Many teachers who include autobiographical writing in their courses agree that one of the greatest difficulties for students lies in making the transition from personal writing to the analytical and expository modes that customarily predominate in composition courses," writes Robert Lyons in his preface to Autobiography: A Reader for Writers (N. Y. Oxford, 1977). I would like to suggest that this transition would be easier to achieve if students could sometimes view their own autobiographical writing as something other than a finished form. Too often students are assigned autobiographical "themes"; that is, they are asked to shape their personal responses and experiences into something approaching the public literary genre of autobiography. Instructors might have more success in teaching analysis and exposition—public forms of writing—if the autobiographical writing of undergraduates were viewed primarily as a private way to find ideas, not always as material itself to be shaped into public autobiographical prose.

Literary autobiography is a genre that only a few can create. Writers like Cellini, Franklin, and Yeats have the artist's gift of distance and can impose this distance even on their most personal experiences. We call their autobiographies non-fiction, but they are really fictions in the etymological sense. The Latin root of fiction is fingere (fictum), literally to shape or form. Literary artists are able to write narratives that give shape and form to their lives. We cannot expect all of our students to do the same. Those students who have the talent can be encouraged to work in this difficult genre, but all students can be helped
to nurture the autobiographical impulse as a seed-bed of thought.

In James Kinneavy's terms the major aim of literary writing—and that term includes literary autobiography—is aesthetic, to use language beautifully. The major aim of autobiographical assignments in the composition classroom ought to be expressive. When students write about their own feelings and experiences, they have a chance, quite literally, to see what they know. As Wittgenstein has said, "the limits of my world mean the limits of my language." When we encourage students to write expressively for themselves, not for a reader, we are helping them to expand the limits of their world.

James Britton believes that expressive writing is "the kind of writing best adapted to exploration and discovery." He says further, "It is language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience." In composition classrooms we should encourage our students to explore, to speculate, to come to grips with their own experience through writing. "For writing, by objectifying words, and by making their meanings available for much more prolonged and intensive scrutiny than is possible orally, encourages private thought." And composition teachers should help students to understand that some of their most useful autobiographical writing will be private, written not for the ages or even for a teacher, but unashamedly for themselves. With all good intentions many composition instructors blur the distinction between private and public writing, to the detriment of both forms. Private writing should be like other private acts: it should be shared only when the individual chooses. In my view it is never appropriate to apply measures of objective assessment to anything private, including private writing. It is intrusive for an instructor to require the submission of students' private journals. To assign a grade to such private documents is nothing short of a violation. And in academic terms, we subtly teach the wrong ideas about aim and audience when we treat a private journal as if it were a public document. Papers of exposition and analysis are written to communicate to other people, and papers of this sort are appropriately assessed for their success or lack of success in fulfilling their intention. Private writing is not written to communicate with others and should not be assessed as if it were.

The conventions of academic discourse in the social and
natural sciences require the subordination or even the suppres-
sion of most private references. Composition teachers can help
students to understand that it is perfectly appropriate to keep a
private record of their feelings of awe at the sight of protoplasm
under the microscope. But at the same time students should not
assume that their biology teachers are trying to stifle under-
graduate creativity by suggesting that these feelings of awe do not
belong in a lab report.

Public writing, like other forms of social behavior, in-
volves role-playing. Playing roles need not be false or hypo-
critical. In fact, role-playing may be necessary for commu-
nication to occur at all. The writer, in Walter Ong's terms, needs
to fictionalize both himself and his reader. Ong presents the
example of an autobiographical theme assignment like: "How I
Spent My Summer Vacation." The student who is expected to
submit a paper on this topic probably will not be able to write any-
thing at all until he can create for himself the literary role of
narrator and for his audience special role as readers—readers
with experience in interpreting the signals of earlier autobio-
graphical works, like Samuel Clemens' Life on the Mississippi.

My point is that the opportunity to do unshaped autobi-
ographical writing may be more useful to many students than the
assignment of autobiographical themes. We should ask students
to write private documents that we will never read or even
collect. In fact, we, too, must consider writing privately in com-
pany with our students. Sometimes we might choose to share
this writing, but frequently we might not. In any case, we should
teach our students the function of unshaped autobiography,
when the only role the writer plays is that of explorer, and the
only audience that the writer fictionalizes is an aspect of himself.
We should help students make use of the autobiographical
impulse in its fundamental form, unshaped by the constraints of
a literary genre. We should teach students to use "writing as a
mode of learning," as Janet Emig says, not merely as a mode of
communication. Linda Flower uses the term "writer-based
prose" to identify "verbal expression written by a writer to him-
self and for himself."

Teachers in all disciplines can make effective use of auto-
biography by asking students to write personal narratives about
their experience of learning academic concepts. Composition
teachers can introduce students to the exploratory and clarifying
function of autobiographical writing. Then instructors in all
disciplines can be encouraged to ask students to do more ungraded, exploratory writing. In the composition classroom instructors can give students at least five minutes of each class period to write expressively and autobiographically about whatever they are studying. Even on the first day of class, after distributing the syllabus, an instructor might ask students to write down their feelings of annoyance, dismay, or pleasure at the plans for the weeks to come. This process may also help students to formulate questions while the instructor is present. Most important, the students begin right away to develop the habit of writing down their reactions. While the students are recording their responses, the instructor should be recording his or hers. As Mina Shaughnessy says, "the beginning writer does not know how writers behave." It is important for composition students to see their instructors writing. We know that children have an easier time in learning to read when they have had opportunities to watch respected adults reading. How many children or adolescents see adult role-models writing anything except checks or tax forms?

After a short period of class participation in this writing community, the instructor can ask for volunteers to share a question or comment from this experience of private writing. Sometimes the instructor will want to share, sometimes not. There is no necessity to collect or annotate these in-class journal entries. The whole process has been sufficiently monitored by the instructor's presence and participation.

When composition teachers establish for their students the habit of writing things down, it becomes much easier to persuade instructors in other disciplines to reinforce this habit. Before beginning a lecture on the causes of the Civil War, a history instructor could ask the whole class to write autobiographically for a few moments on connections between the textbook material and issues in the students' own lives. Again, the history instructor should write along with students at this time and then perhaps use what he has written as a starting point for his lecture. A philosophy instructor can stop a seminar discussion at a point when a challenging question has been raised and ask students to write for five minutes about the relationship of the question to their own experience. The time devoted to this informal autobiographical writing will help students to learn concepts in the course. According to James Britton and his associates, class time spent on expressive writing stimulates the learn-
ing process, since this form of writing helps students to make links between what is already known—their own lives—and the new concepts and information that they are learning in the academic situation.

I have made a case so far for the private nature of expressive writing in its most personal form. But it also seems to me that an instructor can ask students to write expressively for a wider audience—an audience that includes teacher and classmates in the role of trusted friends. "Much effective writing," says Nancy Martin, "seems to be on a continuum somewhere between the expressive and the transactional or somewhere between the expressive and the poetic." I believe that students will understand the varying roles for writers and readers by practicing forms at various points on this continuum. Thus, I believe that students should do some writing that they are allowed to keep private, some writing that must be regarded as public and that is submitted for impersonal assessment, and some writing that is neither purely expressive nor purely transactional but is instead designed for interpersonal communication, as a letter to a friend is designed for response, not assessment. Students should be encouraged to write such autobiographical "letters" about the academic material that they are studying. Instructors should read and respond expressively and autobiographically to these letters—or reaction sheets, as some call them.

Like private writing, reaction sheets can be used productively in "content" courses. We often complain about the passivity of the current generation of students. Writing by its nature elicits an active response. Students become more involved with the course material when reaction sheets are required. Also it is more interesting for the instructor to have an opportunity to respond without the responsibility of assessing. When students write reaction sheets and when instructors write responses, they are engaging in a dialectic exchange about the subject matter of the course. Teacher and student are once involved in communication. "The trouble with most school writing," says Nancy Martin and her associates, "is that it is not genuine communication. When adults write they are usually trying to tell someone something he doesn’t already know; when children write in school they are usually writing for someone who, they are well aware, knows better than they do what they are trying to say and who is concerned to evaluate their attempt to say it." When students write reaction sheets they are legitimately telling
the instructor things that he does not know because they are telling him about themselves. The instructor in his turn can treat these autobiographical responses with interest and with respect. Both parties to this communication are learning.

Here is an example of a reaction sheet written for an upper-level course in nineteenth-century British literature:

Barbara Shisler
19th Century British Lit
Dr. Maimon

Reaction Sheet

Two examples of how the course connects with what happens in my life:
During the last snow I took a walk down the snow-covered road to the creek. The trees meet overhead, and each twig was loaded with clinging flakes which made the sight almost unreal in its perfection. I neither met another person nor heard a human noise, only the soft sound of falling snow and the distant water running. I thought, How can I keep it? In a world of so much ugliness, how can I hold on to this vision of glory? Wordsworth's poem about the daffodils that flashed upon his inner eye in a later solitude assured me that I will always have it in memory, and through the imagination can make it even more real to myself and perhaps others. But more comforting to me was the plain talk of Carlyle.

Though nature can be a glory to meditate and feast one's eyes on, the other side of the world is necessary too. There is no light side without the dark one. It is in the very fleetingness of perfect moments that their joy lies. It is foolish to pine for perfection, to believe that a blissful moment, extended forever, would continue to be blissful. Torturing ourselves because we are not always good and the world always beautiful is ridiculous. Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe!

Nearing home, as a sudden breeze rushed through the overhead trees causing thick showers of snow to softly fall and cover me, I felt baptized. Here is the instructor's response:

Dear Barbara,
Wordsworth helps me to keep things, too. Browning, whom we will read later in the semester, speaks of "the moment made
eternal." I think that's a good phrase to identify your experience in the snow.

But Carlyle does console us for the fact that those moments may last forever in art but not in life!

Thanks for sharing this experience with me.

E. M.

This particular reaction sheet is well along toward the poetic in the continuum from the expressive to the poetic. But I wonder if the student would even have thought these thoughts if she had not been required to record her reactions. Students rarely have an opportunity in an advanced course to express their autobiographical response to literary material. If we are interested in the staying power of the courses we teach, then we should encourage this personal involvement with our course material. It is not appropriate, however, to assess students on this autobiographical involvement or lack of it.

It is also important for students to write transactional, objective prose. In papers of research or interpretation, subjective responses are not often appropriate. Paradoxically, it is easier to convince students to edit out autobiographical narratives from their formal papers if they have been encouraged to write expressively in journals and reaction sheets. Students then understand that they are not being asked to stifle their autobiographical, "creative" responses; they are simply being asked to write with public decorum on formal papers. Students then can see that they can develop ideas freely and openly with more familiar audiences.

Of course, the students must become accustomed to viewing the instructor in two very different roles: When reading reaction sheets, the instructor is a trusted friend. When reading formal papers, the instructor represents scholars in his field and thus holds the student to standards which scholars expect of apprentices.

These scholars expect the writer to come to the point as efficiently as possible and do not want to wade through an autobiographical account of the writer's research process. But many students need to write an autobiographical narrative before they can deal with their research material analytically. Again, Linda Flower's idea of writer-based prose is helpful. She sees the use of autobiography in an early draft of an analytic paper as a strategy for explaining ideas to oneself. Some writers may need first to
talk to themselves about their personal process of discovery before they can transform these ideas into a form accessible to a reader.

Thus, even for projects that are not supposed to involve autobiographical material, the autobiographical impulse can be channeled to good effect. The student who wrote the reaction sheet on Wordsworth and Carlyle, for example, may gain motivation and insight for a formal paper on either author or on the connection between the two. Thus, autobiographical early drafts can help students make the transition from personal writing to analytic and expository modes and even, finally, to that most difficult form of all, autobiography as a literary genre.

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Notes

6 College Composition and Communication, 28 (May 1977).
10 Martin et al, p. 29.