insights, understandings, and misunderstandings of that stretch between thirteen and nineteen play no small part in determining the people we will always be. – Amy Goldwasser

To be a young woman in high school is to be a part of a culture. That culture—laden with expectations from the media, expectations from peers and parents, attention from boys and judgment from other adolescent women, and a whole world of technology—intersects the individual psychology of each woman going through it. And as the ocean begins, these teenage women turn to writing as a way to navigate the wreck before them, with the curiosity of their childhood and the language of their adulthood, eager and afraid and silent and assertive, multiple selves in one.

During their transition period as upperclassmen who will soon graduate high school, teenage women function in a liminal space. Maggi Savin-Baden defines liminality as “a stripping away of old identities, an oscillation between states and personal transformation,” and names adolescence to be one such liminal state most people experience (Savin-Baden 2). The writing of the teenage women I’ve taught shows they oscillate between a “young adolescent” identity and an “about-to-graduate” identity. This time in their lives is a searching stage, a place “in which an individual stays for a time, and then emerges into a new place or position” (Savin-Baden 2). Art of Writing provided a venue for the women in this study to openly exist in this liminality, a chance to use writing to strip away old identities and transform.

But the young women’s past identities from childhood and early to mid-adolescence did not disappear; in fact, they often re-scripted them in writing. It is these written identities that I will focus on in this study, not their inherent identities. Written identities are those identities they scripted in writing. In journals they keep outside of
school, and journal entries and graded assignments they write for my class, they write versions of who they perceive they are and who they perceive they have been. Rather than studying them psychologically and trying to discern whether the identities they present are true to life, I will believe what they share with me both in writing and in interviews.

This chapter will examine the tendency of the young women in this study to use writing to construct and then reflect upon their multiple contradictory identities of the past and present. Their writing will show that early-adolescent identities, as they write them from a senior-year vantage point, lean towards silence and passivity. When they recreate these years in writing, they recall times where they were shaped by cultural standards of attractiveness and behavior for teenage women. Through personal writing, both in and out of school, they ultimately found a method of resistance to rules the culture placed on them as females, and this chapter will prove that as seniors, their writing became an effort to rescript and reclaim their identities. This experience helped break their silence. While some found voices solely on the page, others used what they created on the page as a vehicle for presenting an identity to others for the sake of connecting with other women.

Writing a Past Identity: Courtney and Giovanna

"Now, as I near the end of my senior year in Art of Writing, I feel utter confidence. I've grown so much not only as a writer, but as a person." – Giovanna

For many of the young women in this study, Art of Writing provided the first opportunity to write their past identities. Some first semester journal prompts asked students to recall past events, emotions, and moments of enlightenment, all in an attempt
to promote self-reflection.\footnote{For a list of sample journal prompts from the first semester in Art of Writing, see Appendix A.} This genre-driven course begins with various personal essay subgenres such as reflection, description, and narration, so these journal entries were a necessary tool to help students dig into their pasts for material. The consequence of prompts like these was that some of the women in this study found a deeper understanding of their identities as they wrote interpretations of their pasts.

But many were reluctant at first to look so far within. Often they needed to be prompted by question-based feedback and conferencing. Courtney, for example, needed a bit more prompting than a journal question; her search for an identity in writing occurred over multiple drafts. The additional prompting in Courtney’s case was far from uncommon, especially early in the year. At this point, many young women resist self-disclosure. Some are reluctant to write versions of their past identities because they are embarrassed by them, especially since as seniors they perceive themselves as having overcome these “lesser” personas. Others are reluctant to share these past identities with me, an adult and a teacher, because they are not yet sure they can trust me as their audience. Despite their challenge, and despite my own hesitation, I push them for the sake of their writing. I pose journal topics to prompt them to rewrite their pasts, ask questions in the margins of their writing so they can reflect on those written pasts, and hold conferences to discuss it all one on one.

The first out-of-class essay in Art of Writing is a self-reflection, completed in time so seniors can hand it in with their college applications. The common application task most students choose is, “Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you,” and so for their
reflective essay, I first use journal prompts to help them to look into their past for something that shaped their identities. Courtney struggled with the reflective journal entries because, as she explained in one of them, “I guess any self-reflection I don’t like; I can’t like talk about myself at all!” The first draft of the essay she wrote, where she used her skating career as a window into her fear of judgment, was more about a skating event than about herself.

After I read Courtney’s reflective essay draft, I wrote question-based feedback in the margins that Courtney had to respond to in her journal for homework. The following day, I held a writing conference with Courtney where we discussed the essay and her journal responses, which still included gaps in the identities she presented in the essay. On her first draft, I had asked in the margin, “How did you develop a negative view of yourself?” Even in her response to that margin question, Courtney was not able to pinpoint the source, so she wrote, “I have expected so much from myself but I don’t think anyone [expected at lot of me] except my skating coach this certain time at Norths—the competition.” But as Courtney explained aloud what she meant in a writing conference, I jotted down notes verbatim on her draft, which read, “after years of judging a person can break easily, but I didn’t. This sport—you have to be strong. At any moment—any competition, any test, can ruin you. If you’re not determined. Every morning I’ve faced this—coaches, judges, etc.—makes me real.” To her final draft, Courtney added:

Everyone gets judged somehow. Lots of times we’re our own biggest critics. I am, without a doubt, my toughest critic. Whether it is a 6 a.m. practice or a weeklong competition, I am constantly on display, getting critiqued and fixed. With a test, it’s 3 or 4 judges, silence, and me, on the
Nerve-wracking is an understatement. After years of judging and expectation, I could’ve broken easily, but I haven’t. I must be tenacious. Any competition or test could have ruined me if I wasn’t determined.

To this day, I remember the look on Courtney’s face as we were sitting out in the hallway and she came to this conclusion, when she finally understood the effect competitive figure skating has had on her self-perception and perfectionism. In her personal interview for this study, Courtney said, “Conferencing was like self-discovery. It may take some time to get it out but eventually it’s gonna surface.” She couldn’t believe that she had opened up the way she did, and she couldn’t believe how much her past had influenced her current identity. Despite her distaste for self-reflection, this essay became one of the essays she liked the most because, as she explained, it was “one of those defining moments, which are always fun because you learn something about yourself.” For Courtney, it was the revision process that helped her to write an identity she hadn’t been able to name.

After conferencing and revision, Courtney was able to use personal writing as a tool for constructing an identity. In the final draft of the essay, she concludes in the third person about her rise above a past identity:

I used to know a girl who always had a negative view of herself. Ugly was the only adjective she knew to describe her, and no accomplishment, compliment, or success she has ever encountered has changed her mind. Over time I’ve watched that girl get shackled down by her own doubt; awkwardly she tried to skate away but it held her back. I’ve witnessed self-confidence burst away from those shackles and rise up above it all. I
used to be that girl. But, if what the velveteen rabbit said is true, I must be real, because I could have never gone through almost twelve years of my life staying with skating. I must have been strong enough not to break.

By writing in the third person at first, Courtney distanced her past and present identities, and she used the essay to come to some understanding of how the two have manifested in her life. When she says “I used to know a girl who always had a negative view of herself,” she creates two identities in writing. The I and the girl are both Courtney, but the I is how she perceived herself as a senior and the girl is how she perceived herself for years before that. The task of writing this personal essay allowed her to use a metaphor, skating away from shackles, in order to separate her multiple constructed identities. Once self-confidence bursts away from the shackles of doubt, she connects the two written identities with the transition, “I used to be that girl,” and is then able to make a claim about her current identity, saying “I must be real.” For Courtney, it was easier to be an observer of her past life than to admit to her past with I statements. She “used to know” that girl, and she “watched” her. Only when she gained awareness through writing her identities does she begin to use I statements to claim her current identity. By manipulating points of view in this piece, Courtney created an identity that was a combination of past perceptions of herself. The personal essay task and the creative nature of Courtney’s writing style gave her this opportunity in a way that only writing can.

By the second semester, the teenage women in this study had internalized this type of self-searching and began to write their past identities even in assignments that didn’t call for it. During our comparison-contrast unit in April, a journal prompt asked
students to write about a friend they knew who transformed in high school, for better or worse. Giovanna asked me if she could write about herself. In the entry, she wrote:

When I came to HP as a freshman, I had little confidence, LOTS of baggy sweatshirts in my wardrobe, and absolutely no voice of my own. I was a follower, not a leader. I didn’t speak out much in class and often felt embarrassed whenever I uttered a word to anyone. When making my freshman year schedule, I desperately wanted to take choir class because I really did enjoy singing. However, because my three best friends weren’t taking the class, I chose not to. This was honestly one of the biggest regrets I’ve had in my life.

Now, as a 4th parking period senior, my voice has significantly grown and developed—not only my singing voice, but my opinionated voice. I’ve developed my own style with my clothes, hair, and makeup, and I do things to make me happy. I’ve taken choir class for the past 3 years, and have become such a stronger singer. I’m comfortable in my own skin and love talking in public. It’s definitely safe to say that I’ve changed for the better. 😊

In this journal entry, Giovanna writes a past identity that lived life for others. She sees she had constructed an identity that would be accepted by her peers, and she re-scripted that past identity in her journal entry. In her interview, Giovanna recalled what young women do to themselves throughout adolescence: “In high school, it’s all about what you look like to other people. In high school I’d ask my friend, ‘Do you like this shirt?’ and if she said no, I’d put it down and not buy it. Now [as a college student] I have a mind of
my own.” Young women in high school are socialized to blend in with a crowd of accepted others. After years of seeing and hearing the rules of style, body type, and actions for their gender, teenage women construct an identity that embodies those rules. For Giovanna, writing became a way to rewrite this identity of the past and place it in contrast with the way she perceives herself in the present. The written contrast between her dependence and independence gave Giovanna an awareness that liberated her from living for others.

Writing contradictory identities like Courtney and Giovanna occurred often among the young women in this study, a tendency that can be traced back to theories of dialogism. In The Dialogic Imagination, Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin argues that a “dialogic” work of literature exists in an ongoing conversation with works that come before it. The fact of this dialogism, for Bakhtin, extends and expands both the present work and that which precedes and thus influences it. From this, I will take this notion of shifting, relative time, where writing in the present is both informed by and alters writing in the past. The span of time becomes useful for this study, despite the fact that the young women’s writing all occurred within the same window of time, because, as writers, they were scripting identities of their past and present, and creating ideal identities for their futures. Once they wrote their past identities, they were able to reexamine them in the context of their own writing. Their past identities became like “past works” as they were reconstructed through personal narrative. This opportunity to scrutinize representations of themselves through writing, the chance to see their own pasts as they recreated them, altered their readings of their present identities and vice

\[3\] For more information about Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, see The Dialogic Imagination (1975).
versa. Their present identities, as they constructed and examined them in writing, gave them clearer perspective on their past ones. The inevitable contrast of these past and present works—of the identities they perceive they had and the identities they perceive they have—informed the identities they scripted for the future, those written representations of who they might hope to become.

This theory sheds light on why the young women in this study suddenly faced tension in their senior year, tension they then negotiated in writing. Throughout the course, the young women in this study wrote identities of the past, but these past written identities were altered by their present writing of themselves, writing shaped by the culture of high school and their girl-damaging society. The way Giovanna, for example, places her two written identities in contrast with each other shows that they are working dialogically within the space of her writing; her past informs her present, and her present informs her past. When she writes that as a freshman she had “no voice of [her] own” and “little confidence,” she does so because she feels she now has a voice and has confidence. These are not claims she could have written as a freshman; she can write them now, however, because of the contrast she perceives in her senior self. In scripting her present identity, she emphasizes, “I do things to make me happy,” an affirmation that emerged as she rewrote her past and noticed how much she’d changed. Her present identity as she writes it, where she feels more comfortable with herself and no longer lives for others, is a construction that is shaped by her sudden understanding of who she feels she was in the past, an understanding that she came to because she had to recreate her past in writing. In Art of Writing, this realization occurs for many teenage women, as often they say they see themselves in ways they never have before. Both Giovanna and
Courtney claim to have found a newer, more confident identity, but according to Bakhtin’s theory, they wrote these identities into existence by altering the reading of their pasts and letting their pasts alter the readings of their presents. They create a stark contrast between their past and present identities in writing to reject who they feel they were, and take ownership over who they feel they are. By writing and examining their dialogical identities through personal narrative, they created a more aware and informed identity that they were proud to claim as their own.

**Awareness of Cultural Norms: Samantha and Taylor**

“We are caught in the middle of childhood and adulthood. Teenagers are pushed to act like adults while being treated like children. We are trying to grow up, but yet we still have uncomfortable boundaries and people telling us 'no.' Personally, I have a tendency to look beyond the roadblocks and try to 'seize the day.' But there are numerous times when I feel stuck.” – Samantha

While Courtney and Giovanna were more reluctant to write their past identities, Samantha and Taylor were eager to. Both had written in journals for years before taking Art of Writing, and so they were more comfortable with self-searching than some others. By the time these young women came to Art of Writing, writing became their way of scripting past identities that were influenced by the culture’s expectations of beauty, and re-scripting present identities that resisted such expectations. What fascinated me was that the Art of Writing course did not openly prompt discussions of beauty or body image; these topics were consequences of the young women looking to their pasts. Their re-scripting of identity was sometimes deliberate and other times subconscious, but the end result was the same; in establishing and emphasizing their own self-growth, they wrote confident feminist identities in stark contrast to the identities they wrote of their pasts.
For her reflective college admissions essay, Samantha chose to return to those shaky years of adolescence, to her eighth grade graduation, and crafted an essay that shows her awareness of what the culture did to her as a young teen.\(^4\) In her essay, she rewrote a past identity as one who tried to fit in, one who knew she needed to be attractive to get attention. As a senior in high school, she finally understood the damage her appearance-driven society caused, and she used that understanding to alter the reading of her past, an identity she eventually saw as having been dictated by cultural norms of femininity. Put simply, she used the self-reflection piece to negotiate a struggle between an identity she has known and an identity she was just coming to know. That day of eighth grade graduation practice, Samantha was immediately sent to the back of the line for being the tallest student to graduate. She writes:

> For a short time I attempted to play with the card I was dealt in life and throw a basketball around, but it wasn’t for me. People would gaze up at me and say, ‘Do you play basketball? No?! Well, why not? You’d be perfect. Just lift those big arms up and you’re right at the net!’ I never wished to be tallest or biggest. I never wished to play basketball. Acceptance for who I was, even for myself, was something I yearned for in life. Hovering over small classmates, feeling wider and uglier than all of the other girls was what I came to know.

> The irony of ending my middle school years in a sequence of height order is undeniable for me, considering how I spent these years transforming myself in an attempt to gain some sort of normalcy…

\(^4\) For the complete essay, “The Back of the Line,” see Appendix B.
Her reflection on others telling her to play basketball shows an awareness of a culture that says tall girls play basketball, that her size would only be acceptable if it was put to a use deemed acceptable by others. She uses the essay to recall an identity she tried on—one who fit others’ expectations by playing basketball—and then to reject that identity by writing “it wasn’t for me.” The past identity she rewrote couldn’t be disassociated from her height; however, her present reading of herself alters the reading of her past since she calls the height-order event “irony.” It’s unlikely that in eighth grade, Samantha would have seen this as ironic after “years “transforming [herself] in an attempt to gain some sort of normalcy”; it may have hurt her, or affected her self-perception at the time, but the word irony is a realization she now has a term for in seeing her two identities in writing. The self-reflective personal narrative allowed Samantha to reread her past with an informed awareness.

Later in the essay, she proudly claims her present identity as one of self-acceptance, and in the process establishes a feminist identity that resists cultural norms:

But by living through the pain of being a big girl in middle school and surviving, I’ve learned that there is so much more to gain from being big, strong, and female. I am proud of my height and my hips. I may never be able to have that feeling of weightlessness that some girls experience on a day to day basis, but I will always be a strong woman. I will wear my high heels with pride and stand tall next to my fellow businesspeople once I enter the ‘real world.’ I have found beauty in myself, no matter what height or weight I may be.
Her reference to her hips and to being “big, strong, and female” shows a feminist undertone; she realizes the pressure that is put on her by a culture obsessed with beauty but is more proud of her strength in being an independent woman. Unlike some of the other young women in the study, Samantha has written enough about herself throughout her young life to often feel comfortable making claims about who she is. She writes, “I am proud of my height and my hips,” “I will always be a strong woman,” and “I have found beauty in myself,” all strong I statements that script a confident senior identity. To conclude and make meaning of this height-order experience, Samantha ends her essay with “While I may have been at the back of the line, I received my diploma last and took my time getting to the podium, as I wore the most beautiful, pink, open-toed high heels I had ever seen. Talk about final impressions.” By ending her essay in pink heels at the back of the line, Samantha constructs an identity that refuses to accept what the culture tells her to be; rather than take on the petite and passive role of women, her informed identity stands taller and more dominant than those around her.

The way Samantha constructs and examines her past identity, and then creates a confident present and future identity, shows she is a third-wave feminist without even knowing it. Unlike earlier feminists who were activists for women collectively, third wave feminists empower the individual woman against her culture’s restrictions. They recognize the sometimes harmful impact of the culture on young women, but rather than run from cultural symbols of femininity, third-wave feminists claim the symbols as their own and bring them into male-defined spaces. In their book, *Manifesto: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards explain, “We, and others, call this intersection of culture and feminism ‘Girlie.’ Girlie says we’re not
broken, and our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for ‘we’ve been duped’” (Baumgardner and Richards 136). For the first time, teenage women can call themselves feminists and still read Seventeen and wear pink high heels. In fact, embracing such stereotypically feminine trends is a way to bring women back into the spotlight for what matters to them—the main goal of feminism in the first place. “When Girlies claim Barbies, pink, eye shadow, and knitting to be as valid as trucks, blue, combat boots, and sports, that’s all part of the resistance too,” Baumgardner and Richards say. “Both are attempting to put girls’ ‘voices’—broadly defined as what girls like, think about, talk about, and what moves them—into the human conversation” (Baumgardner and Richards 176). Being forced to dress according to what women “should” wear has the same consequence as feeling compelled not to, just to prove a point as a feminist. As part of this generation of third-wave feminists, Samantha did not have to wear a tuxedo to her graduation to challenge the status quo; she did so by wearing pink high heels. It’s doubtful that as an eighth-grader, Samantha saw her pink heels as a symbol of empowerment, but the self-reflective identity she creates in this narrative does, a shift that emphasizes Bakhtin’s theory of dialogical works. “The Back of the Line” is not only informed by her past, but also alters her past, as she rereads the event five years after it happened, with eighteen-year-old, third-wave-feminist eyes.

Seeing these past and present identities in dialogue with each other gave Samantha the chance to examine them, to see how one was altered by the other, and to establish an identity that was more culturally aware and confident. She writes her future
self as one who will proudly stand in heels next to her fellow business people, an act Baumgardner and Richards see as “bring[ing] our Girlie-ness into male-defined spaces” (Baumgardner and Richards 141). They explain, “While it’s true that embracing the pink things of stereotypical girlhood isn’t a radical gesture meant to overturn the way society is structured, it can be a confident gesture” (Baumgardner and Richards 136). Because of the nature of the writing task, self-reflection, Samantha is able to use the essay both to construct a past identity that was burdened by her culture’s restrictions and to place it in contrast with a stronger, feminist identity. Reliving this gesture through personal narrative and then examining the past and present identities in conversation gave Samantha a sense of confidence she was finally able to claim as a senior.

The nature of Art of Writing leads students to construct and reconstruct their identities because the curriculum offers personal narrative topics throughout the entire first semester. In Samantha’s case, writing her past and present identities in a self-reflective narrative brought to light a contradiction between an identity the culture constructed and an identity she constructed. This reflective assignment took place in October, but Samantha actually used the rest of the Art of Writing course to analyze her contradictory identities as products of cultural restrictions. This is due in part to the timing of the course in her life; as she explains in her portfolio reflection letter in June, Art of Writing “went along naturally with [her] in [her] progression to sanity.” She explains that our papers came at the time of her “mini life disasters,” and that she used them to escape and reflect on what mattered to her. But this was not an accident; it was her conscious decision. Since the writing topics were all her choice, she decided to use them to write and then negotiate her culturally-scripted identities.
An example of this occurred in her description of self essay in November, where Samantha used writing to unpack her public and private identities that have been constructed by what people expect of her. During our descriptive writing unit, I use a journal prompt that asks students to describe how they see themselves. The prompt reads, “What do you see when you look in the mirror? Where does your gaze land? How does this gaze determine your attitude toward yourself and your life? Do you see your younger self beneath this present-day face? Can you determine your future self through this gaze?” It explicitly asks students to write their past, present, and future self-perceptions, but these self-perceptions are colored by how they see themselves physically. Body image is perhaps the most popular topic among the teenage women I have taught; students often use writing to scrutinize their own bodies in class journal entries that, unlike the prompt above, do not explicitly call for it. For this generation of teenage women, their perception of their bodies is often as the root of their perception of their identities. According to Baumgardner and Richards, this is why so many young women flock to Seventeen’s “Trauma-rama” feature, where teenagers around the country share embarrassing moments their bodies caused. “Girls really want to hear that they are not alone,” they say, “that they are not the only ones who feel a sense of foreboding that their social ambitions, indeed their entire identity, can be derailed by their bodily anarchy” (Baumgardner and Richards 192). The prompt above recognizes the idea that bodily exploration and identity exploration are intertwined and shaped by each other. Teenage women’s self-image is often dictated by how they perceive themselves

3 Courtesy of Tell it Slant by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola [Maybe just say “From Tell It Slant by” (etc.) because “courtesy of” implies you got their permission to use the prompt.]
physically, and how their physical perception fits into cultural standards of attractiveness for women.

While some students struggled with this journal task, Samantha, who was already used to writing about herself, was inspired by it. She used her journal response to craft a descriptive essay about herself. In the essay, she wrote:

‘There she is: The November Student of the Month. She’s among the top seven Soprano Twos in the state and she’s editor-in-chief of the Forum. Her life must be completely flawless. Look at her! She has a boyfriend, an awesome brother, intelligence, talent, and poise. She’s also tall and beautiful. I wish I could be her.’ Gross. I look in the mirror, horrified at what I see. I haven’t eaten in about 36 hours, a pimple mocks me on my lower left chin, my eyebrows scream the need for heavy plucking and my teeth that were once perfect have gotten less than white lately. I am a mess. Today sounds unappealing and the depression etched onto my brain refuses to rub off. Must I face the world today? I lean closer into the mirror and examine every blotch and acne scar. I find it amazing that anyone would find me attractive, especially today. My stomach gargles, reminding me of my hunger, but also shoots the idea into my busy head to stare at my stomach some more. There remains to be a tiny portion of fat still hanging by my hip bone. I got a B on my math quiz yesterday and I barely had a voice in choir. I am such a failure.
She begins this description with a quote from an unnamed “other” who ticks off Samantha’s successes. The success is measured by appearance (“tall and beautiful”), relationships (“has a boyfriend, an awesome brother”), and titles (Student of the Month, Soprano Two, editor-in-chief). These are identities she feels she lives for the eyes of others, identities that are constructed by the larger culture of high school. But since Samantha is the voice behind this unnamed other, even that perception of herself is one she creates through writing. The quick transition to what she sees in the mirror, with words like “gross,” “horrified,” “mocks,” “scream,” and “mess,” crafts an identity that rejects qualities that “should” define success, and instead scrutinizes physical imperfections. All of the success as she begins this piece is filtered through the eyes of others, and so she writes it in the third person. For example, rather than reveal her Student of the Month title by saying “I am” she says “There she is”; yet, at the end of the piece, she has no problem saying “I am such a failure.” This contrast was typical of Samantha’s writing throughout the course. She found it easier to point out what she perceived in herself as negative, rather than give herself any well-deserved praise. And while she did praise herself in this piece, her use of third-person point of view handed it off to someone else.

By constructing an identity through writing, however, Samantha was able to claim an identity that rises above her culture’s expectations and write private identities that she was proud to bring public. Later in the essay, she writes a senior identity, one that “doesn’t need to pretend anymore.” “I really am just about that happy,” she wrote. She ends the essay with confidence in the identity she now adheres to:
Every morning is a challenge, but also an opportunity to create a miracle for myself. The closer I get to divine happiness, the deeper the exploration of who this tall beast of a girl truly is. I will wear my loud perfume and sport all of my rings at once and listen to Christmas music in October. ‘Samantha’ may appear to be just a lucky face, doing everything right all of the time. But if you really know me through my eyes and into my soul, it is clear that all of that isn’t even the start of it.

What is so fascinating about this piece is the difference between what Samantha thought she was writing about and what she was actually writing about. When she shifts the writing to discuss her newfound acceptance, she begins by saying, “Flash forward four years. Now as a senior, I throw some makeup onto my tired face and run a straightener through my newly-died brown hair. Changes mentally bring about changes physically.” By using the transition “flash forward four years” halfway through the essay, Samantha assigns her self-deprecating identity to the past. However, all of those facts she ticked off as she gazed into the mirror—Student of the Month, editor-in-chief, top seven Soprano Two—occurred in present day. So while transitions like “flash forward” and “now as a senior” try to script competing freshman and senior identities, the content of the essay actually scripts public and private identities that really both operate in the present during her senior year.

This contradiction in the writing illustrates a contradiction Samantha has faced throughout her young life. A deep seated fear of failure, made present in her life after years as an adolescent trying to survive high school, is a fear that surfaced in her writing, despite accolades from those around her. She harbored so many private identities as a
result of what the culture expected of her, and she used writing to recreate these identities, examine them, and then begin to overcome them. Even though she claimed to have finally found success on her own terms, the separation of public and private still existed in her writing. The culture’s expectations, then, still manifested within her, but writing offered her a venue to face the tension. She explains this in her personal interview, as she reveals her motivation for taking on a description-of-self piece:

I was going through a tough time, and I thought it would be a good idea to delve into who I was on the inside and outside and try to find some reason for why I was going through it and be at peace with it. And writing that was a really good way for me to do it. I started with looking in the mirror, and wrote how I was disgusted by myself, but I ended saying I was going to be okay.

For Samantha, writing allowed her the space to at least say she was going to be okay. She writes a private identity to recognize falling victim to the culture’s idea of beauty and success. Then, after examining that identity, she writes a public identity that resists societal norms by listening to Christmas music in October and wearing multiple rings, and a private identity that only people who “really know [her] through [her] eyes and into [her] soul” can see.

Like Samantha, Taylor chose to describe her appearance in her reflective admissions essay, and in doing so, she crafted contradictory identities: one dictated by cultural acceptance, and one that rises above it. Rather than retell an experience, Taylor wrote a descriptive self-portrait where she contrasted people’s judgment of her appearance with the reality she lives every day. For example, she began by discussing
her hair, her characteristic others often criticize, but explained that she kept her hair so wild in order to hide what she considered a “too-big forehead.” She discussed her obsession with tanning, which her friends mocked, but explained in her essay, “When I am tan, I am confident.” This was also the first piece of writing where she disclosed her struggles with self-mutilation, as she included scars from cutting in her self-portrait, too. Taylor concluded that all young women, herself included, judge each other based on appearance, but they never know the full story. That behind appearances rest deeper issues. Through personal writing, Taylor shared “the full story”: that the culture’s expectations of a teenage woman have constructed contradictory identities within her. She wrote an identity that was scripted by the culture—one concerned with beauty, makeup, and her body—but also wrote an identity that rose above this obsession with image and saw how damaging it could be to young women. According to third-wave feminists like Baumgardner and Richards, this makes Taylor a Girlie like Samantha. In her writing she claimed ownership over feminine symbols like mascara, tanning salons, and hair, and used them to empower herself against the culture.

According to Taylor, this awareness did not happen until her senior year in Art of Writing, even though since her sophomore year, she has written in a journal. While her sophomore year entries documented the happenings of each school day, her most recent entries are her opinions about topics that interest her. She actually read *Ophelia Speaks* and began to write her own entries for each of Shandler’s chapters. Her latest is about self-inflicted wounds, the low point in her life that she has since overcome. The personal journal entry did not include everything she’d gone through, but it began with her first cutting incident and ended with how she moved past it. She wrote about these topics in
her at-home journal because, as she says, "I can get everything out without anyone judging me because I don’t have to show anyone." For Taylor, self-motivated journaling is an opportunity to be candid away from the critical eyes of others, a concern she is plagued by because of her role as a teenage woman. She writes now about cutting episodes she’s had in her earlier teenage years because she has gained a new perspective on them that she now has the capacity to discuss. As she explained in her interview, “Two years ago I wouldn’t write about that because of myself. I wasn’t comfortable talking about it yet.” Now, however, she is willing and almost eager to write her past identity, one she perceives as constructed by a culture obsessed with beauty. Like the others, Taylor’s identities are works that operate dialogically. Her present reading of herself is altered by her past culturally-scripted identity; likewise, she rewrites her past identity with the new awareness she’s gained as a senior in high school. This re-scripting of identity is an act of rebellion against her appearance-driven culture. By recreating her identity in this way, Taylor gained an awareness of how the culture tried to influence her and established a stronger, third-wave feminist identity that resisted its forces.

The Safest Way to Be Heard: Grace and Alex

Anger rushed through my blood and spilled out in ink on my diary’s page. – Alex

Whether to rewrite their pasts, gain awareness of their inherent contradictions, or establish a new culturally-informed self, writing was a tool for the young women in this study to construct and negotiate their many identities. Silenced both as teenagers and as women, many of them built walls around these perceived identities, and writing gave them the space to break their walls down. But why? Why writing and not just speaking?
The simple answer is that many were not asked to self-search before taking a writing class, and so the mere act of personal writing was an opportunity few had before their junior or senior year. Questions like those posed in the journal prompts are questions few take the time to ask or to answer. But there has to be more to it, or else none of these young women would have been motivated to write in a journal outside of school years before Art of Writing. The reason teenage women choose to try on identities in writing is because writing can take place in isolation.

I have taken these young women at their word, so even though I could never know for sure whether my students are discussing these issues with close friends or their parents, most have told me they are embarrassed to do so, and that they write about them instead. According to their personal interviews, most then keep that writing private. Giovanna says she wrote about issues in her Art of Writing journal that she “wouldn’t want fellow students to see.” Beth says, “Sometimes when I’m upset I’ll write to myself, but I don’t share it.” Alex told me, “You’re the only person who ever sees these,” as we discussed poems she had written. Courtney doesn’t think anyone, even her family, knows she writes outside of school at all. Taylor’s family, before her senior year in Art of Writing, didn’t know she wrote, until her mother found her journal and “she used it to talk to [Taylor] about stuff.” Taylor explains, “In the long run it helped, but at the time I hated her.” Grace and Hannah both say they are reluctant to share their personal writing, but they will share it with a person they trust. Of the eight girls, Samantha is the only student who said she willingly shared her work because she has “always been very open about it.” I will take what these young women have said in interviews and throughout the
course of knowing them as truth; most of what they write about themselves occurs in an isolated space.

Alex and Grace, for example, both write in journals outside of school, and did so before they took Art of Writing as juniors. Alex began journaling in elementary school and Grace began at fourteen. For them, self-motivated writing was a safe space away from their judgmental peers where they could pour out any emotion, like anger, sadness, or frustration. The release of such emotion through a pen calms them; it relieves the stress they face as teenage women. A teacher of writing, I do love to hear that students use writing this way, but its implications worry me. What has our culture done to teenage women to teach them to write rather than speak?

One guidance counselor at the high school recalls a situation where he used writing to encourage one of his counselees, an adolescent woman, to open up about her parents' divorce. Much of the time, this is because it is easier to write than to speak aloud. As he explains:

From what I witnessed, it was so different with her writing it down. It was difficult for her to talk about but when she wrote it, it was able to just flow. We started with drawings, then asked questions that she wrote answers to, like ‘Can you tell me about how it was when mom and dad lived together? Can you write down what it felt like when dad left?’ Unlike some people who can come in and free flow, other people are very reserved—but for some reason when they write it down, they’re not as reserved.
One explanation is that teenage women are taught at a young age to keep their negative emotions to themselves. In a high school, a brooding man doesn’t get a second look, but a brooding woman is told, “Smile!” by everyone around her. Mary Pipher explains that “training for the female role” is the same as it was fifty years ago: “Be attractive, be a lady, be unselfish and of service, make relationships work and be competent without complaint” (Pipher 39). Years of this make young women internalize it, and during high school they forget how to openly express their darker emotions. They are so used to being silenced or judged by others that they keep many identities private. Pipher encourages her teenage clients to keep journals outside of school because of this: “Their journals are places where they can be honest and whole. In their writing, they can clarify, conceptualize and evaluate their experiences. Writing their thoughts and feelings strengthens their sense of self. Their journals are a place where their point of view on the universe matters” (Pipher 255). When a teenage woman writes in a journal outside of school, it cannot answer back like others can. It cannot be disappointed. It cannot expect, or judge, or react, or reject. And so as adolescents are socialized into their role as women, they use self-motivated writing to express what they cannot say aloud.

In this way, the writing in this study is a form of rebellious silence. When writing takes place outside of school, most teachers do not know it’s happening, and so a student may appear reticent when actually she has quite a bit to say. The young women in this study do not harbor their thoughts or emotions; instead, they “voice” them in writing. The writing these young women do exists in that spectrum between silence and voice. It is not quite silence because something within them is escaping in words, but it is not quite voice because the release only occurs on the unpublished page. In some ways this
body of written work is proof of their public silence, of the measures they must go to because of their role as silenced teenage women. But in other ways, this work is a break of their silence. The nature of journal or poetry writing is a free flow of ideas, and so freewriting at home is a way to pour out emotion in a way that crying would, or try on an identity they are embarrassed to try on in public. They are, in a way, speaking out; it’s just occurring on paper. Writing this way in the classroom, or bringing in the writing they do at home to share with me, places them farther towards “voice” than “silence” on the continuum, even though they are not sharing aloud. They break their silence more publicly because they have an audience besides themselves, me; however, it still isn’t totally public because most are not sharing their writing with anyone else. So, for the purposes of this study, I consider journal writing both in and out of school as a gray space these young women exist in as they negotiate a desire to remain silent with a desire to establish a voice.

Grace writes about her hidden identity in her outside-of-school journal, and like many of these young women, the private space has given her at least a written voice to cope with her tumultuous past. In one entry that she shared with me after she graduated, Grace wrote, “I withhold my own identity....I feel as if I do not release that identity to the world, in fear of being different. I fear difference because I hold myself to higher standards. I don’t want to be a typical high schooler. I try to act older to gain respect. I see no point in drama.” The way she references “typical high schooler” shows a mature perception of the impact a school has on identity. There is a “typical,” and when teenage women do not identify with that image, they find themselves struggling. Grace explained to me that she had come home and written in her self-motivated journal in response to
something that had happened during the school day. This shows a reason many of the young women in this study turn to personal journals. During adolescence, they fear being different, and a journal is the only place they can “be different” where no one is watching.

While Grace may have stayed silent about these issues publicly, silence does not indicate absence. In a speech at Texas A&M University, Cheryl Glenn discussed the rhetorical function of a woman’s silence. As she explained, some “occupy silence” when they feel they have no other choice, when they feel “they must remain silent or be hurt in some emotional, physical, or professional way” (Glenn). Many young women, like Grace, feel their high school culture will shun them for being themselves. The identities that would be less “popular” can come out as written identities on the page, but not in public, for fear of being rejected or being hurt emotionally. This is proof of Glenn’s belief that some “feel silenced by the knowledge that speech makes one vulnerable,” as she explains in her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Glenn 43). Because speech makes them vulnerable, the young women in this study, especially Grace, turned to writing to “speak” through their silence. The writing is something they can control; they can select their audience, and so some of that vulnerability is alleviated because the power rests in their hands. In her outside-of-school journal, Grace explicitly spoke through her silence by crafting a metaphorical poem, “Unheard,” about a young woman screaming into a sheet:

To scream into a sheet unheard

No one around

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6 For the complete transcript and video of this November 2006 speech, see http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/news/uwc-publishes-video-of-glenn-workshop/.
No one to hear
The lightning strikes within your eyes.
They don’t know
They don’t care
The lioness takes hold and cries.
Louder than your voice
Louder than your existence
You yell until your body shakes
The rolling anger
The thunder within
This is what it is,
To scream into a sheet unheard.

In a personal interview, Grace explained that she was talking about herself in this poem, but she used “you” because she was reluctant to make such statements about herself. The lines “lightning strikes within your eyes,” “Louder than your voice,” “Louder than your existence,” and “You yell until your body shakes,” would have been much more exposed if they had been “my eyes,” “my voice,” “my existence,” and “I yell.” So, both the content and the writing style (you versus I) show Grace hiding and silencing a private identity. References to “they” show that Grace perceives herself as separate from others in this silent writing space: screaming, yet unheard. But what is so interesting is that Grace wrote this poem in her own personal journal, not one that she would show to anyone else; according to Grace, she showed this only to me in the year after I taught her. The content of the poem creates a silenced identity, and then despite the privacy of this
journal, Grace re-silenced that identity by hiding behind second person pronouns. According to Glenn’s theory of rhetorical silence, Grace remained “unheard” because she feared the alternative. She used writing to express the anger that she cannot express in public, the anger that would be rejected because of her role as a teenage woman.

But according to *Unspoken*, even though silence can signify subordination, it can also signify strength (Glenn 31). In writing rather than speaking, Grace owned her fear and chose not to share it with others, until she chose to share it with me later. She maintained control. As Glenn explains, “For those rhetors who practice the art [poetry or writing] at its deeper levels, a rhetoric of silence, as a means of rhetorical delivery, can be empowered action, both resistant and creative” (Glenn, *Unspoken* 155). Grace chose to create poetry, and in doing so, she established a written voice. The strong avowal of feeling in this poem shows self-empowerment despite being silenced by the “they” she references. It is not only creative through her use of metaphor, but resistant to the cultural restrictions she faces as a teenage woman. She “speaks out” through her writing because it is her safe space away from others.

Alex also wrote what she felt she couldn’t tell others; for her this often meant confiding romantic feelings about someone her friends didn’t approve of, or as she says, “secretly saying goodbye to a friendship.” Much of Alex’s self-motivated writing out of school takes the form of poetry, and often involves questions that she tries to answer in the piece. In those moments that breed question-answer based poetry, Alex says she is still “confused and conflicted,” and will “try to figure it out as [she] is writing.” Those she has shared with me over the years read like conversations she had with herself, though of course in choosing to share them, they became conversations she had with me.
For example, when she was conflicted about a romantic interest, she wrote a poem to decide what she should do:

Back and forth my mind sways,
Caught in the sun shower sort of days,
first lightning then rainbows.
Too many highs and too many lows.
Can we just be friends?
Can I handle that or does it depend on my incurable feelings?
...I no longer see this man in the brightest light.
The clock finally ticked again to make it alright.
I’d like to be friends
but that is only if my heart does mend,
and is able to separate the past, present, and future.

Alex has confidence far beyond many her age, and so she trusts her own judgment more than the judgment of her inconstant peers. She trusts she will come to the right conclusion, but she uses writing to get there. In this poem she asks questions (“Can we just be friends? Can I handle that?”) and by the end of the poem she answers them herself. These poems, conversations, and venting sessions, compiled in journals throughout her young life, gave her a voice she didn’t feel she had in public during adolescence.

In her college admissions essay, written the year after Alex took Art of Writing, she chose to write about her collection of personal journals from kindergarten through her senior year, and in the essay she reflected on how important writing has been in her life.
Much of this she attributed to the chance to confide in a nonjudgmental “listener”: “From when I was nine years old, angry after a fight over a remote control, to now at age seventeen, upset after a fight with a friend, I vent to my notebook with complete honesty….I do not have to worry about something sounding goofy or mean or dramatic; it is my personal notebook that I escape to in privacy. I write what I mean.” Again, Glenn’s theory of rhetorical silence is helpful in explaining this. Alex’s essay about writing shows that she writes rather than speaks to avoid being hurt by others; she may “feel inarticulate,” and by this point she has internalized that “speech makes one vulnerable” (Glenn 43). This is one reason Alex embedded her silence in writing; she remembers writing because she didn’t have to feel “inarticulate” in public, which she calls “goofy, mean or dramatic.” Young women inherently fear rejection at this age. Pipher explains that “many girls become good haters of those who do not conform sufficiently to our culture’s ideas about femininity” (Pipher 68). The counselors at Accrede Regina echo this; they call acceptance the single most important issue among teenage women in high school. Fellow females are brutal; they will reject each other for the most minor of reasons, and so young women cannot risk this when social acceptance is so important in high school. The honesty that Alex desired to communicate aloud would have been shunned, and so rather than speak out, she wrote it down. As young women like Alex use writing to try on identities, they must keep the writing private, because the identities may not fit into the high school culture. She, like Grace, existed in that spectrum between silence and voice as a young writer to avoid backlash from others.

Both Grace’s and Alex’s poems show a struggle between an identity they feel they need to limit to the page, and an identity they feel the culture will allow them to
bring public. Grace does this with the second person pronoun “you,” separating the speaker from the person in action. Alex does this with questions; someone asks them and someone else answers. But in both cases, there is only one writer. Grace writes both identities working in dialogue with each other; so does Alex. This tension in the writing mirrors a conflict in who they see themselves to be. As women, they struggle against society’s perceptions that they are irrational or emotional, so publicly they move almost entirely in the other direction. Grace’s anger and Alex’s confusion are not qualities that would be embraced by their peers, by adults, or by the high school culture, and as they’ve told me, they don’t share those sides of themselves with others. In that way, they silence the competing “unattractive” identities within them by limiting them to the page. These poems, both extremely candid and raw, were written at home in personal journals and were not shared with anyone before this study. This is because the safest space for them to negotiate their competing scripted identities is in writing. Exposing themselves there will not hurt them emotionally, and so their deepest thoughts spill out of their pens. A journal gives them a voice, but it’s a silent voice. They write because they can only write.

But there may be other silence theories at work here in the young women’s writing. The other applicable reason for Alex’s silence that she “uses silence to enhance [her] own isolation, independence, and sense of self-uniqueness” (Glenn, Unspoken 16). Even though her identity is constantly changing, Alex still trusts herself more than adults or peers. For one, many adults do not hear teenagers, at least according to those in this study. Parents and teachers have told these young women to act like adults but then treat them like children; this is silencing, so young women reclaim the silence as their own by
becoming reluctant to share thoughts with teachers or parents throughout adolescence. Pipher explains that teenage women do not openly disclose themselves and seek guidance until their later years of high school; juniors and seniors have learned to trust adults much more than their junior-high counterparts (Pipher 62, 73). Growing up as young adolescents, the women in this study needed to assert their own power in the face of those that silenced them. Since silence, and in this study, writing, can be used to resist domination from others or to maintain a position of power, it is possible that Alex and Grace wrote rather than spoke to keep the power in their hands (Glenn, Unspoken 23). With poetry and journal writing, they claimed their space on the silence-voice continuum; this then allowed them to assert their individuality as writers separate from their peers. It gave them an isolated place to be unique and creative and to construct identity. And in their eyes, isolation seemed safer than its alternative.

Establishing a Revised Identity: Hannah

[Writing poetry] changed me, but didn't make me someone I'm not. It just brushed off the dust and revealed the person I really am. – Hannah

Though Giovanna, Courtney, Samantha, and Taylor looked more to the past to establish their identities, Hannah looked to the future. For Hannah, writing was a way of reclaiming a connection with herself and creating an identity she hoped to become. She used three out-of-class journals, post-it notes, and scraps of paper kept in her purse to write her observations—the world’s small beauties or imperfections—and used them to craft original stories or poems. Unlike the rest of the young women in this study, and most young women I’ve taught, Hannah does not like to write about herself. Instead, as she explained in her personal interview, “I write about what I want to be like, like a character in a poem. If you read it enough and get it in your head enough and create
something beautiful out of it, you’ll eventually be that person.” Of course it is impossible, within the confines of this study, to determine whether Hannah becomes the person she writes about in her poetry. However, the way she views the possibility is important to consider here. Hannah places complete faith in writing. While so many teenage women lack any sense of authority or confidence, Hannah has it when she writes. She is an artist with words, and so to her, writing almost has a superpower; crafting the fictional stories and poems that come to her in moments of inspiration is, in Hannah’s eyes, the surest way to craft a new identity.

Hannah shared much of this writing with me in an independent study project she completed during her senior year, the year after she took Art of Writing. I was her advisor for this study, which meant we met weekly to discuss her progress and read her pieces together. By the end of the semester, she had completed over seventy poems and two short stories outside of school, then presented them to a panel of teachers and administrators along with an essay that explained her process. At this juncture of her life, Hannah was experiencing the doubts inherent in graduating high school and starting college. A free spirit, Hannah often feels burdened by the expectations of more-structured others, like parents, teachers, and friends. Some of the poems she wrote during the independent study project helped her to create characters that overcome the restrictions and advice of others, and in doing so, she feels it helped her overcome them herself.

In one such poem, Hannah starts with someone’s demand that her speaker “fix scribbles” and “follow instructions” and “take a hint.” She ends the poem with the speaker talking to this person, who she calls “father,” saying, “My spirit is what I’ve got.
/ All the forces inside tell me to go / and I’m already running / to save my own life. / Keep your hint.” In writing her speaker’s rejection of others’ orders, Hannah created a character she tries to emulate in her own life: one who does not let her spirit become burdened by others.

Her most striking example of this creation of identity through writing is a poem that became one of the focal pieces of Hannah’s independent study, one that went through many drafts, and one that we discussed at length in several of our weekly meetings. The poem reads:

Last night I was shot with a bullet

of advice.

Once inside of me, it spun

its own voice

that told me what I had to do.

‘Damn it,’ I yelled, ‘leave me alone.’

It hissed back at me

to leave my dreams behind,

they were worthless and unachievable.

I let it take control

long enough to scab.
I thought I was free.

I thought I was sane,

until one day I ran my fingers over the scab and

heard its voice grow anxious with my hand’s proximity.

I scratched the scab once, twice

and eventually it hung—

the hole exposed.

By now the voice was screaming,

‘Remember what I said,

you can’t achieve those goals of yours!’

Into my flesh,

I reached

and tore

that bullet out of my chest,

fighting to push the tainted thoughts from my brain.

Once it was out, the bullet lay in the palm of my hand

in a pool of blood,

small and quiet.
I thought about burying it
in the dirt,
but instead I let it roll off of my hand
into the street
for metal to take care of metal.

Hannah often wrote poetry after arguing with her parents about college, and this poem is one such example. She explained to me that she was having trouble negotiating all the advice from adults in her life, and wanted to rely on herself and her own passions. This poem shows a character who unwillingly receives the advice: the shot bullet. The bullet lodges within her, but she has the strength to pull it out of her own chest and cast it away. The advice, which began as a screaming voice, became “small and quiet” because of the speaker’s initiative to remove it from her body. Hannah strives to be this person, the person who can sift through advice and criticism and take only what suits her. She desperately fears becoming someone she is not because of the influence of others. She has resisted thus far in her life, but fears the changes college will bring, when there will be adults and peers who try to shape her thinking. By creating a character through this poem, Hannah put herself in control over those voices of advice, and in doing so, she crafted an identity she hopes to be. As she explained in her personal interview, “When you write a goal down, or a to-do list, it reinforces it, reinforces the idea of who you want to be. A lot of people live thinking, ‘I want to be that person, but I’ll never be that person.’ But if you write about it and create something around that person, you’re more likely to lean towards that person.” Hannah’s strong sense of the person she is and the person she hopes to be are a direct result of her experience as a writer. Hannah’s poetry
is her space to fight back against the culture. By creating characters that hold up against
the restrictions of others, Hannah establishes an identity she hopes to adhere to herself,
both now and in the future.

For Hannah, this written identity breaks her silence as a female. True to form,
Hannah is rebelling against restrictions in a subversive medium: poetry. In this way, her
poetry-writing places her in that same gray space between silence and voice that Alex and
Grace find themselves in. On the one hand, her authority is limited to the page because
she felt silenced by those around her. On the other, she wrote these very candid words as
a rebellion against the silencers, and this helped her to “speak out” on the page. In terms
of Glenn’s theories of rhetorical silence, Hannah was both resistant and creative in her
poetry, and so she used writing as the first step towards voice. For example, in “Last
Night I Was Shot,” Hannah’s speaker yells at authority, saying “Damn it, leave me
alone!” and forcibly rips the advice from her chest. The speaker disobeys authority,
rejects guidance, and proudly announces her own desires, but it’s all through a character
in a poem. *Hannah* doesn’t lash out against authority, her *speakers* do. She may want
to—in fact, from knowing her, I know she does—but her ability to actually speak out this
way is limited to poetry. After all, Hannah’s a young woman. And young women don’t
get angry. In her essay “The Hermit’s Scream,” Adrienne Rich sees writing as a chance
for women to subversively break their silence, like Hannah did. In the essay, she writes:

> When we do and think and feel certain things privately and in secret,
even when thousands of people are doing, thinking, whispering these
things privately and in secret, there is still no general, collective,
understanding from which to move. Each takes her own risks in
isolation. We may think of ourselves as individual rebels, and individual rebels can easily be shot down. The relationship among so many feelings remains unclear. But these thoughts and feelings, suppressed and stored up and whispered, have an incendiary component. You cannot tell where or how they will connect, spreading underground from rootlet to rootlet till every grassblade is afire from every other. That is that ‘spontaneity’ which party ‘leaders,’ secret governments, and closed systems dread. Poetry, in its own way, is a carrier of the sparks, because it too comes out of silence, seeking connection with unseen others. (Rich 1158)

Hannah is an individual rebel, but rather than risk being shot down, she takes her risks in poetry. Her suppressed anger against what authority tells her comes out in “whispers” on the page. Even in writing these experiences, she writes them metaphorically; nowhere does her poem say “my parents and I disagree about college,” but she disclosed the disagreement to me during independent study meetings and also in the interview for this study. The metaphor of the shot bullet and the nameless authority mask the experience and allow Hannah to fight back through her speaker without fighting back herself. Additionally, since this poetry is written in private and not shared with most others, it is isolated from those around her. So the style of writing is subversive, and so is the fact that it’s kept behind closed doors. According to Rich, this is a break of Hannah’s silence, and a dangerous one, because poetry threatens to create a collective voice for women. Hannah’s poetry is indeed “incendiary”; it lights her free spirit aflame and lets her do-as-she’s-told identity fall to ashes. For Hannah, then, writing is a way to fuel a subversive identity in ways teenage women can’t—or don’t choose to—aloud.
Connecting with others: Samantha and Beth

*I wanted everyone else to know that I could do it and they could do it too.* – Samantha

But if no one hears the writing these young women do outside of school, does it still make a sound? According to those in this study, it does, but not one that will resonate with them in the same way as those words they hope are heard by others. In the years they took Art of Writing, Alex, Grace and Hannah were juniors in a predominantly senior course. Because of shyness, or because they were not ready to self-disclose like their 18-year-old counterparts, none of them wrote about their more private identities for my class. According to Glenn, this may be because adolescents typically use “stylized silence” to maintain their dignity in the face of authority and realign with their peers (Glenn, *Unspoken* 41). However, during their senior years, each of the young women came to me with new poems they had written outside of school, and some of those included in this study were written even after they had graduated. At this stage of their lives, they still used writing to self-search in a private space, but they chose to bring their private written identities at least somewhat public in sharing their poetry with me. Ultimately, once the young women in this study found writing as a tool for identity construction and safe place to oscillate between silence and voice, they used their own writing to connect with others.

For some, sharing their writing with me wasn’t enough of an audience; two young women in this study instead used their written identities to present a stronger public identity to their peers. In Beth’s case, for example, writing became a medium for first scripting contradictory identities, and then bringing these private tensions public as she shared them in the classroom community. Right away, the recognition and acceptance of
internal contradictions resonates with the tensions inherent in much of third-wave feminism. In her introduction for To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism, Rebecca Walker recalls women she’s met who think they can’t be feminists because they like misogynistic hip-hop music and want to be “treated like a lady.” But to Walker, embracing these ambiguities is all part of female empowerment. The majority of women today are “including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving,” all tendencies of many of the young women in this study, and all actions third-wave feminists encourage (Walker xxxiii). Walker explains, “The people in the world who are facing and embracing their contradictions and complexities and creating something new and empowering from them are important voices leading us away from divisiveness and dualism” (xxxv). As a senior, Beth was able to face and accept the competing identities within her; the stronger identity she then created through writing gave her the confidence to exist in a space that is not so black and white.

Beth’s comparison-contrast essay, titled “A Phase or a Lifestyle,” helped her to understand how she identified with contradicting sexualities and ultimately expose that internal tension to others. She began by contrasting what to wear on a first date—a skirt and black boots or blue Addidas pants and a t-shirt—and asked questions within the essay about when the latter would be acceptable: “What if the first date was with a girl? What if that first date was with someone of the same sex? Would that be okay then? For me, it seems natural because it’s who I am. Whether it’s a phase or a lifestyle, I’m not sure yet, however, I’ve been taking chances striving to find out.” The questions suggest that Beth still has not determined her sexual identity, and is asking for approval through her writing. Beth’s internal contradiction of identities is at least partly rooted in gender
stereotypes. In negotiating her space as a female, she is trying on two different gendered identities, one she calls “sassy girl” and the other “tom boy athlete” in her essay. For Walker, these kinds of questions are relevant ones for third-wave feminist thinking. As she explains, third wave feminists “continue to build upon a feminist legacy that challenges the status quo, finds common ground while honoring difference, and develops the self esteem and confidence it takes to live and theorize one’s own life” (xxv). Beth used this expository assignment in Art of Writing, comparison-contrast, to theorize her life as she neared graduation. This, in Walker’s eyes, takes self esteem and confidence, qualities Beth found for herself when she scripted her identities in writing.

But for Beth, unlike some of the others, writing it wasn’t enough, and neither was sharing it with me. Art of Writing became a safe space for Beth to first construct identity, and then disclose this identity to her peers, a rare opportunity within the walls of high school. On her own accord, Beth came in the day “A Phase or a Lifestyle” was due and asked if she could read her essay aloud. The class had only nine students, and of the nine, only two knew she was bisexual. In her personal interview, Beth said, “After all the writing we did, and since I had shared certain stuff with you in class, I felt more comfortable in the surroundings we were in since there were only nine of us.” The chance to disclose something so personal was a side effect Beth hadn’t expected before taking Art of Writing. In fact, even though Beth had written outside of school before taking the course, she would always type her journals into a computer and delete them, releasing pieces of herself but never leaving a trace behind. Because of the classroom community, writing became Beth’s way of opening up to others, as she found it much easier to read her essay aloud to the class than to announce, “I am bisexual.” As she
explained in her end-of-the-year portfolio reflection, "Art of Writing completely taught me how to open up as a person. To admit things that I probably never would have. To not be ashamed of who I am or what I like or even what I believe in. I was already outgoing but Art of Writing gave me a reason to be, and it enhanced my personality. That right there was enough for me to gain writing skills because as soon as I wasn’t ashamed of my beliefs, I was able to share them with other individuals." After constructing her identity through writing, Beth sought to show her written identity to others.

The writing in Beth’s case served as a vehicle for writing an identity and then claiming it publicly. In re-scripting these contradictory identities on the page, Beth gained a surer sense of her public identity. She saw the identities at work in her, and for the first time could admit what she believed in. Once she adhered to this clearer, more informed identity, she felt comfortable exposing that identity to the class. While the process of writing helped her examine her re-scripted identities and embrace her own contradictions, the product of writing gave her the venue to expose her identity to others. Because she read from her written essay, the essay provided a separation, a shield between herself and the rest of the class. If, say, the class rejected her, she would have the writing there to lean back on to perhaps claim that it was a creative move, not a self-disclosing move. Admitting “I am bisexual” would leave her much more exposed, with no shield between herself and others. The writing, then, gave Beth the medium she needed to make this bridge between herself and her classmates. What is most interesting, though, is that Beth came in the day the assignment was due and asked to share it. This was not protocol in Art of Writing, as many people write personally and are reluctant to
share. So Beth was not only able to share her identity with others, but eager to. The solace young women find in opening up to others is proof of the “unspoken connectedness” among women that feminists of any generation recognize (Baumgardner and Richards xxxiv). Baumgardner and Richards think women should strive for such connections because “only when women are sounding boards for one another, affirming those interior monologues and adding to it a chorus of voices, will we have the confidence and centrality to eventually change what society values” (Baumgardner and Richards 175). Beth’s disclosure to her peers in high school took courage, but it was worth it. In constructing and then sharing her contradictions, she added what used to be her interior monologue—the one typed and then deleted from her computer—into a chorus of women’s voices. In this way, writing gave Beth the chance to break a silence not just on the page, but publicly, too.

Samantha had a similar experience in eighth grade, when her self-motivated writing served as a bridge to talk about her private identity to her friends. Like Beth, Samantha felt safer writing an identity and then reading that identity aloud, rather than self-disclosing with an “I am” statement. As she explained in her interview:

Sometimes I’d want to read [my journal] to my friends, so they would feel my pain and see if they felt the same way. I’d say, ‘Aren’t I so weird?’ I wanted to see their reaction and see if they thought I was crazy. As a fourteen-year-old girl I could have been just like, ‘Do you think I’m fat?’ but you always think that people aren’t gonna listen to you, so instead I said, ‘Just sit down and listen to what I wrote and see if you like it.’ It was always really dramatic. But for some reason I got better results having
them listen to something I wrote on paper instead of just listening. When words are written on paper, it’s more official. It sounds more important. Because Samantha feared not being heard, she wrote and spoke because that made her thoughts more “official” and “important.” Even though her journals weren’t published, they could have been, whereas words spoken aloud cannot. This need is indicative of our time period, since most teenagers are not the reluctant personal writers they were thirty years ago. According to Amy Goldwasser, author of the essay compilation Red, teenage women constantly use technology like Facebook, online chatting, or texting to present a version of themselves to others. As she explains, “Regularly, often late at night, you’re generating a body of intimate written work. You’re used to writing about yourself. In fact, you choose to write about yourself, on your own time, rather than it being a forced labor when a paper’s due in school. You’re a reporter embedded in your parents’ home, your school, and your own head” (Goldwasser xiii). These teenage women are compelled to re-script their identities in writing, but because these days so much is public, sometimes their own eyes aren’t enough.

When they present their “intimate written work” on Facebook, it sits there, exposed, while peers can comment on it and give them feedback. But there’s still a shield there, a computer screen, so young women can still somewhat “privately” present a written identity. They don’t admit their private identities to their peers; the writing does, or the computer screen does. This barrier offers what Savin-Baden calls “disembodiment”: “It could be argued, and increasingly is, that cyberspace has resulted in a sense of multiple identities and disembodiment, or even different forms of embodiment. Further, the sense of anonymity and the assumption that this was what was understood
through one’s words rather than one’s bodily presence, is becoming increasingly unmasked through immersive virtual worlds” (Savin-Baden 10). In other words, the internet allows people to embody different identities and still feel anonymous, even though their identities are viewable to the public. This feeling is similar to the authority Samantha and Beth give their writing. Through writing, these young women can try on identities and present them to others, and still have at least a sense of separation, despite the fact that they’re voicing them aloud. The writing creates anonymity because it allows “real-life identity” and “written identity” to be separate, the same way the internet separates “real-life identity” from “virtual identity.”

For this reason, many teenage women consider writing a safe space to self-disclose; but what is more interesting is that they want to disclose. For young women, this is a chance for connection with another. It’s a chance to know they are not alone. For example, when Samantha struggled with body issues and used a journal to cope with her life during early adolescence, writing helped her connect with other young women and find validation. In writing, Samantha was able to pour everything out without being stopped or silenced by someone else. She could construct an identity on her own terms, rather than construct an identity that might have been shaped by her peers. The way she reads her writing, and then asks “Aren’t I so weird?” shows that she is using her writing as a shield much like Beth did. Saying “I hate my body” leaves a person much more exposed than reading something that had been written already. There’s the opportunity to claim the written identity as the past, to claim it as a feeling that she’d had earlier but had since overcome. There’s also the opportunity to claim it as a stylistic move in writing; Samantha, a creative writer, writes poetically, and so if she was rejected in self-disclosing
she could have claimed herself a “dark writer” rather than “body-hater.” The flip side, of course, would be if her friends supported her and praised her writing; then, Samantha would have the validation she sought in the first place.

What stood out about Samantha is that she used a written space to seek human connection both to construct her own identity, and to help others construct theirs, too. In her eighth grade journal, Samantha would first write without wanting anyone to read it, but she said, “I hoped that later someone would read it and it would help them. I’d write during harder times, then months later when I was doing much better. I try to make it dramatic, like someone would want to find it and say ‘Wow, this is her life story!’ I want someone to want to read it and find something strong and helpful in it. Then good would come of it.” For Samantha, writing was a way to memorialize her identities and place them on the map of feminine experience; according to feminist theory, this is a benefit of women writing. Like Adrienne Rich, French feminist Hélène Cixous believes the written work produced by women creates a collective voice because so many stories women have coincide. As she writes in “The Laugh of Medusa,” “I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (Cixous). Too often, women are “rhetorically silent,” like Cixous who “said nothing, showed nothing” and instead “swallowed [her] shame and [her] fear” (Cixous). In Samantha’s case, perhaps years of people not hearing her spoken words made her write instead. She hoped her written words would take more root and spread to others. The assumption that someone else will have experienced what she did shows a commonality in the path of women; many share the same “unheard-of songs,” especially
in high school. Because so much of their writing remains private, some young women in this study feel alone in their thoughts until they share them with others and find them accepted. Women this age are out for the underdog; they know what it’s like to suffer and be cast aside and so they are sensitive to others in need of support. Once Samantha was able to name her private identities, she felt compelled to share them as a way of helping others know they are not alone. Now, as a sophomore in college, Samantha has an online blog where she writes about the struggles with anxiety and bulimia she faced as a young woman and encourages her readers to find strength and seek help.

At the end of the Art of Writing course, I show the movie *Freedom Writers*, the true story of a class of students from Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, during the Los Angeles riots of the mid 1990s. Their teacher, Erin Gruwell buys personal journals for these “unteachable” students so they can tell their stories, and she reads them once a week. When Samantha reflected on the movie *Freedom Writers* for her final Art of Writing journal entry, she noticed the same desire in those students that she had as an eighth-grader. She wrote, “By writing in journals, these students are allowed to finally have a voice. They will be remembered. I believe they were so open because of this lack of a voice. They have so much to say, but never thought anyone would want to hear. By telling their stories, they get the feeling that someone finally truly cares and now someone will listen.” Her response, written before what Samantha disclosed in her interview, was fascinating to me, because it is this trifecta—to be remembered, to be heard, to be cared about—that Samantha sees to be the value of journal-writing. Words spoken aloud are often forgotten, glossed over, or worse, silenced, and so for some of these young women writing was a way to get these words
out and have others hear them, remember them, and elicit a connection between reader and writer. For Samantha, this was so important in her young life when young women most need validation. While some teenage women find enough intrinsic validation when they see their written identities in dialogue with each other, this was never enough for Samantha. She needed something outside of herself. The validation in some cases came from me, her teacher; other times it came from peers who listened to her writing. In a culture that tells her as a teenager and a woman she isn’t heard, connecting her written voice with the voices of others was crucial in her construction of identity.
The way girls handle the problems of adolescence can have implications for their adult lives. Without some help, the loss of wholeness, self-confidence and self-direction can last well into adulthood. – Mary Pipher

The young women in this study used writing to script past and present identities, both shaped by the awareness they gained as they approached graduation from high school. Because of pressures they faced in their young lives, personal narrative writing allowed each teenager to place herself on the continuum between silence and voice, some closer to a public voice than others. Ultimately, as they claimed their place between silence and voice, they were eager to connect their written identities with another woman or, in some cases, many other women.

The main component of Art of Writing that fosters identity construction is the in-class journal component, and often what young women wrote in their journals made me, their teacher, the “other woman” with whom they sought connection. As a beginning teacher, I inherited an assignment titled “The Journal” as an appendix to the board-approved, district-wide Art of Writing curriculum; I did not create it, but rather it was passed down to me by those who taught Art of Writing in the past. The explanation of the journal reads:

According to writing experts, the journal provides a safe space for you to write more freely. It is your chance to play with words, express your emotions, or experiment with ideas. It allows you to think on paper….The journal is a tool for expressing yourselves without the restraint of grammar and spelling rules. Journal writing is helpful for prewriting, for inquiring,

7 The full document can be found in Appendix C.
the having a conversation, and just for relaxing. The more you write in the journal, the more comfortable you will feel about expressing yourselves. The more comfortable you feel, the better your writing will become. As with any endeavor, you learn by doing. How do you learn to write? By writing....[Journals] will be graded on length of each entry, completeness (you have all the entries), and seriousness of purpose (you answered the questions I gave you). The goal is to push yourself to think and write as much as you can. Although the journal must be written in sentence form, it will not be graded for grammar, mechanics, or organization. (Hanover Park Regional High School District)

At its core, the journal in Art of Writing is a freewriting tool stemmed from Peter Elbow’s idea that the best thinking and writing happens when there are no restrictions. But as this journal is packaged, where the overview calls it a “safe space” to “express your emotions,” “think on paper,” or “[have] a conversation” in an attempt to become “more comfortable about...expressing yourselves,” its weight is obviously much greater. This handout, which I distribute in the first full week of school, sets a personal tone for the journal and so, indirectly, because my students journal at least three days a week, it sets a more personal tone for the entire course.

The curriculum overview says the purpose of Art of Writing is to “equip college-bound students with composition skills necessary to produce well-developed essays with different purposes,” and then lists those purposes as “description, narration, exposition, analysis, and persuasion.” After the curriculum was created, but still before my time as a teacher, “self-reflective” writing was added to the beginning of the course, before
“description,” because the course is primarily for seniors who need to include a reflective essay with their college applications. To encourage journaling as a prewriting tool, as the explanation handout suggests, I often assign topics that fit the genre we are working on. So, during the reflective unit, some journal topics include “Epiphany,” “Characterize Myself,” and “Live and Learn”; during description, one topic is “Self-description”; and during narration, prompts include “Emotions,” “Childhood Event,” and “Standing Up.” That way, when students need to write a composition for one of these genres outside of class, they have stories and ideas to pull from. And, to make the subject relevant to students’ lives, as any teacher must do, I focus nearly all of the prompts on their experiences and opinions, rather than on those of others. To remove even more restrictions in their safe journal space, some journal topics throughout the year are “Free Choice,” where students can freewrite about whatever is on their minds.

Because of the sequence of the course, journal entries, especially among the young women I teach, become more and more personal as the year progresses. A free choice journal entry in September for a given student may be about how tired she is, or how she did on her math test, or how busy she is after school. In October we begin self-reflection, and so slowly the walls break down. The journal prompts I give them during that unit become more self-based, and that focus on self ends up filtering into their free choice entries too. By May, we are working on comparison-contrast, which in itself sounds formal, but students are always allowed to choose their own topics. While some students will compare two sports teams, or two bands, or two colleges, I’ve taught some young women who used their journals to compare their past and present identities.

See Appendix A for an explanation of these journal topics.
external and internal identities, or false and genuine friends. I even had one student who compared her attitude and her brother’s attitude about their emotionally abusive household. Many of these young women, using their journal as their prewriting tool, went on to craft compositions about these topics for their graded comparison-contrast essays, like Samantha who used her comparison-contrast essay to compare how she perceived herself as a freshman with how she perceived herself as a senior, and Taylor who compared how others see her with how she sees herself. So, while our final genre, exposition, sounds impersonal, the journal component of the class leaves hardly any stones unturned, and the personal focus in journals during the first semester truly sets the tone for the rest of the year.

Because the journals are called a “safe space” where grammar and style are not evaluated, my feedback on journal entries creates a personal dialogue between my students and me. The part of the handout that calls journals a way to “[have] a conversation” suggests this too; since they’re turning their journals in to me, their teacher, the conversation is not with themselves, but with me. Then, because so much of their journal writing is a method to construct identity, I become not only one who listens to their self-searching, but one who praises and validates it. This establishes a connection between my identity and theirs; as they create texts through journaling, I create texts through feedback. They know this, and so it is possible that their perception of me dictates what they write in their journals. I could read their responses as a desire for attention, to elicit feedback from me that will fulfill their need to be validated by another, and for some students, this may be the case. But, whether their personal narratives and expressions of emotion are exaggerated or true to life, their need to be heard is the same.
The risk of ignoring what is most important to them is too great to read these journal entries as anything less than searches for voice, constructions of identity, or negotiations of the liminal space they find themselves in as they approach graduation.

Giovanna, the only student in this study who did not write outside of school, used her in-class journal entries as venues for conversation with me. Often she would pause her freewriting to write a comment directly to me, as if it truly was a conversation. In a free choice entry that covered a range of self-focused topics, Giovanna wrote within it, “P.S. Miss Fazz, I’m COMPLETELY OVER MY BREAKUP! I’ve come a really long way. I’m finally happy,” and in another, she thanked me: “Over the past month I think my confidence has gotten a lot higher (your last pep talk that you wrote in here really helped, Fazz. Thanks!).” These were updates from previous entries that talked about her self-perception as a result of male attention and body image. I had written back to those, telling her not to sell herself short and reminding her of her strengths, and now here she wrote back to my feedback. In this way, we engaged in a conversation, where she, the student, sought guidance from me, the adult who had gone through similar experiences. We related as two people sharing experience, not as student and teacher. In that way, the student-teacher dichotomy was grayed; I was not distant authority, but closer confidant. Giovanna explained in her interview for this study, “In Art of Writing, I wrote about boyfriends and stuff because even though I talk to my friends about that, they’re a lot of times less mature than me. And you’re older, and you’ve had a lot of experiences, and I like to get opinions from people. I’m totally open to advice. I felt comfortable writing it [in my journal]. I knew you’d be writing back and it would be like having a conversation with you.” So, while journals were primarily a source of constructing identity for these
teenage women, they were also a way in to have a conversation with me. And the way they perceived my identity—young, female, trustworthy—is what encouraged them to disclose themselves in the first place.

Unlike Giovanna, Grace always wrote outside of school, and even after taking my class in her junior year, she continued the dialogue we’d established in class. She came to visit me frequently during her senior year, carrying with her a poem or essay she had written on her own. She’d leave it with me and ask what I thought. I was fascinated by this. On the surface she was asking my opinion of the language or style of her poem as a teacher of writing; however, Art of Writing is a composition course, not a poetry course. Since the poems were always personal, I interpreted “tell me what you think” as her way of seeking my emotional reaction to her writing and continuing the dialogue that began the year before. When I asked Grace in her personal interview why she shared her writing with me, she explained, “I want to share [writing] so that someone else can know things about you and they can be there for you instead of you keeping it all to yourself.” So the exchange was not to help her with crafting poetry—she was already a much more talented poet than I ever was. Instead, it was about a young woman’s need to connect her identity with another’s. In giving her poems to me, she was seeking the feedback of a fellow woman who would support her and validate her as she scripted her identity.

The conversations Grace, Giovanna, and the others had with me through writing and about writing involved me on their path to creating identity. As the teacher behind their written journeys, I prompted the assigned writing, offered the journal topics, and sought answers through feedback questions; so even though they were left to navigate their own waters, I held the lamp that helped them see though the darkness. Any teacher
of writing has this role, but once the element of personal narrative is involved, as it is in
Art of Writing, sound teaching practices may look like prying into students’ personal
lives. Because journal entries are not evaluated, the only feedback I give is praise- and
support based. Other times I respond to their answers with interest through question-
based feedback. These practices allow me to support them as writers in the “safe space”
of their journals where rules don’t matter, where all that matters, according to the journal
handout, is pushing themselves to write more, think on paper, and express emotion.

Cheryl Glenn calls this tendency to praise and validate students the negotiation of
silence between two parties. As she explains in Unspoken, “When silence is a means for
exerting control and managing the situation, silence originates with the dominant party,
stimulating the subordinate party to explore options for breaking the silence, for rousing
speech from the other” (Glenn 32). When the young women in this study write their
personal stories in journals rather than speak them aloud to me, they exert control. They
claim ownership over their identity exploration, and so they actually become the
dominant party. But sharing this “silent writing” with me stimulates me (the subordinate
party) to help them break their silence, as I do with feedback. A power shift occurs; my
feedback is determined by their words, and so when they write, my students have more
power than I do. Glenn calls a teenager’s silent body language “stylized sulking”; for
adolescent girls this means pushing their chins up, closing their eyes for a long period of
time, or striking a defiant pose. These acts of silence place the student at the center of the
teacher’s attention, again empowering them; according to Glenn, a teacher’s best
ammunition to break these silent displays is positive feedback like affection (Glenn 40).
Because the students in this study are a few years older than those Glenn references, they
only sometimes exhibit the body language she references. Their silence appears instead in their journals, when they write what they are not saying aloud, and that type of candid journal entry certainly places them at the center of my attention. In that way, Glenn's prescription for breaking the silence sheds insight into why I use feedback to validate and support these young women on their journey to constructing identity. Their writing can take many avenues, but my path, the one of praise and validation, is already decided. Through my affectionate comments in the margins of their journals that validate what they put in writing, I seek to break their silence. My goal in doing so is to make them more comfortable writers elsewhere. As the journal objective explains, "The more you write in the journal, the more comfortable you will feel about expressing yourselves. The more comfortable you feel, the better your writing will become." The more praise and validation I give them, the more they will write. However, because they write their identities, my praise and validation evokes not just writing, but self-searching.

The consequence of my feedback to journal entries as teacher of these young women is that sometimes my role looks more like "mother," "sister," "friend," or "therapist." Much of this is because of its praiseworthy and affectionate nature, like in my responses to these journal entries:

Courtney, in her journal: "I know when people say they are not getting into college they definitely are probably getting in somewhere. But I legitimately do not think I am going to."

My feedback: "Courtney! You are a shoe-in. Honestly they will fight for you (gloves and all). Why wouldn't they? You are the whole package and I just hope one day you see what others see in you."

Giovanna, in her journal: "I do like him, but he's such a JERK. And I don't deserve to be treated badly, but for some reason, I find myself constantly going back to him...He's mean to me...and constantly makes me feel like he's using me. So why do I choose to keep talking to him?"
My feedback: “Okay, Giovanna—you know the answer here... You are too good for him! Don’t sell yourself short!!”

Because what Courtney and Giovanna wrote was so self-deprecating, I felt compelled to shower them with praise, as most teachers would; but, since the writing was about their own lives and identities, my praise was not typical “teacher praise” like “Good use of this verb” or “well-organized.” My feedback is about them, not their writing, as evident in my choice of words like “you are” rather than “your writing shows.” Since identity creation is a byproduct of Art of Writing through the journal component, my praise in their journals validates their constructions of identity. In these kinds of personal narrative journal entries, I find myself convincing students to see their own worth rather than just helping them with their writing.

Because so many journal topics promote identity crafting, and because many young women choose to write about themselves and the pain of being a teenager in high school even when I don’t ask them to, sometimes my feedback sounds like what a therapist might say. In some journal entries, students disclose personal information that prompts me to offer support through my feedback:

Hannah, in her journal: “I have not felt like myself lately. Sometimes it’s a good thing when you know you’re changing for the better, but I don’t feel that way.”

My feedback: “I’m sorry to hear this. Do you need to talk about anything?”

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Hannah, in her journal: “I’ve been wondering who will read my journals when I die. Will they be published? No. My writing is too scattered and broken. Who would want to read of teenage troubles anyway?”

My feedback: “I do! I’m always here to listen!”
Samantha, in her journal: “I didn’t do anything bad last night! Even after all of that McDonalds, I fought the feeling and it passed.”

My feedback: “Good for you!”

Samantha, in her journal: “Tomorrow is Hershey as in oh-my-god-that-is-a-lot-of-chocolate, Hershey Park. I’ll be okay though. I have to be.”

My feedback: “Hang in there, Sam. You can do this.”

Looking back, I’m surprised at my own texts; after all, these are shaky waters for a teacher that challenge the power relationship between student and teacher. Often, when students write so candidly about themselves, especially when it involves self-destructive behavior, I sit with my pen poised, carefully choosing my words. These kinds of situations, like Hannah’s use of journal writing to examine her own self-worth, or Samantha’s use of journal writing to document her struggle with bulimia, leave me with several options. I could take the safe route and ignore the issue, only commenting on less controversial journal entries, but that would make me, in their eyes, just another adult who doesn’t listen to teenagers. I could act as the authority and scold them through my feedback, telling them not to think or act the way they do, but that would make me
another person judging them for what is out of their control. So I choose written affirmation of who they claim to be or emotions they claim to feel, and in so doing, they begin to trust me as a non-judgmental listener. Like Samantha had said, to be remembered, heard, and cared about are what make students feel they have a voice, and because so many teachers fear this relationship, this type of response to personal narrative is hard to find within school walls. But in asking the young women questions and validating their creation of identity through my feedback, I present myself as a person who “gets it,” rather than just another adult who doesn’t, and it encourages them to continue to write this way. Validation in their journals causes many to seek that validation in all the writing they do for my class, so even though I do not evaluate journals for craft, my personal interaction with the content they write there bleeds into their graded essays too. Once they see me as a listener when I respond in their journals, they become more apt to write their identities in evaluated, assigned writing.

I wonder, then, how much of this I’m perpetuating. Inviting my students to craft personal narratives in journals and then responding to those journals in the way that I do is a cycle that feeds itself, making my students more and more candid and leading them further through the dark waters. My first instinct is to call this a consequence of any class devoted to writing. The opportunity to construct and examine identity arose because Art of Writing requires the personal essay in many forms, unlike most language arts classes. As Samantha explained in her portfolio letter to me in June of her senior year, “You challenged us to take a step out of our normal teenage lives and truly think about what we have to offer, who we are, and what we wish to be. Even in our journal entries, we were given the opportunity to dwell on everything in our lives and hold on to moments
forever.” Art of Writing, then, was a chance, perhaps the first in an academic setting, for students to write a perceived past identity, their perceived present identity, and the identity they hope to maintain in the future, and I see value in giving them that chance. But is this in my best interest as a teacher? There are situations that I am not qualified to handle, like self-destructive behavior, and when they cross a line I’m not comfortable with, I have to take their writing to a guidance counselor or school psychologist. My role is to be their teacher, not their therapist, but the nature of the writing tasks and my feedback on those tasks causes a shift I didn’t expect when I began teaching. I both embrace this shift for its benefits to my students and fear its impact on what’s expected of me as a teacher. Since their journal entries are not evaluated, I can maintain a dialogue with them and react only to their content on a personal level; however, when their candid creation of identity filters into graded composition assignments, I must maintain my role as a teacher of writing. I must guide their writing as a craft while validating their written identities. The more heart wrenching the content, the less apt I am to critique them as writers, and so in some cases outside of the journals, the kind of graded writing they do governs the feedback I give.

But perhaps this isn’t the consequence of any writing class; perhaps the candid avowals of identity journaling evokes is perpetuated in part by the identity I share with them. I present a version of my own identity in the texts I create through feedback on their writing. With students I knew since they were freshmen, I felt more comfortable being candid in my feedback, and often would connect my past experiences to theirs as a way of establishing common ground and reminding them they are not alone:
Courtney, in a journal entry: “I don’t really like what I see in the mirror...I
don’t live my life around my confidence, I just live regardless of what I
look like.”
My feedback: “I know what this is like, and often feel this way too—but
Court, please know how strikingly gorgeous you are!”

Courtney, in her September get-to-know-you essay (also ungraded): “Most
people, except for my close friends and family, probably have no idea that
my self-confidence is non-existent.”
My feedback: “Thank you for sharing this with me, Courtney. This must
be why we’ve always gotten along—a lack of confidence plagued me
throughout high school too, so I can understand what this feels like. Well,
you are fabulous. And one day you’re gonna wake up and believe me
(even if it’s not till you’re 30).”

Alex, in her September get-to-know-you essay (ungraded): “Being with
my friends is important too. It means I can be myself and joke around.
After two drama-filled years, we have almost finally worked out all of our
problems.”
My feedback: “That’s wonderful...having friends (especially girl friends)
can be very difficult at times. I’m glad you all worked things out!”

Samantha, in her September get-to-know-you essay (ungraded): “I feel
proud of the woman I’ve begun to look like, after years of never being
able to accept the girl in the mirror.”
My feedback: “Nice contrast between ‘woman’ and ‘girl’ here—you’ve
summed up the plight that many of us (yes, us) faced as high school
students.”

Courtney, Alex, and Samantha took my class as seniors, but they were also among my
very first students in their freshman year. As the advisor for their graduating class, where
Courtney was the president, and the advisor for the school newspaper, where Samantha
was the editor-in-chief, I knew them well both in and out of the classroom. Perhaps this
is why I felt so comfortable speaking so candidly. Still, there is only so much I can say.
My students are seventeen and eighteen, and I still need to be their teacher. I cannot
speak too personally because it would be unprofessional. So I gave them glimpses, moments of “I get it” or “I’ve been there too” in order to validate them and remind them they are not alone. But, in connecting a watered-down version of my past identity to the identities they negotiated in writing as juniors and seniors, I joined them in their quest, and in so doing, I presented to them a “grown up” identity, an example of an adult woman who survived the tumultuous teenage years. Perhaps they see, through my feedback, a possibility for their futures: a woman who lived through high school and came out the other side to attain a level of success.

Some of this can be attributed to what feminists see as the collective voice of women. Just as my students’ stories are so similar, and writing them may connect them with “other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns” (Cixous), so too is my experience like theirs, because I too was once a teenage woman in high school. I’ve noticed that in some of my feedback, I seek to unite with my students as a fellow woman:

Beth, in her September get-to-know-you essay (ungraded): “Socially, my only goal would be to STAY CLEAR OF DRAMA.”
My feedback: “HA. Yes, as a girl, doesn’t it always seem to find us??”

* * *

Giovanna, in a journal entry: “I’m gonna try to keep my self-confidence up, and remember that college will bring bigger and better things—and hopefully, more mature boys!”
My feedback: “It will—I promise! (Though, still not as mature as we’d like. That’s just wishful thinking!)”

In using words like “us” and “we” in my feedback, I attempted to establish a collective voice, but in doing so, I destabilized my authority and scripted my identity as a younger “girl” rather than an adult woman. I imply “we women are in this together” and channel women’s “unspoken connectedness” that Baumgardner and Richards address in
This, coupled with the praise and validation I give elsewhere, adheres me to Baumgardner’s and Richard’s “feminist prescription” for young women: “to say that looks shouldn’t matter (but do), to love your own unique and miraculous bodies, to nurture your self-esteem and the rest will follow” (Baumgardner and Richards 192). As I reread the comments I’ve written on my students’ writing, I realize I read them with this third-wave feminist prescription in mind. When they criticize their own looks, I tell them they’re beautiful; when they say they’re not confident, I tell them I remember those feelings and overcame them. I try to nurture their self-esteem through praise, validation, and connectedness. In Samantha’s interview, she spoke about this experience for her: “All your comments were supportive, and it always helped me feel better and helped build my personality.” Because of the responses these young women have given me both aloud and in their writing, I have seen how valuable it is to support and encourage these students as they are scripting and negotiating their identities in a world that tries to silence them. But the consequence of this is evident in my juvenile feedback; as I attempted to script an identity of a woman who understands, my language shaved ten or more years off my life.

Many colleagues of mine do not agree with my methods of journal response, especially because of the relationship this journaling-feedback dialogue creates. One anonymous language arts teacher at Accrede Regina feels the risks of bonds between writing teachers and their students outweigh the benefits:

Of course every situation is different and I have seen some where a deeper relationship has been a saving grace for certain students. I have also experienced situations that have exploded in a negative way. A thought to
consider is the age of the student and the expectations for ‘help’ after that student graduates from high school. Some students are not able to deal with the loss of their confidant and continue to visit high school in order to recapture the security of the relationship. Administrations usually frown on this type of relationship and if a teacher is considering entering into one, he/she must be prepared for any outcome.

In many ways, this colleague of mine is right. Many of my writing students visit or stay in touch years after they graduate, and some young women in this study have even given me poems they’ve written since entering college. What I see as a meaningful relationship established within the security of a writing classroom, other teachers perceive as dependence, as an unwillingness to let go, and any teacher can agree that dependence is not a side-effect we should be supporting. What further stood out to me in this response is the perception of how administrators feel about such a relationship. Like the young women in the study, writing teachers are also stuck in an environment laden with expectations and the critical eyes of others. Expectations from stakeholders, obligations (and restrictions) in being part of a union, and critical eyes of fellow teachers who teach similar course content can weigh on our teaching identities to the point where our external identity, the title “Teacher,” is mainly constructed by the gaze of others, and unfortunately many writing teachers fall victim to pressure to conform to the Teacher identity others expect. Teachers never teach in isolation; much like our students, we are under the constant scrutiny of others, and few colleagues of mine are comfortable with the role. One Accrede Regina teacher responded in an anonymous survey, “Through such [personal writing] activities, the greatest bond between teacher and student, or
student and student, is formed. But reading their personal thoughts and opinions doesn’t necessarily make me a ‘therapist.’ I’m doing my job as a teacher, which I believe is to help them grow and find their individual selves.” The one common notion between these two very different colleagues of mine is that the bond between writing teacher and writing student is anomalous to most student-teacher relationships. While some of us embrace it, in my experiences it is more often scorned.

Despite a teenage woman’s need to connect with her teacher on a human level, most teachers run from this. In her book, Teacher Identity Discourses: Negotiating Personal and Professional Spaces, Janet Alsup studied preservice teachers facing the demands of the institutions they worked for; she concludes that “despite nearly thirty years of postmodern thought, many academics still operate in the land of the binary, accepting a hierarchal division between the intellect and the affect” (Alsup 26). Many high school teachers who lean more towards the academic exist on the intellect side of this binary, and forget the human side of teaching. For one, it takes more time to teach with affect, or emotion, in mind; it means more feedback, more conferencing, and more writing assignments, since the school says writing should be academic, so anything personal is an addendum to an already packed curriculum. When we are given the responsibility to teach writing, the academic is much easier to handle, not only because it eliminates the personal, but because it provides a set formula. Do this, get results. Write this way, get an A. All those demands on the teacher start rearing their ugly heads, and so schools become sites that value “conformity and stagnancy” (Alsup xv). Others run because of the scary similarities between “teacher” and “therapist.” But either way, the ones running in fear are the ones with the easier life. Those who don’t are left wondering
where to rest their loyalties: with their students who will benefit from support and
guidance through writing, or with everyone else watching and evaluating. Despite a vast
range of personalities among these study participants, all of the young women in the
study said they are most liberated by assignments they had more ownership of, like
something personal or creative. But instead, throughout high school many have felt
stifled by curricula that neglect to bridge literary searching with soul searching, or
development of argument with expression of self. The academic is often separated from
the personal, and so for many, Art of Writing is the first time they enjoy writing because
it is the first class to give them the opportunity to create and examine their identities.

Because I have found personal value in using writing to construct identity, this is
where my human element in being a teacher struggles to break free of the expectations
my society has of me in being a Teacher. As a woman, I can understand and relate to
these young women because I, too, have experienced what it means to meet other’s
expectations of my feminine role. I was also once a teen, and what we experienced as
young women in adolescence never fully goes away. As a writer, I know the benefit of
self-discovery through journaling. These identities that I bring to the classroom, along
with countless others, inform how I teach my class in writing. If I wasn’t a naturally
introspective, reflective person, would I expect my students to recreate their identities in
writing? If I wasn’t a woman, would I have the language to talk to young women about
their experiences in feedback and conferences? If I hadn’t seen the value in personal
writing first hand in graduate work, would I believe in the benefit for others? If I hadn’t
learned to phrase feedback in the form of questions in my graduate study, would I not be
eliciting information from my students? When I look back on my early teaching career, I
realized that I wasn't trained in writing instruction until I started graduate school in 2007. That's when I learned to give feedback in the form of questions, and also when I experienced creative nonfiction first hand. In this same time frame, I began to notice my students becoming more candid and self-exploratory in their writing. Did students change? Or did I? Maybe since I found the benefits of personal writing in self-creation, and also learned how to elicit writing through question-based feedback, I brought two more identities into the classroom, and these, coupled with my other ones, is what makes students in my Art of Writing classes write their lives so freely. They're not, like my colleague believes, "just different."

So like these young women, I too have past and present identities. Within my identity as a teacher rests my identity of woman, writer, ex-teenager, graduate student. According to Alsup, a "teacher identity" resides "on the borders of other types of discourse" like the discourse of graduate and undergraduate education, experiences or memories, and the school she teaches in (Alsup 36). The "teacher," product of her past and her own experience with writing, wants to give her students what she knows will help them—support, encouragement, validation, and praise—through written feedback and the opportunity to write personal narrative. The "Teacher," part of a whole school community and defined by external factors, is supposed to approach writing instruction in this way: 1. Prepare them for the state test, 2. Prepare them for college, 3. Teach them to analyze literature and support their claims in an essay, 4. Grade efficiently without spending a thousand hours on feedback. These provisions are at direct odds with the human part of the teacher. They are societal demands: demands of the school, colleges who will meet these students next year, and the watchful eyes of other teachers who are
in competition with each other. So the human elements that I bring to the classroom every day inform my role as “teacher” and often conflict with my role as “Teacher.” But a successful teacher must negotiate this conflict by maintaining “the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical aspects of the teacher’s life” and her own “sense of self,” and merging it all with a “professional identity that in our culture is often very narrowly and rigidly defined” (Alsup 36). As a teacher of writing, it would be much easier to either reject a professional identity entirely, or reject my humanness to conform to what others expect (Alsup 131). Instead, my students will most benefit from a teacher identity that is both professional and personal, closed-off and candid, guarded in some ways yet genuinely human in others. The feedback I use to craft this teacher identity must not only nurture my students on their journey to creating identity, but also maintain a level of professionalism and maturity.

Despite my vow before I began teaching to lean more towards the professional, the way I interpret my students’ needs in Art of Writing pushes me more towards the personal; the consequence of this is complication of the traditional roles of “teacher” and “student” in my classroom. The young women in this study did not see me as “adult” or “Teacher,” but rather as a fellow woman they can relate to. And regardless of the tension this creates within me, the backlash it ignites from colleagues, or the emotional investment it fosters with students, I find it all entirely necessary. Countless feminist scholars maintain that women “form their identities, at least in part, based on connections with others” (Alsup 92). As young women use their journals to try on identities, they need to connect with me on a human level; they need to hear feedback to confirm that the identities they’ve created are valuable and possible. Many will not find worth in their
identities on their own without the collaboration of a fellow woman, someone who presents herself as a non-judgmental listener who understands the plight of teenagers. But we must accept that holding the lamp for our students comes with the risk of casting its light upon our own murky waters; as long as we continue to teach writing, and encourage teenage women to recreate and examine identity, our own identities will continue to intertwine with theirs.
This is the Place, and I Am Here...

...even the darkness contains light...
...even the silence contains music...
...even the disarray contains order, in this pasture of life. – Hannah

This is, no doubt, a small sample of young women, only a fraction of those I’ve taught, an even smaller fraction of those in our high school; and Accrede Regina is just one school, in one county, in one state. I cannot imply that all young women have had or will have this experience. I also do not intend to discount the relationships male students may have with writing. In fact, I’ve taught some young men who disclosed emotions or personal stories in their Art of Writing journals, though not in quite the same way as the young women I’ve taught. Also, because of my age and gender, I am reluctant to initiate the kinds of personal connections with male students that I establish with female students, so I have not studied student-teacher relationships for that population. I’ve focused on only one kind of interaction, one relationship between writing and identity, student and teacher. Others surely exist; however, I have not yet considered them.

But I do leave wondering if even among young women, this method of identity construction happens more than we know; if the liminal states young women find themselves in as they transition from childhood to adulthood translate into writing elsewhere; if in other classes, in other schools, in other states, young women recreate their identities in writing and then share them with others. While I cannot imply this transformation happens for all teenage women, I can say definitively that each one I’ve taught has had, at some point throughout the course, a special relationship with writing. She has felt validated, she has seen her identity differently, she has shared something she hadn’t expected to. They all harbor a need to write and a need to connect, regardless of what year they graduated, what activities they participated in, what social group they
belonged to. Once they entered the doors of Art of Writing, their journey towards constructing and examining identity was for some, ignited, and for others, nurtured, supported, and shaped.

When these young women leave Art of Writing, will they continue writing? Will they continue examining their lives through personal narrative? Will they continue to seek connection with fellow women? How much of this is inherent in the time of their lives the course took place, and how much is prompted by the course itself, or the way I choose to approach instruction? These questions are not ones this study is able to answer. But this study can still provide insight into what it means to teach writing. Just in knowing these young women, my practice as a young female teacher is forever changed. I used to see teenage women as ones who needed to be fixed. But it is clear from their writing, especially from personal narrative that allows them to construct identity, that there is nothing broken. As Baumgardner and Richards say in *Manifesta*, “We need to listen to girls instead of lecturing them” (185). As teachers, we need to embrace the human elements over the societal ones and offer opportunities for young women to script their identities. We need to encourage them to rewrite their pasts as a way to construct and examine their young lives. We need to give them affection and support through feedback to remind them they are heard, that their thoughts are worth something, that they are not alone in the plight of teenagers. We need to put them in touch with other young women and with our own pasts to give strength in numbers to the collective voice of women. To effectively foster identity construction through writing, we must realize there is no black and white between student and teacher when it comes to personal narrative, and we must find comfort in the gray. We are not their therapists, or their
sisters, or their mothers, or their friends. But we are their teachers. And as such it is our duty to at the very least be aware of this special relationship to writing, and beyond that, to nurture and support it through our assignments and our feedback. If not us, those within the vast ocean, then who?

I've learned from their writing that young women are pulled in many directions. As a result of institutionalized writing and social pressures as young women in high school, many turn to silence because they fear being judged by others. Some are able to break their silence on the page outside of school by keeping a journal or writing poetry, and in doing so they create a space in which they are not judged by someone else. Art of Writing is an escape from this draw towards privacy. It is a center for negotiation, a place where students are at least somewhat protected from institutionalized writing because most writing is personal. Since they do not have to share their writing with others, they are protected from social pressures to act a certain way; they can "act" however they want in their writing. They can try on identities that they create in writing and if they don't want to share their work, I will be their only audience. This can be their small step into view.

Year after year young women stop into my classroom between classes and ask if they can take their journal and freewrite. They confide in their end of the year portfolio letters that they've kept a journal for years, or that they went out and bought their own journals once Art of Writing was over. They pour their innermost thoughts into poetry and they share that poetry with anyone they trust to listen. Their inherent need to write is embedded in an inherent need to script identity and connect it with others. They may need us to hold the lamp, but they have the tools to explore the wreck themselves. And
even though the ocean is deep, with the right guidance, young women will finally find the words to face their damage, value their treasures, and, in the end, write their identities as ones of threadbare beauty and collective strength.
Works Cited


Appendix A

*Sample Journal Prompts from the first semester of Art of Writing*

- "Epiphany." Have you ever experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something to which you were previously blind? Explain.

- "Characterizing Myself." What attribute, quality, or skill distinguishes you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?

- "Live and Learn." Complete the sentence "I've learned that..." and tell the story of how you learned it.

- "Soundtrack." What song would be on the soundtrack of your life story? Why? Include some lyrics and explain how they connect to your life.

- "Emotions." Choose an emotion, like happiness, sadness, fear, anxiety, pride, serenity, etc. Write a narrative journal entry about an event in your life when this emotion was especially present. Describe the event and how you felt in detail.

- "Childhood Event." Choose a vivid time from your childhood. You might think of the first time that you rode a school bus, of a time when you went to the principal's office, the first A you earned on a test or paper, earning money to buy something that you really wanted, and so on. In a journal entry, narrate the events related to the childhood memory that you've chosen so that your readers will understand why the event was important and memorable. (Traci’s 19th List of Ten Narrative Writing Prompts.)

- "Standing Up." Choose a time when you did something that took a lot of nerve, a time when you didn't follow the crowd or a time when you stood up for your beliefs. Your journal entry should show why you decided to make a stand or try something that took nerve, give specifics on the events, and share how you felt after the event. (Traci’s 19th List of Ten Narrative Writing Prompts.)

- "Self-description." What do you see when you look in the mirror? Where does your gaze land? How does this gaze determine your attitude toward yourself and your life? Do you see your younger self beneath this present-day face? Can you determine your future self through this gaze? (*Tell it Slant* by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola).
Appendix B

"The Back of the Line," by Samantha

‘Now, kids. We’re going to be lining up shortest to tallest for graduation this year. Let’s do this orderly, please. If you know you’re tall, please just go to the back of the auditorium.’ It was eighth grade graduation time at my middle school, four years ago. After eight years in the same school system, being the tallest, most awkward girl of the bunch, these words were an expected and appropriate way to end my years of grade school existence. As most of my friends pushed their tiny selves toward the front, measuring back to back to define who was taller by the centimeter, I immediately walked to my final resting place, the only place I’d ever known—the back of the line.

Most girls like to wear their mother’s high heels in an attempt to feel taller, more beautiful and glamorous. While I was never a tomboy—I still wanted to feel beautiful—the height part was never an issue. For a short time I attempted to play with the card I was dealt in life and throw a basketball around, but it wasn’t for me. People would gaze up at me and say, ‘Do you play basketball? No?! Well, why not? You’d be perfect. Just lift those big arms up and you’re right at the net!’ I never wished to be tallest or biggest. I never wished to play basketball. Acceptance for who I was, even for myself, was something I yearned for in life. Hovering over small classmates, feeling wider and uglier than all of the other girls was what I came to know.

The irony of ending my middle school years in a sequence of height order is undeniable for me, considering how I spent these years transforming myself in an attempt to gain some sort of normalcy. I had reached a point somewhere in the summer before eighth grade when I gained a sense of confidence, coming from somewhere unknown. I had my braces taken off, I received contacts in exchange for my old glasses, and some of my awkward weight had flown off. At some point in here was where I found my singing voice. Having confidence in something allowed me to feel worthy of the time of day. If I couldn’t be happy with how I looked, I would be satisfied with my voice. Feeling good about myself was a new fire in my soul. Eighth grade continued to present new confidence in some areas, but heart-ache still sprung from attempts to find an identity for myself inside of my five-foot, ten-inch body. I would forever be ‘the tall girl,’ but was it possible for me to simply be ‘me’?

I had always wished to be picked up and thrown around by a boy in my life as other girls were able to. I wanted to play and be cute. But by living through the pain of being a big girl in middle school and surviving, I’ve learned that there is so much more to gain from being big, strong, and female. I am proud of my height and my hips. I may never be able to have that feeling of weightlessness that some girls experience on a day to day basis, but I will always be a strong woman. I will wear my high heels with pride and stand tall next to my fellow businesspeople once I enter the ‘real world.’ I have found beauty in myself, no matter what height or weight I may be. I will find love with whomever I wish and smile whenever I see it fit. I have worked harder and longer on myself inside and out than I know most of my fellow females ever will.

But most importantly, I can think back to that eighth grade graduation and smile, my big white, straight, beautiful-teeth smile, and know that while I may have been at the back of the line, I received my diploma last and took my time getting to the podium, as I
wore the most beautiful, pink, open-toed high heels I had ever seen. Talk about final impressions.
Appendix C

THE JOURNAL

According to writing experts, the journal provides a safe space for you to write more freely. It is your chance to play with words, express your emotions, or experiment with ideas. It allows you to think on paper. As the writer E.M. Forster observed, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” The journal, then, is a tool for expressing yourselves without the restraint of grammar and spelling rules.

Journal writing is helpful for prewriting, for inquiring, for having a conversation, and just for relaxing. The more you write in the journal, the more comfortable you will feel about expressing yourselves. The more comfortable you feel, the better your writing will become. As with any endeavor, you learn by doing. How do you learn to write? By writing.

Sometimes you will be given a directed assignment in your journal. Other times the topic will be your choice.

Rules for the Journal

1. Please title, date, and number each entry. The top of the page should look like this:

   #1: “My Writing Process”  9/13/10

2. Do not write on the backs of the pages. Write only on the front sides, even if you’re writing an entry that is multiple pages long. Later in the year, we will flip the journal and write on all the backs.

3. Each journal entry should begin a new page, even if there is space left under the one before it.

4. Each journal entry should be at least three-quarters of a page to a full page in your journal. Do not stop until you reach that point—just keep the words flowing.

5. If you are absent when we write in the journal, you must make up the entry.

6. Your entries must be written chronologically. If you miss an entry, leave space for it to be written.

Grading the journal...
Journals will be graded at the end of each marking period for 30 points. They will be graded on length of each entry, completeness (you have all the entries) and seriousness of purpose (you answered the questions I gave you). The goal is to push yourself to think and write as much as you can. Although the journal must be written in sentence form, it will not be graded for grammar, mechanics, or organization. Dedication to the journal results in an A.