

## ***Ben Lerner Sequence***

**Bartholomae**

**Seminar in Composition, Fall 2016**

**Assignment #1**

### **Ben Lerner, “Contest of Words”**

**1. Reading Assignment.** Please read “Contest of Words” (Due Wed. 9/7; please read the opening 2 pages by Wed. 8/29)

On Wed 9/7, I will ask you:

- What, in general, is the argument of this essay? What would most people say that it says? What passage would you choose for a summary statement?
- What, for you, is the best moment? Where, for you is the writing the most compelling? Be prepared to take us to a specific passage.
- What do you see here in this essay that you suspect others have missed? What are you thinking that you suspect others are not?
- What story or example might you bring to the table if you wanted to extend or question what Lerner has begun?

### **2. Writing Assignment #1 (Due Monday, 9/12)**

I would like you to begin a project in the style of Ben Lerner’s “Contest of Words.” I’d like you to write about a language lesson, a relatively recent event or exchange (or a series of events or exchanges) that led you (or that can lead you) to questions about language and its use, about the ways it serves (or fails to serve) individuals and communities. (For reasons that I’ll present in class, I want to warn you away from an essay on the language of the current presidential contest. It will be very hard to find a fresh angle, to find something new to say—hard for you and hard for your readers.)

Begin with a story. In fact, you can take the structure of Lerner’s essay as a model. The story you tell should be important to you and rich enough in possibility to take 2-3 weeks of your writing time. It should be something you are willing to share with others.

Your audience? You can imagine that you are writing for a magazine or for friends and family or for a future autobiography. What a reader wants is a view of you and your world, not in the pen-pal sense of what you look like or what you prefer in music, but with the goal of understanding something more general, something about people like you, something about what it is that shapes and defines a person or a life or an identity in this place and at this point in time, something about what it means to live in and through language.

You are preparing a first draft. You don’t have to begin at the beginning and you don’t have to finish. We will be working together to find a sense of shape and direction. And you will return to this document more than once later in the term.

I am trying to avoid the word “essay” in describing this project, since that word carries certain generic restrictions. And I’m trying to be fairly vague in describing what I want. My advice is for you to begin not with a generalization but with some specific scene or scenes. Begin with a story (or stories) rather than with an argument. If people are speaking, you can, if you choose, let them speak as characters speak in fiction. You can, obviously, write in the first person.

Format? Please use a 12 point font and normal margins. I prefer Times New Roman. Please single space with double spacing between paragraphs. Please put your name on the first page only. No headers. Please include a title. Please be sure to number pages. Please use Microsoft Word or something compatible with Word.

How long? I’m assuming something around 3 pages for starters. Less than 2 pages is too little; unless you are really on a roll, more than 4 would be too much—that is, the pressure to fill space would most likely keep you from the kind of concentration that I value. Before you finish this draft, please take time to reread and to think about sentences.

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**Seminar in Composition**  
**Assignment #2**  
**Due: Monday, 9/19**

There is more to writing, in other words, than first thoughts, first drafts, and first pages. A writer learns most by returning to his or her work to see what it does and doesn’t do, by taking time with a project and seeing where it might lead. To that end, this course will be organized so that you will work a single essay through one or more drafts; each essay will be a part of a larger project. When I assess your writing I will be looking primarily at the progress from draft to draft. (4)

Bartholomae, “Course Description”

For this assignment I would like you to revise Assignment #1. Remember, I am assuming that careful, thoughtful revision takes as much time, if not more, than the preparation of a first draft.

1. I am assuming that you will be going back to reread Lerner’s essay. I am not expecting you to write *about* the essay (yet), but I would like you to pay close attention to form—to the shape and rhythm of Lerner’s sentences, to the shape and rhythm of the sections, and to the shape and rhythm of the essay as a whole. Pay particular attention to beginnings and endings.

*As you think and write toward your final draft for this project, I would like you to think of the project as, formally, an homage to Lerner. I’d like to see the evidence in sentences and in your use of section breaks. Good writers, as I said in class, think carefully about punctuation, including ways of punctuating the essay. Punctuation helps readers locate themselves in the midst of all those words.*

2. And, as I said in the course description, I understand revision as the occasion to take a project to its next level. Revision requires more than tinkering or correcting mistakes (which I call proof reading). You will need to be preparing and writing new material—new sections for your paper. And (and this is perhaps the hardest lesson to learn), you may need to make cuts, to leave some of your prose behind (some of it excellent prose, just not appropriate for what you are doing in revision).

You need to step back to think about what you might do next to make this project rich in detail, deep and surprising. Your primary job this week will be to add new material. I'm assuming 2-4 new pages. If you can't quite figure out how it fits, just add it to the end or add it to the beginning. Turn in the full second draft.

If they can be helpful, here are some suggestions:

- Lerner builds his essay from episodes in chronological order. You might think about new stories that come before or after the story you have told in the first draft.
- Lerner's sections also have different thematic centers—high school debate, male culture in a Topeka high school, U.S. political discourse, etc. You might think about some theme or topic you might introduced to enrich and/or complicate the story you have told.
- I'm still encouraging you to write in a narrative mode—scene, setting, character, dialogue, description. But you don't necessarily need to write about yourself. You could write about a friend or family member, about people you've observed closely in school or out of school, about characters in films or novels, or moments taken from the news. You could write from memory but you could also write from what you have been reading, including in textbooks, newspapers, etc. (On the news, please remember my caveat about the current elections. It could be interesting; it could be very difficult to find something new to say.)

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**Assignment #3: But what does it say?**

Lerner's essay moves from scene to scene—from high school debate to basement parties, from his freshman year at Brown to the more recent Occupy Wall Street public demonstrations. The connections are implied rather than stated. Lerner leaves it up to a reader to think through the connections or to account for the logic in the argument.

Let's imagine that it is your job to explain Lerner's argument to someone who has read the essay but who is not quite sure what it says, or why it is interesting (or important), someone who isn't quite sure what the implications might be. With paraphrase (*Lerner says that....*) and some direct quotation (including block quotation), write an essay to provide your sense of what the essay says and why it might be of consequence to you, and to people of your generation. Be sure to take time to explain and translate key passages. And be sure to take time, most likely at the end, to speak for yourself, to extend what he says to your interests, experiences, stories, and concerns.

Note: I am going to give you a formula for this assignment. I think it can save you some time and grief. If it feels like a straightjacket, don't use it; if it feels like a prison, escape. Note: For in-text citation and "work cited," use MLA style. (It is your handbook. You can figure it out.)

No more than 2 pages. I'm hoping for a page and a half. You can't say everything Lerner says. You have to make choices about what is important (to Lerner, to you) and you have to work selectively.

I want you to think of your essay as composed of two sections, each doing something different:

1. The first section offers a general summary—what most people or any smart person would take as the core of the essay—the unfolding argument and its conclusion. You should write

- A very brief (one or two sentence) introduction to Lerner and the context of the essay.
- A brief summary of the argument, including its most important stages. You can use brief or sentence-length quotations as necessary. Most of the words, however, are yours. I hope there will be an "in other words" moment of translation. You cannot cover everything Lerner says. Honor what you take to be the core of the argument, but be selective.

2.) You've presented the general, every-reader's account of the essay. Now it is time to foreground your point of view. Here you step to the center of the stage. Present what you think is most interesting or challenging or wrong or right in Lerner's essay, something you think other's would miss.

- This section should include the presentation of a block quotation followed by commentary. In the commentary, you should be sure to pick up some key term or phrase in the block quotation.
- You must bring something new to the table—a different example, perhaps, or an alternative reading of Lerner's argument, or a different point of view (including something written by someone else), or an alternate conclusion, or (with care) some combination of the above. Remember--you can't do everything.
- This is the most important part of the exercise.

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**Writing Assignment #4 (due 10/3):**

You have spent three weeks working toward an essay that was prompted by or framed by your reading of Ben Lerner's essay, "Contest of Words." Now I would like you to finish it.

Your primary materials will be the pages you wrote to complete Assignments #1 and #2. I'm assuming you will draw from those, cut and paste, write new sentences and paragraphs (as necessary), revise what you bring from the earlier drafts, and, in the end, proofread and attend to sentences. If you think

you can do the job by simply cutting and pasting, you are wrong. I'm expecting a week's worth of work.

1. I would like you to think long and hard about the shape of your essay—the opening, the ending, and the stages in between. I'd like you to take Lerner's essay as a model—that is, yours too will be written in sections.
2. Before you hit *send*, I would like you to be sure to take time to proofread. Proofreading is an odd behavior. It requires you to pay attention to black and white marks on the page. Normal readers don't do that. They get caught up in what is being said. You have to toggle back and forth between the sound and flow of the prose and the physical presence of words and commas, white space and black space. Look for mistakes. Think about punctuation. Tinker with sentences. Step back to assess the *look* of the page. Professional proofreaders will sometimes read from bottom to top or with a ruler to block everything below the line.
3. I do not expect you to make a literal connection to Ben Lerner's essay. I am not expecting that you will refer to it or provide passages in quotation. In my comments, I have suggested to *some* of you that you *might* want to do this. If I didn't suggest it but you would like to anyway, go for it. But again—I am not expecting this, and a direct reference to "Contest of Words" does not guarantee special credit. Don't mess up a great essay by trying to find room for Ben.
3. Include a title. Be sure to number pages. Single space with an extra space (not a double space) between paragraphs. Name the file with this format: lastname assignment 4. This should be longer than what you wrote for first assignment, but it doesn't have to be twice as long. Do what you need to do in order to do your best.

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### Reading exercises

Note: These are meant to help focus your attention on particular passages in Lerner's essay, difficult passages that you might otherwise (I have learned) have decided to skim, highlight ("I'll read this later") or completely ignore. When the prose is hard, it is usually because it is working hard. And a reader needs to rise to the occasion.

#### I. Lerner exercise: The Machinery of Syntax

Freestyling isn't about fitting preexisting content into rhyming and rhythmic forms but rather about discovering content, what's sayable, in the act of composition. . . . At that point it didn't matter what words I was plugging into the machinery of syntax . . . what mattered was that language, the fundamental medium of sociality, was being displayed in its abstract capacity, and that my friends and I would catch a glimpse, however fleeting, of grammar as pure possibility. (63)

Ben Lerner, "Contest of Words"

Write parallel sentences to the sentences below—same structure, same rhythm, same punctuation, but you supply the content. (You don't need to follow word for word; you don't need to have the same word count, but stay as close as you can.) Be prepared to talk about what these sentences *do* as well as what they *say*.

1. Although high school debate is often considered the thinking person's—the nerd's—alternative to sports, my memories of it are primarily somatic: the starched collar of the dress shirt against my recently shaved neck, small cuts and razor bumps deepening the sensation; the constant gentle pressure of the tie; how my gait and posture adjusted under the direction of the suit; the way the slacks always felt high and tight because I normally let my baggy jeans sag to whatever level we white Midwestern adolescents had tacitly established as our norm.

2. I became in these transportative moments an acned rhapsode, and if the song that was coursing through me was about the supposedly catastrophic risks of a single-payer health-care system or the affirmative speaker's failure to prove solvency, I was nevertheless more in the realm of poetry than of prose, my speech stretched by speed and intensity until I felt its referential meaning dissolve into pure form, until I was singing the oldest song, singing the very possibility of language.

3. In a public school closed to the public, in a suit that felt like a costume, while pretending to argue about policy, I, in all my adolcescing awkwardness, would be seized, however briefly, by an experience of prosody.

## II. Student examples—used later for discussion.

**1. Although high school debate is often considered the thinking person's—the nerd's—alternative to sports, my memories of it are primarily somatic: the starched collar of the dress shirt against my recently shaved neck, small cuts and razor bumps deepening the sensation; the constant gentle pressure of the tie; how my gait and posture adjusted under the direction of the suit; the way the slacks always felt high and tight because I normally let my baggy jeans sag to whatever level we white Midwestern adolescents had tacitly established as our norm.**

a. Because high school football is often considered the barbarian's—the jock's—way to get away with violence, I remember it very physically: the sweaty padding of the heavy helmet against my constantly soaked scalp, the sun's heat magnifying the sensation; the constant soreness of my body, how I always collapsed after a long day of practice; the way my shoulder pads slid across my chest because I felt the need to unbuckle them with the hope of accessing more air with each breath.

b. Although high school girls lacrosse is often considered to be soft – easy – compared to boys lacrosse, from my experience, I would say quite the opposite: the small pocket of the stick that makes catching, passing and cradling more difficult; the constant checking of the stick by opponents to force the ball out of your stick; the frequent reminder from the referees to not make contact with the other player made the differences between both men and women's lacrosse, surprisingly far from each other.

**2. I became in these transportative moments an acned rhapsode, and if the song that was coursing through me was about the supposedly catastrophic risks of a single-payer health-care system or the affirmative speaker's failure to prove solvency, I was nevertheless more in the realm of poetry than of prose, my speech stretched by speed and intensity until I felt its referential meaning dissolve into pure form, until I was singing the oldest song, singing the very possibility of language.**

a. I became in these thought-provoking moments a hesitant loon, and if the voice that was coursing through me was about the supposedly accurate keys of the mysterious physics problem or the subsequent question's rigor of changed components, I was nevertheless more in the form of cluelessness than of math, my thoughts stretched by speed and insanity until I felt my overwhelming panic transform into clear motive, until I was solving the toughest problem, showing the very possibility of physics.

**3. In a public school closed to the public, in a suit that felt like a costume, while pretending to argue about policy, I, in all my adollescing awkwardness, would be seized, however briefly, by an experience of prosody.**

a. In a school auditorium with no students, under lights that felt like the sun, while pretending to not be scared, I, in all my pent up tension, would be captured, for as long as I could, by a state of pure happiness.

b. In a classroom meant for learning, in a uniform that felt like a prison jumpsuit, while acting like I know what's going on, I, in my severe boredom, would be enlightened, however briefly, by a moment of genius.

c. In a prohibited area open to the owner, in riding gear that felt like a jumpsuit, while considering the worst possible consequences, I, in all my teenage rebelliousness, would be seized, however briefly, by the thought of turning back.

d. On a stage filled to capacity, in a costume that felt like a ball gown, while standing backstage in the wings, I, in all of my excitement, would be taken over, for a few seconds, by an experience of stage fright.

e. In a library with more noise than most, in a chair that felt like bricks, while pretending to do homework, I, through all the distraction, found a surge, that was rather intense, of focus.

### **III. Student Writing: Language Games**

#### **Lerner exercise 2: The Construction of Meaning**

My college application essay was about moving from debate, which conceived of linguistic exchange as a contest with winners and losers, to a more poetic understanding of the nuances of language in which writer and reader collaborated on the construction of meaning. (64)

Ben Lerner, "Contest of Words"

Below is a key moment in the essay, a place where you can feel (hear) Lerner trying to say something that is not easily said—that is, something not already prepared, packaged, and available. There is, in the prose, a “haltingness”; you can sense the “demand ... for a new language.” These moments ask (even require) a reader to collaborate on the construction of meaning. And this is a standard move in serious writing.

Let’s imagine that you are writing about “Contest of Words” (using, say, the passage below in block quotation). If you did, you would need to follow Lerner’s words with a kind of translation. The block quotation won’t just speak for itself. You would need to write your sense of what Lerner is saying. To enter this space, you might write, for example: “in other words” or “here is what I think Lerner is saying” or “here is what I take from this.”

For the passage below, I’d like you to provide your version of what Lerner is saying.

When I was in my Dillard’s suit spewing arguments in a largely empty school, when I was a belligerent little wankster rhyming in a basement, when I was an ignorant undergrad abandoning the clichés of my macho Midwestern romanticism for the clichés of poetic vanguardism, I was, in all my preposterousness, responding to a very real crisis: the standardization of landscape and culture, a national separation of value and policy, an impoverished political discourse (“There you go again”) that served to naturalize our particular cultural insanity. I was a privileged young subject—white, male, middle class—of an empire in which every available identity was a lie, but when I felt that language breaking down as I spoke it—as it spoke me—I felt, amid a general sense of doom, that other worlds were possible. (65)

#### IV. Student examples

1. Lerner addresses three moments of his life, which I interpret as turning points. As a high school debater, a teenager rapping in a basement, and an undergrad he highlights exchanging the “clichés” of his real, culturally accepted identity for that of a poetic character. He explains that exchange to be a response to a “crisis.” I interpret this crisis as a response to the separation between value and policy. In other words, he’s saying he was ignorantly making that exchange of his real self as a reaction to troubled political discussion and possibly a troubled culture/society. In addition, he mentions that accepted identity was a lie in our troubled society, but through language it was true, alive, and versatile.

2. In my opinion Lerner is saying that every person has a voice and with that voice can advocate for whatever the hell he or she wants and how it creates new ideas and pushes the boundaries of stagnant old thinking. This can be backed up with his last sentence, “its collective haltingness is an eloquent expression of the necessity of our learning as a people how to speak”.

Note (DB): *The results, as you can see, were not promising. I wrote to the class:*

*Most of you, in your translations, focused on the first use of the word “cliché” and ignored the second. You had Lerner abandoning his clichéd years in highschool for his true identity as a poet. Here is what I hope you will take away from the “construction of meaning” exercise: When the words are hard or used in odd ways, when the meaning seems hard to construct, you must focus in on the language and read even more closely. Let the context help you. You should not step back and translate the text into what*



*is commonly said. The writing that is valued in the university is almost always writing that struggles to say something new, that struggles NOT to repeat the common phrase or the common wisdom.*

I needed to move on so I didn't have them revise this.