

December 6, 2002

Dear Professor Lunsford:

“Writing is difficult and takes a long time.” This simple yet powerful statement has been uttered so many times in our class that it has essentially become our motto. In just ten weeks, my persuasive writing skills have improved dramatically, thanks to many hours spent writing, revising, polishing, and (when I wasn’t writing) thinking about my topic. These improvements are clearly illustrated by the various drafts, revisions, and other materials included in my course portfolio.

[Here Kung lists the materials in his portfolio, explaining how they demonstrate his strengths and show his improvement as a writer.]

I entered this first-quarter Writing and Rhetoric class with both strengths and weaknesses. I was strong in the fundamentals of writing: logic and grammar. I have always written well-organized essays, and that held true for this class. However, despite this strength, I struggled throughout the term to narrow and define the various aspects of my research-based argument.

The first aspect of my essay that I had trouble narrowing and defining was my major claim, or my thesis statement. In my very first writing assignment for the class, the “Proposal for Research-Based Argument” (1A), I proposed to argue about the case of Wen Ho Lee, the Los Alamos scientist accused of copying restricted government documents, but most of the major claims I made were either too broad or too obvious. For example, in the second paragraph of the first page, I stated (without any evidence) that “the Wen Ho Lee incident deals with the persecution of not only one man, but of a whole ethnic [group].” You commented that the statement was a “sweeping claim” that would be “hard to support.” In the first paragraph of 1A, I also claimed that the U.S. government and the media “acted unjustly and irrationally regarding this incident.” Since many people who knew the Wen Ho Lee case agreed that the government and the media acted unjustly, this claim was somewhat obvious and thus not sufficiently arguable.

After seeing the weaknesses in my claims, I spent weeks trying to rework and retool them to make them more specific and more debatable. I came up with so many claims that I almost lost interest in the Wen Ho Lee trial. Finally, as seen in my “Writer’s Notebook on 10/16/02” (5A), I did a Toulmin analysis of my argument in order to find out exactly why I chose the Lee case as my topic in the first place. I decided that I had chosen this topic because of my belief that the political inactivity of Asian Americans contributed to the case against Wen Ho Lee. Therefore, I decided to focus on this issue in my thesis.

While my new major claim was more debatable than previous claims, it was still problematic because I had established a cause/effect claim, stating that the political inactivity of Asian Americans caused the Wen Ho Lee trial. As you pointed out, a cause/effect claim is one of if not the most difficult types of claim to argue. Therefore, I decided to once again revise my claim, stating that the political inactivity did not cause but rather contributed to racial profiling in the Wen Ho Lee case. This new claim can be seen in the full drafts of the paper (6C, 6D) and in the revised proposal (1B). In 6C, 6D,

and the final draft, I tempered the claim to make it more feasible: “Although we can’t possibly prove that the political inactivity of Asian Americans was the sole cause of the racial profiling of Wen Ho Lee, we can safely say that it contributed to the whole fiasco.”

Since I had trouble narrowing and defining my major claim, I also had trouble defining my audience. When I first wrote my “Analysis of Audience and Sources,” I barely even touched on issues of audience. On page 1, I briefly alluded to the fact that my audience was a “typical American reader,” implying that my audience included anyone in the United States. However, after using Toulmin’s analysis to restructure my claims, I decided to address my paper to an Asian American audience because, as stated in my “Revised Analysis of Audience and Sources,” it would be advantageous in two ways. First, it would establish a greater ethos for myself, since I am an Asian American, specifically, a Chinese American. Second, it would enable me to target the people the Wen Ho Lee case most directly affects: Asian Americans. As a result, in my final research-based argument, I was much more sensitive to the needs and concerns of my audience, and my audience trusted me more.

Although working through my major claim and intended audience were critical to the success of my essay, the actual process of writing the essay was also important. For instance, when I wrote my first informal outline for the “Structure and Appeals” assignment, I had not yet put much of the research-based argument down on paper. Although the informal outline made perfect sense on paper, as I began actually to write my research paper, I found that many of the ideas that were stressed heavily in the informal outline had little relevance to my thesis and that issues I had not included in the informal outline suddenly seemed important.

[Kung goes on to discuss other aspects of his paper and his future writing plans.]

I hope to continue to improve my writing of research-based arguments. The topic that I am currently most interested in researching is the field of Eastern medicine. I am presently undergoing Chinese therapy for a back injury, so I would love to understand how it works. Eastern medicine is also a very controversial topic right now, one that interests a diverse audience, not just Asian Americans. When I have the time, I will probably apply for undergraduate research funds to work on this project, and I will be able to use all of the argumentative firepower that I have learned in this class.

Sincerely,

James Kung

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