

# Exploring Intersections: An Exercise in Dismembering and Remembering Selves

by **Lockie Hunter**

A writing exercise that has generated a great deal of excitement in my nonfiction classes is one I call the “self-adjectives” exercise. Its intent – to locate your interests and passions by listing self-descriptors – is similar to Sherry Simpson’s “tiny masters” exercise (*Brevity* craft essay, Issue 28) and rarely failed to spawn enthusiastic responses...until I began teaching at Warren Wilson College.

Warren Wilson, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Asheville, N.C., is a place where students can major in environmental studies or outdoor leadership and live in the world’s first Ecodorm. It is known for its Triad curriculum of work, academics and community service. Many students come to my writing classes after living abroad, and most are out to change the world. My self-adjectives exercise feels shallow to students who lived on a kibbutz or spent three months on an organic farm in Peru.

Warren Wilson’s tagline is “We’re not for everyone...but then, maybe you’re not everyone.” It is my job to teach those who self-identify as *not everyone* to shape and share their unique experiences. One of my students complained that although she understood that the self-adjectives exercise was “harmless” and was meant to create categories to generate story ideas, she felt limited by the exercise rather than empowered by it. She felt that bringing pen to paper with a specific “identity” limited both vocabulary and self-discovery.

This sense of limitation when applying traditional story-generation methods may apply to many seasoned writers as well. Ideas flow easily, and writers’ large worldview and varied life experiences make for an often overwhelming choice of personal essay topics, yet it is locating the writer’s narrative within the *context* of their world that is key.

My solution for students who don’t wish to be “limited” to an identity is to push against the constructed reality that identifies their age group (or socioeconomic background or race or religion) and explore the “why” by adding the context or intersection.

During the recent H1N1 outbreak a spokesperson for another college noted how difficult it was to get his students to take precautions such as hand-washing. He boiled it down to being unable to make “that age group” care about anything. My students were riled at this attack on their peers. They felt that the “college student” self-adjective was being abused. I asked them to funnel this anger into writing a personal essay that pushed against this imposed reality in which their age group is portrayed as jaded, to write at the intersection of “college student” and “engaged.”

Many times when a student resists the self-adjectives exercise, it is because she finds herself straddling two worlds. This intersection creates a discomfort, and it is from this discomfort that I encourage the student to write. I argue that the uncomfortable intersection *is* the story.

Pushing past this discomfort is tricky. A writer cannot worry about judgment during the writing process. A classic mistake is to self-censor before the words hit the page. “Suppose my mother reads it?” is a common refrain. The memoirist Richard Hoffman recommends setting the mind a task as a way to tackle this urge to self-censor. The obsessive part of your brain, the part that recognizes taboo, does not want to let the uncomfortable intersection surface, so keep it busy by giving it a task or a game. A poetic form can allow the writer to approach topics that are too difficult. Try to write in haiku or perhaps every third sentence must rhyme. This will keep the subconscious part of your brain too busy to self-censor or judge. Hoffman notes that it’s uncanny

how much candor will find its way into your work.

Once the student collects her self-adjectives (environmentalist, Unitarian, lesbian, farm-girl, scientist, chef, biker, vegan, poet, Southerner, Irish, punk), she divides her experience into units (*dismember*) that we then work to unite (*remember*). *Unitarian* plus *lesbian* equals something so much larger than simply Unitarian. *Vegan* plus *chef* equals so much more than simply chef. The student can explore two worlds while also reaching out to the larger community and giving her story greater contextual meaning. This approach seems to satisfy students' initial reluctance of the self-adjectives assignment. A student breaks her identity into seemingly disparate adjectives and then reunites them into something often larger than the writer ever imagined. Instead of limiting self-discovery and vocabulary, the exercise enhances and expands self-discovery and vocabulary.

The adjectives the writer chooses are the “handles” the reader grasps to identify the character in the story. The story hangs on the slices of self that are shown to the reader. This approach also serves to limit a nonfiction piece. By focusing on only two or three adjectives that define the writer's connection with the world, the writer is not in danger of floating off-topic. After all, in writing creative nonfiction, it is difficult to know what part of your life-experience to include. When the writer locates herself in a nexus of adjectives and finds her intersection, she is set free to trust that her experience is *not for everyone, but then, she's not everyone*: She's a writer with many selves and a grand story to tell.

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