

Judges' Commentary on "Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not"

by

Kelly Coburn

"Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not" won first prize in the University of Pittsburgh's 2005/06 Composition Program Writing Contest

"Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not" was written towards the end of a University Honors College section of Seminar in Composition. In her assignment, the instructor asked members of the class to "consolidate some of [their] own thinking" by writing to future students, helping them to imagine "what challenges are involved [in the course] and what . . . can be gained by grappling with them." They were to do this by describing a "telling situation," which could be either factual or fictional. Kelly Coburn addresses this challenge by means of a narrative account (we never learn, and perhaps do not need to know, whether fictional or not) of the thought-process involved in composing the paper itself.

From its opening in the dramatic present of the story — "It is midnight on Tuesday" — to its conclusion "in the face of exhaustion" several hours later, "Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not" holds a reader's attention through the twists and turns of its own process of writing and reflection. The persona we encounter seems at first painfully self-doubting, but this critical self-consciousness is revealed by the end as part of a necessary strategy for the writer's development. The almost obsessive questioning of word-choices and examination of claims becomes a mark not of "inadequacy" but of the careful attention required for improvement: "I decide that acknowledging my distance from my goal may be the best way to get my point across."

Instead of arguing for a particular way of learning or teaching composition, then, the author demonstrates how this way works in practice; it is revealed as a pedagogy based on "close reading" of one's own and each other's texts, with an eye and ear for "the craft of writing." We learn, as we go, about the vocabulary used in the class to mark the effects of this craft: overstatement,

rhythmically pleasing sentences, intensification, engaging imagery, connotation, structure, cliché. Developing the “high standards” the author claims for her composition class means making constant small decisions about such matters of language, and learning about the consequences of those decisions for one’s readers: “Suppose this assignment were set before my classmates. How would they react?”

The Awards Committee found this paper prize-worthy in part because it is well crafted in its details and well structured in its overall movement. It also succeeds in fulfilling the intent of the assignment in that its student readers can learn from this not only about the kinds of thinking they’ll be invited to perform in the course and the stance towards language the instructor will expect of them, but also about the potential rewards of engaging in this challenging activity of composing.

To read the full text of Kelly Coburn’s essay [click here](#)