A Writer's Examen

Perfecting Eloquence: Jesuit Pedagogy in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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In this exercise, you will reflect on your growth and potential as a writer by examining your thoughts and emotions throughout the writing process. This practice of reflecting on your own thinking is called "**metacognition**," and education psychologists consider it to be a vital part of learning. Metacognition requires us to be the mechanics of our own brains, looking "under the hood" of our thought process and assessing how each part is working. When we do this well, we can "keep" what's working, and "fix" or "replace" what isn't.

St. Ignatius of Loyola never used the word "metacognition," but he dedicated his life to the idea of learning and growing from deep personal reflection. At first, he did this for himself in solitude, while recovering from battle wounds in a cave. After recovering, however, he guided others through the same personal reflections that he had composed, revising and reimagining them over the course of his life. The simplest of these reflections is a famous meditative prayer known as "the Examen."

What is "The Examen"?

"The Examen" is a daily reflective prayer that was first developed by St. Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*. It has two basic purposes. First, as with any personal prayer, the Examen is designed to place a person into intimate conversation with God. Beyond this, however, the Examen serves as a meditative process of recollection and reflection. Ignatius believed that God is present in all things, but just because God is present doesn't mean God is easy to find. Rather, each person must carefully examine their memories to discern where, when, and how God has been speaking to

them that day. By practicing a daily Examen, one can find meaningful themes, patterns, and lessons from the rhythms of their everyday life.

The Examen is traditionally divided into five steps.

I. **Enter into God's presence.** Find a quiet place. Still your thoughts and your body, and invite God into your heart and mind. Allow yourself to feel your breath, your heartbeat, and the ambient noises around you. Realize that these all come from God, that God sustains you and all of creation. Imagine God seated beside you, or in front of you, looking at you as if you were going to have a conversation.

II. **Give thanks.** Call to mind the many gifts God has placed in your life (e.g. loved ones, good health, the natural world, etc.). For each gift, offer your gratitude to God.

III. **Reflect on the movements of your day.** Allow the memories from your day to play through your mind, almost like a movie. Recall the moments, emotions, desires, and repulsions (or, as Ignatius calls them, "interior movements") that you experienced. What sticks out to you? At this point, do not pass judgment on them, but simply take a moment to examine them for what they are.

    Now, select one or two "movements" that you find most significant. Ask yourself: where did that movement *move* you? Did it move you toward God? Toward hope or interior peace? Toward mercy and care for others? When you experienced the movement, did you feel more full of life? Or, did that movement take you away from God? Toward anxiety or

despair? Toward self-centeredness, impatience, or hatred? When you experienced the movement, did you feel less full of life?

IV. **Rejoice and seek forgiveness.** Now that you have awareness of where your spirit has moved throughout the day, take this time to rejoice for the moments when you may have moved closer to God and hopeful peace. Or, take this time to ask for forgiveness and healing for the moments when you may have moved away from God and hopeful peace. Praise God for making these movements clear to you.

V. **Look to tomorrow.** Reflect on what your day will look like tomorrow. What challenges might you face? What gifts might you receive? Keeping all of this in mind, ask God for something practical and specific that will help you move closer to God and hopeful peace in the day to come (e.g. fortitude and patience while taking a Calculus quiz, mercy and understanding when interacting with a lab partner who you find frustrating, etc.). Finally, close with a moment of silence or a prayer that is close to your heart.

This process of reflection, discernment, and conversation is repeated daily, both in the late evenings and at midday.

In this exercise, you will undertake a "***Writer's* Examen**" to develop metacognitive writing practices. Unlike the Examen developed by St. Ignatius, this Examen will not be a conversation with God. Rather, it will be a conversation between you and yourself about your writing. You do

not need to be a Christian, or even religious to do this exercise: all you need is to be open-minded and willing to write.

A Writer's Examen

Begin by situating yourself in a quiet place, preferably a place with dim lighting where you will be undisturbed. You may also choose to close your eyes when not writing. This will allow you to withdraw your focus from your immediate surroundings, and instead devote it to this meditation. You should have a writing utensil and something to write on in front of you.

I. **Free write.** Using the paper in front of you, write whatever comes into your mind for at least ten minutes. Don't focus on the content of what you're writing: there's no need to think about an overall theme, organization, coherence, or even grammar and spelling. Your goal is just to practice what scholar Peter Elbow calls "shedding ink." Try to keep your writing utensil moving the whole time, and don't cross out or erase anything you write. When you feel like your focus has shifted from your everyday concerns and your environment to the process of writing, you may put down your writing utensil and close your eyes.

II. **Give thanks.** Call to mind different things in your life that you're grateful for (loved ones, good health, education, shelter, good food, etc.). Imagine each of these things in your mind's eye, in different contexts. For instance, if you're imagining your home, imagine it in both summer and winter. Then. when you have a good list of them, pick up your writing utensil, and begin to write them down by name (below your free write). Imagine that the

act of writing them is your way of giving thanks for their existence in your life; that your writing of their names is an embodiment of your gratitude.

III. **Reflect on your experience of writing.** Allow the memories from your free writing to play through your mind, almost like a movie. Try to trace the "interior movements" that occurred within your mind and heart as you undertook the process of writing. What feelings emerged? Did your focus remain in the present moment, or did you become immersed in your writing? Did you get bored? If yes, when? And did you become interested again at any point?

Were you able to write for the whole time without stopping? Did you feel tempted to go back and revise at any point? If yes, what kinds of revisions did you feel most tempted to make?

Which part(s) felt the easiest? Which part(s) felt most challenging? Which part(s) did you feel most excited about when writing? Which part(s) did you feel least excited about when writing?

Did you feel your mind making decisions about diction, syntax, or organization as you wrote? For example, did you almost write a certain word, but then changed it? Or did the words on the page reflect the thoughts you initially had in your mind?

How was your body positioned while you were writing? Did you shift throughout the process, or stay relatively still? Were you comfortable? Uncomfortable (hot, cold, sore, stiff, tired)? Were you conscious of your body throughout, or did your focus move away from it?

IV. Rejoice and acknowledge. Now, read back your writing on the page in front of you. Compare it with your reflection on your "interior movements" and your embodied experience of writing. Do you notice any connection between your interior movements, your embodied experience, and the writing in front of you on the page?

Pick a paragraph, a sentence, or even a phrase that you are glad to have written. What do you like about it? How does it express something meaningful about yourself, other people, or the world around you? Consider the words you chose, the sentence structure you used, and the way it resonates with the writing around it. Now ask yourself: as a writer, what can you learn from this piece of writing? Do not move on until you have articulated something you can learn from this part of your free writing. When you have settled on something, write it out on your paper. Read it back to yourself, and *rejoice* that you have both produced some meaningful writing and have learned something from it.

Now, pick a paragraph, a sentence, or even a phrase that confuses you, frustrates you, or simply one that you find uncompelling. What don't you like about it? Does it strike you as something meaningful? If it doesn't strike you as meaningful, did writing *that* part lead you to write *another* part that you find meaningful? If it did lead you to write something meaningful, rejoice, and understand that writing is a process of discovery. If you don't

think that the part you picked led you to write something meaningful, *acknowledge* this for a moment. Then, remind yourself that writing is difficult and that we, as writers, will often produce things that "go nowhere." Understand that this is part of the writing process too and that—even if it doesn't feel like it at this moment in time—it's good that you wrote that part.

V. **Look to tomorrow.** Re-read the lesson you learned from the piece of writing that you found meaningful. Now, close your eyes and imagine yourself the next time you sit down to write. How will you apply this lesson in your writing then? Imagine yourself recalling this moment of reflection, and using it to produce another meaningful piece of writing. If you feel called, write down a practical step you can take to remember this lesson the next time you write. Finally, close with a moment of silence.