

WRITING FOR RIGHTS

A Handbook to Accompany the Course “Dissent: A Study in Memoirs”

IAFF 190W - 18
The Elliott School of International Affairs
George Washington University

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I INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

A. Content and Scope of the Class

Dissent: A Study in Memoirs is an examination of the lives and achievements of some of the most compelling dissidents of the 20th Century, through their own writings. These works include autobiographies and memoirs, letters and essays written, organized and edited by the dissidents themselves. In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, there is no formal memoir. Instead, her now-deceased husband compiled many of her speeches, essays and articles into a single volume. In this class, we will discuss how the form of the writing itself shapes the narrative and provides us with a lens through which to view both the life as well as the work. What is the difference between a collection of letters written during a prison term, for example, and a memoir written many years after the fact?

In our class, the word “dissident” is used to refer to a man or woman who challenges the existence of a political regime through non-traditional and public means. Their goal is a change in government or a certain practice of government. Dissidents serve as both conscience and challenge to the status quo, where dissent starts off as a personal statement and gradually evolves into a public call to action.

The class begins with an historical overview of dissent, reading Henry David Thoreau’s timeless essay, “On Civil Disobedience”, and taking us into the present with some of the works of Martin Luther King Junior. With these works as book-ends, we are introduced, in chronological order, to our subjects. We begin by reading Gandhi and becoming involved with the movement for self-rule in India; next, we travel to Russia where we are swept up in the movement to free the Soviet Jews; there, we read Natan Sharansky as well as Elie Wiesel, who documented his own visit to the “Jews of Silence” in a moving essay by that same name. From there, we move across Eastern Europe where we read letters, plays and essays by Vaclav Havel. Havel’s narrative is also accompanied by writings of Lech Walesa and other Eastern European dissidents. In Iran, we become familiar with the life and work of Azar Nafizi and Sherin Ebadi. South Africa’s battle against apartheid, inextricably linked to the life of Nelson Mandela, is framed by a lesser-known Mark Mathabane, author of the better known “*Kaffir Boy*”, the first first-person narrative to provide the west with a description of life in the South African Township, and Desmond Tutu’s work in the now famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Not all of the characters are leads, and some appear to be backdrops or scribes rather than plotters or strategists. But this is one of the fascinating bonuses of this course: an examination of bit players helps us to understand how, in history as well as in a well-crafted play, there are no small actors. The roles with fewer lines add color and texture to define the greater drama unfolding before us. Without these ancillary characters, the stage would be flat, the drama less interesting.

Our understanding of dissent grows and morphs as we get to know these once-ordinary people, now legends all, who have clung to beliefs at a time when conviction was a punishable offense. In the beginning of the class you will learn about context. This means you will learn about the systemic racism of apartheid, the chilling terror of a KGB summons, or the degrading politics of a colonial power. You will learn about individuals who safeguarded their beliefs, recognizing that their conscience was one thing that they could call their own. Together we will spend most of our time talking about what happens when an all-encroaching, life-consuming context collides with an indomitable creed. From this collision comes dissent.

The first discussions tend to be a bit difficult. Many of you will not yet be familiar with the language of dissent. Many of you will have read about the women and men we will study, but from secondary sources and through a lens of causality: Gandhi or Mandela or Sharansky or Havel went to prison following a publication, a speech, an outburst. Something happened. The world listened. And a formula for non-violent resistance is extrapolated out of the sound of a whip on bare skin, the death of a spouse, or the enforcement of exile. In this class, we read of the pain, the shame, the losses and, yes, the victories, by the instigators themselves.

Gradually, we develop a common language as we get to know our cast of characters. Our discussions become more heated, our ability to relate what happens in Burma to actions in South Africa, or Russia, or the American South becomes second nature. “These men and women are so human,” a student in last year’s class commented. And so they are. Out of this common humanity, we develop themes; we start to identify the moments in each life when creed collides with context. What happens in prison? How did they first appear on the public stage? What was their particular form of subversion? Of challenge? Of refusal to accept a totalitarian system?

B. Why Read Memoirs?

About each of our dissidents we can read volumes; they are the subjects of biographies and figure prominently in books, journals and papers. They are the stuff of legend as well as doctoral dissertations. And, let us not forget blockbuster movies. All of these works have merit.

There is something particularly wonderful about reading memoirs, however. In reading their stories penned by their own hand, we learn more about what is important to our protagonists. In studying the image they project to the world, we see how they wanted to be remembered, which is a statement of value as much as any other.

Dissent is a public statement of deep and personal convictions. How much more honest it is therefore to read the words of the believers themselves as they struggle to articulate that which moves their souls. The interpretation of a belief is never quite as pure when written by someone else, especially if that person is perhaps not particularly friendly to the belief. There are those, for example, who attempt to disassociate Gandhi from his faith. If you read Gandhi, this is impossible to do. The best guardian of a creed is the believer. And so let us read the words of the believers. Many of them are marvelous writers. They have all lived extraordinary lives. They have much to teach us through their words as well as their craft.

C. Writing for Human Rights

As I have written, spoken, preached and lectured about human rights throughout my own career, people have come up and thanked me for being a voice for the voiceless. This expression continues to unnerve me to this day for I cannot pretend to speak for someone who has experienced the brutality of the world in ways unimaginable to most. What I will say is that, recognizing the sheer absurdity of all forms of injustice, I feel more able to navigate the vagaries of one over another, and these have become my causes. For those of you wanting to pursue a career in human rights, or civil society development, or community empowerment (among many other careers where advocacy is an important element) there are tools that will sharpen your skills and your performance. My effort, in this class, is to introduce you to some of these tools, ever referring to the written examples of the dissidents we are studying in this course.

Purpose and audience both contribute to determining the form of the finished product. Most human rights writing is designed to produce a change, whether this be in policy, practice or perception, across a wide range of actors. The chart below illustrates the common purposes, audiences and forms of human rights writing.

PURPOSE	AUDIENCE	FORMS
Inform and educate	General public	Editorials
Mobilize support	Policy makers (members of congress, committee staff, key agency personnel)	Congressional testimony
Initiate action	Donors	Reports
Change legislation	Foreign governments	Policy briefs
Protest and challenge	Activists and advocates	Lectures, papers and articles
	Youth, students	Books
		Blogs, social media

Below are some notable examples to illustrate the different genres of human rights writing:

Editorials: One of the most common forms of expressing a response to a political act, editorials are written by newspaper editorial staff or professional columnists, usually experts in a particular field. You would fit into this latter category. Your editorial will usually be a response to a political decision, or linked to an historic event, expressing a (strong) opinion on why this was good or bad, beneficial or harmful to the human race. When you are writing an editorial, you are writing to an educated public with potential to act by writing members of congress, joining a cause or contributing money. Editorials should be brief, direct and compelling.

Examples:

Wright, Robin. " Tipping Point in Tehran: A Gathering Opposition Faces a Weakened regime." *Washington Post* 14 July 2009.

Hiatt, Fred. "Courageous Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi marks birthday still under house arrest." *Washington Post* 12 June 2010.

Expert witness testimony: When Congress wishes to consider new legislation, respond to an economic, environmental, or humanitarian disaster, or learn more about a region or an issue, members of committees or subcommittees convene hearings in which expert witnesses present the best thinking and most recent research on a given topic. Congressional testimony should fact based and action oriented. While written testimony, required by every witness and incorporated into the Congressional Record, is formal and academic, the spoken testimony can be emotional and compelling.

Example:

"Afghan Women and Girls: Building the Future of Afghanistan"
Testimony of Rachel Reid, Afghanistan Researcher, Human Rights Watch:
Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 23, 2010

Reports:

The purpose of an international human rights report is usually to document a state's failure to respond to a human rights violation. Written reports are the life-blood of advocacy groups and are one of their main tools for making their message available to the public. If you choose to work in a non-profit organization you will find yourself working on numerous reports.

In human rights work, these reports usually document a problem that has previously received very little attention. The strength of these reports is that they are usually based on authentic field research and do not depend on secondary sources for their information.

Data is collected frequently with the assistance of local NGO employees and advocates and require a rigid methodology, as these reports will frequently be challenged. These reports prove the existence of a problem and subsequently offer a series of recommendations, based on an analysis for change, to be implemented by an array of actors.

Example:

“Egypt: Women Targeted by Association.” *Amnesty International*. Amnesty International, 1 March 1997. Web. 27 June 2010

Policy briefs and memos:

You will often be asked to defend the rationale for choosing one policy over another in a political debate; critique existing legislation, make recommendations for new legislation or for reauthorizing existing legislation, and occasionally provide actual language for proposed legislation. You will also be asked to suggest funding priorities and to develop grant proposal ideas. This writing requires a thorough understanding both of your subject and of the policy process so that your suggestions will be taken seriously AND will have a small chance of being included in final recommendations or policy changes. A policy brief is concise, persuasive and to the point.

Example:

Magarrell, Lisa. “Policy Brief: Inquiry into human rights abuses in the war on terror.” *International Center for Transitional Justice*. International Center for Transitional Justice, November 2008. Web. 27 June 2010.

Lectures, papers and feature articles:

Professional writing throughout a human rights career will have much in common with other careers in international affairs. You will deliver lectures and present papers at conferences and research seminars; you will also on occasion and depending on your position, write for popular magazines or scholarly journals. Since these exercises have much in common with research-based writing in your other courses, this guide will not focus on them in any length.

Example

Diamond, Larry. “Transition to Democracy in Iraq? Averting the Slide into Civil War.” Session on Democracy in the Middle East. The Hoover Institution/Woodrow Wilson International Center. Washington, DC. 6 April 2004

Blogs and other forms of social media:

These are mentioned in this handbook because of their growing importance in dissident movements.

Example

One among many effective blogs on progressive today is change.org.

II WRITING ASSIGNMENT

A. Introduction to the Writing Assignments

The writing assignments for this course are not intended to duplicate what you have already studied about writing good research papers. Rather, making certain assumptions about your ability to survey, locate and review research, develop a topic and write a paper, this course will build on those skills by developing skills that will be useful to you anytime you need to persuade, argue, convince or challenge your audience as to the importance of your topic.

First, a word about the writing itself: I will be looking for papers that are well written, thoughtful, organized and thoroughly researched.

1. Good Writing: While perhaps an obvious criterion, it is one that is worth repeating. If grammatical errors or spelling mistakes interfere with my ability to read your work in a straightforward manner, your paper will not be accepted. In other words, if I find that I am correcting grammar mistakes instead of following the development of your reasoning, you will be asked to rewrite the paper.
2. Good Thinking: Human rights writing is about underscoring gross violations of human rights and dignity, resulting from a complex series of factors. Identifying the basis for a wrong and being able to unravel a multifaceted problem will be at the heart of much of your writing in this area. Your assignments will require you to analyze your own convictions in the context of contemporary human rights violations and to examine the individuals we study as their creeds clash with their contexts. Before you can propose solutions, we have to understand how a situation unraveled.
3. Good Organization: Human rights writing is descriptive, analytical and persuasive. Keep these in mind as you draft your document. Don't shy away from descriptive detail, notably as you introduce your topic.
4. Thorough Research: Are your arguments supported by the data? If you claim that something is wrong, prove it to me. Human rights writing is not the place for sweeping generalities – you will lose your audience. You may use any number of acceptable formatting styles in your work as long as you are consistent within each of your papers.

1. THIS I BELIEVE

A distinguishing characteristic of our dissidents is their ability to name their beliefs and engage others in a similar vision. Writing in the human rights field requires a comparable clarity of conviction and expression.

This first assignment will challenge you to find our own voice. Loosely based on the acclaimed National Public Radio series, “This I believe”, you will be asked to develop your own convictions on a human rights issue of relevance and interest to you today.

The “This I Believe” website includes numerous examples of essays on a wide range of topics. It can be a helpful resource: <http://thisibelieve.org>.

The assignment: You will identify an area of human rights that moves you deeply. You will then write a 5-page paper on why this issue is important to you. I am not asking for a description, exposé or analysis of an issue. I am asking why you believe this issue is important enough that others should know more about it from your perspective.

The assignment is typically challenging for many reasons. Traditionally, academia discourages students from writing in the first person. Furthermore, writing in the first person makes public what we have previously held as personal. Our flawed reasoning can hide behind veiled silence and we are not subject to the scrutiny of others. Finally, a first-person statement requires a public commitment, which in turns carries with it the idea of permanence.

The assignment is to write a paper to introduce the importance of a human rights issue. Your goal is not to educate your reader on every aspect of the issue. Your goal, rather, is to convince your reader to buy into the importance of this issue. The primary goal of this paper is to take it out of the cerebral (it is NOT a paper about the validity of a cause) and into the practical (the paper is about why YOU think the cause is important).

Why is this important? In order to get a policy maker, or a funder, or a power broker to be willing to consider your issue, you will need to make a compelling case for why they should care. They will care if they believe you do. The reader will need to understand why your issue is relevant and why it deserves to be included in a human rights agenda.

Examples of previous topics include the importance of education for all girls in developing countries; immigrants; rights; the imperative to combat child trafficking; the need for peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; ending censorship in China and US welfare reform.

Writing the paper:

The first step is to select your topic. Take a deep breath. Think about this week’s news or last night’s dinner conversation. What caught your attention, made you feel alive, want to “just do something”? Is there a memory from an overseas trip that just won’t shake loose? A news story that compels you to drop everything and listen when it comes across your computer or television screen?

Start with what you know, and care about and then begin reading. Read journals, newspaper accounts, books that address the topic. And start putting your ideas on paper.

The Introduction.

Introduce your topic in way that makes it relevant to the reader. The introduction needs to be compelling and real. It needs to make the reader understand that, if your issue is not featured in the next State Department’s Annual Human Rights Report,

something is indeed wrong with the world. Use illustrations from your experience or from the pages of contemporary news stories.

As an example, let us examine how Vaclav Havel begins his far-reaching essay, “The Power of the Powerless,” in which he expresses his beliefs that dissent, grounded in a principle he calls “living in truth”, is the only way to challenge the existing Communist regime.

“ A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the West is called “dissent.” This specter has not appeared out of thin air. It is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting... Who are these so-called dissidents? Where does their point of view come from and what importance does it have?” (Havel 126).

In the past, student papers have been extremely creative. In a discussion on the importance of education for women in the developing world, a student began:

“We may not realize it when we stand still, but the earth rotates at a maximum velocity of more than 465 meters per second. For this reason, when space agencies send missiles into outer space, these are launched due east, allowing them to harness this rapid speed. The time has come for India, and indeed the developing world, to work with its natural rotation to harness its own enormous potential. When much of the female population is uneducated and illiterate, this immense innate potential is simply not being harnessed. In the same way that a space launch is held back when launched against the rotation of the Earth, India is held back from its optimum when many of its women remain inadequately educated. The time has come for India to fundamentally reorient the direction of its policy by elevating women’s education as a national priority. If it is able to do this, not even the sky is the limit.”

The Body:

In this section, you might want to consider some of the main factors in writing an argument. Following the introduction, you will:

- a. Establish the credibility of your issue and situate your issue in the context of other global problems. Be specific. Use illustrations.

Let us revisit Vaclav Havel to see how he creates a context for his essay, “The Power of the Powerless.” In the third section, he begins to introduce one of the most debilitating aspects of communism, which is the depersonalization of the individual.

“The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan, “Workers of the world, unite!” Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment thought to how such unification might occur and what it would mean?” (Havel 132)

The slogan was a familiar sign for Havel's audience. Throughout his essay, he revisits the greengrocer and, by posing a number of responses the greengrocer could make to this very ordinary sign, he draws the reader into the drama of the individual versus the state.

"Reading Lolita in Tehran," Azar Nafisi's beautifully written memoir, recounts the subversive power of reading American literature in the new Islamic Republic of Iran. For Nafisi, dissent is also characterized by a very normal reaction. In her case, she maintains her identity, and lives in her truth, by subversively teaching Western fiction on her own terms. To do so, she resigned from the University.

"Teaching in the Islamic Republic, like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always, the joy of teaching was marred by diversions and considerations forced on us by the regime – how well could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one's work but the color of one's lips, the subversive potential of a single strand of hair? Could one really concentrate on one's job when what preoccupied the faculty was how to excise the word *wine* from a Hemingway story, when they decided to teach Bronte because she appeared to condone adultery?" (Nafisi 11)

- b. Introduce any opposing viewpoints or challenges to your perspective. Vaclav Havel takes the time to explain the strengths of the communist system before he proceeds to dismantle its basic premises.
- c. Answer these challenges and present your viewpoint.

The Conclusion:

Conclude with a challenge to readers to consider the risks of not addressing your issue.

Consider this ending to an essay on the importance of increasing teachers' salaries:

"My mother's parents came to America in search of a more fulfilling life for their children. Starting kindergarten not knowing more than ten words of English, my mother will tell you it was not an American Dream that showed her the way to success, it was her teachers. It is for this reason that [my mother] has dedicated her life to being a teacher. What my mother has shown me is that her beliefs are not empty. It is education that will ultimately lead our country to a full realization of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is teachers that will be our guiding light. This is what I believe."

Or another piece on education, this time on ensuring the education of immigrant children:

"The America we live in today is not consistent with our ideals as a nation. The America I believe in is a place where hard work is rewarded with opportunity. If America should continue to represent a beacon of freedom and hope, we must hold

true to our ideals and enable children of immigrants to aspire to bright futures. Pass the DREAM Act to keep the American Dream alive.”

As you review your paper, keep in mind the following:

Name your issue, identify your beliefs, and define your strategies. Gandhi was able to name his doctrine of non-violence, explain why it was important, and develop a road map for India to achieve self-determination.

Use stories and descriptions to engage your reader. Remember Havel’s greengrocer.

Do not be afraid of details. I have found that many students take comfort in sweeping generalities. I have found that generalities mask several weaknesses including a lack of real knowledge stemming from inadequate research. You will persuade your reader to the degree that you both move him to action and convince her that the problem is serious. You do not do this by saying that “millions of children every year die from malaria.” How much more compelling to read, “Night falls slowly on the stilt village of Ganvié, located on the shores of Lake Nokoué, a stone’s throw from Benin’s capital city. But it is more than the darkness that announces the night. From the stagnant pools under the rotting timbers, the female mosquitoes get ready for their lethal nighttime wanderings. By morning, 50 children will have malaria. By the following week, one third of those children will have died. Not one of those children has a mosquito net.”

By taking the time to learn where malaria is prevalent, to provide concrete numbers in one place, and describing the core of the problem, you have engaged the reader in this drama of needless death.

LIVES IN CONTEXT

It seems as if I am ever writing reports. I am in good company. Every major human rights organization releases its findings to the world. Through these documents, advocacy groups educate, generate support, push political agendas and obtain funding. If a report is compelling enough, it will be picked up by the media, by a member of congress or even a celebrity. The issue then becomes a cause; hopefully, outrage will ensue.

A report is compelling, and subsequently successful, because it places human lives within the context of global realities: war, conflict, environmental and natural disasters and egregious manifestations of power. A good report shows us how human lives are affected by political decisions. We come away from such a reports with understanding and with a motivation to act. A successful report elicits a response. We understand how we can, as individuals, find our way through the mazes of politics and rhetoric to ultimately make a difference.

How to make such a report compelling, interesting, credible and readable is the goal of the next assignment. Your next paper will provide you with the opportunity to develop a framework for a compelling report.

1. Selecting a Topic

You will have considerable latitude in choosing a topic for your term paper. You may focus on any of the individuals we have studied in class, or you may prefer to branch out. You may build upon your “This I Believe” essay, or your in-class presentation. The paper must include the following elements:

- A person or group of persons
- A belief system
- An oppressive political context
- A public challenge to the existing regime (dissent)

Topics from last year included the following:

- A comparison of the prison experiences of Natan Sharansky and Nelson Mandela
- A discussion of the role of students in dissident movements, looking notably at South Africa and Iran
- A comparison of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela
- The importance of international support in dissident movements
- The rise to prominence of Noble Laureate Sherin Ebadi

Once an idea begins to grab you, read everything you can about it. Explore your characters’ motivations and passions; their triumphs and failures; and look at how their individual actions eventually turned into movements and challenged authorities. Some of the movements we study will have been successful; others are still very much works in progress. The critical point in your work is not the end result, but the process by which individuals interject themselves into political events. The assignment is asking you to engage in a process rather than document or analyze a result.

2. Writing the Paper:

This paper will be written in multiple increments so that you will benefit from input and revision at every stage. Input will come from me and from your peers, as you will post abstracts, outlines and drafts on Blackboard to be reviewed. Some class time will be dedicated to discussing your assignments. These steps will include

- a. Formulating the idea: writing an abstract: Your abstract will be a short paragraph between 300-400 words. This will include the theme you will pursue in your paper and will identify the elements described above: What person or group of persons will you be writing about? What is their belief system? What is their context? How do they challenge oppression and what form does their dissent take?
- b. Developing an outline with a list of resources: An outline is to written work what a blue-print is to architecture. Without it, you might end up somewhere you did not intend and find that you are crumbling for lack of good foundation.

The outline will include a brief summary of your topic (which you may take from your abstract). It will then outline your discussion of beliefs, context and forms of dissent. At the end of your outline, you will include a preliminary bibliography for your paper.

- c. Drafting your report: Based on the feedback from your outline you will begin to write your paper. Your classmates and I will critique these drafts.
- d. Revision and final draft: Based on previous feedback, you are now ready to write your final paper. Good luck!

You will work hard in this course. You will also view the world through a slightly different perspective than you might normally experience in your courses at George Washington University. I look forward to a great semester.

M. Clark

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