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“As The Occasion Demands”: Constraint-Based Practice In Rhetoric And Composition

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“AS THE OCCASION DEMANDS”: CONSTRAINT-BASED PRACTICE IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

In their 2010 *Composition Studies* article, Laurie Gries and Collin Brooke observe, “constrained writing has been underappreciated” in the composition classroom (21). Taking seriously the potential value of constraints in pedagogical practice, this project executes a cross-disciplinary examination (drawing from design theory, experimental poetry, literary theory, composition, and rhetorical theory) of the various occurrences of, and approaches to, constraints and their influences on the ways we think and write. This investigation reveals that constraints create the conditions under which students can become productively defamiliarized to their thinking and writing habits, encouraging them to encounter alternatives otherwise left unnoticed.

I suggest that these potentially defamiliarizing influences of constraints offer an approach to writing pedagogy that responds to Kelly Pender’s call for a *techne* that focuses on “writing itself” rather than writing for a singular purpose. Such an approach reveals a style of pedagogy that encourages students to experiment with writing’s potential rather than treating language like a transparent vehicle for meaning. This project concludes with some suggested methods for approaching a constraint-influenced pedagogy, offering categories for use, discussion of examples, and a list of potential constraints in the appendices.
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CHAPTER 1

CONSTRAINTS

The advantages of using constraints in writing are twofold: first, constraints help in getting away from the traps and pitfalls of spontaneous writing, whose average output is the cliche; second, they are an important tool of invention and potentiality, since they force the author (and the reader) to discover possibilities of writing that would have remained hidden by the false facilities of spontaneous expression.

(Baetens “Colour” 271)

It is thus the paradox of writing under constraint that . . . may one day permit us to supplant the very notion of inspiration.

(Motte 43)

Constraints and their influence have become increasingly popular in a number of disciplines.¹ Art, engineering, music, psychology, design, game theory, early childhood education, business management, marketing, and consumer behavior all address the benefits of working under constraints. This popularity is not accidental. Though a constraint is often thought of as something that restricts or inhibits, a great deal of research (both formal and anecdotal) reveals that conceptual and physical limits can significantly influence how one creates. For example, in her work on the role of constraints in the creative process, Patricia Stokes concludes that when given no limits—

¹Following the Oxford English Dictionary (“restriction of liberty”) and Merriam-Webster (“the state of being checked, restricted, or compelled to avoid or perform some action”), I will be using “constraint” here to mean any kind of limitation or restriction. I will outline more specific contours of the concept as I narrow my focus to specific ways different disciplines talk about constraints.
like the old-fashioned, and often romanticized, method of waiting for inspiration to strike—individuals tend to gravitate toward the familiar because total freedom can be paralyzing. Alternatively, when asked to work within limits, we are more likely to be generative (135). Stokes concludes this reaction is due to the fact that people instinctively learn from experience and rely on what has worked best for them in the past; we veer toward the status quo when left to our own devices, and we venture outside our realm of experience only when there are obstacles that prevent familiar responses (67). What this research shows us is that we seem to have significantly underestimated the role of the box in which to ‘think outside’ of.

C. Page Moreau and Darren W. Dahl had similar results to Stokes in their research on the influence of constraints. In “Designing the Solution: The Impact of Constraints on Consumers’ Creativity” they echo Stokes’ findings that when constraints are not present, individuals will recall their experience with a similar situation they’ve previously encountered and then rely on that experience to inform their behavior (15, 18). They refer to Thomas Ward’s description of this process as the “path-of-least-resistance,” (or POLR strategy), “where the default approach in creative tasks is to implement the first solution that comes to mind, either based on a previous solution or a category exemplar” (15). Their study includes an example of a person needing to get dinner ready at the last minute. Under the influence of the POLR, the person will default to what they’ve done in the past such as call their local pizza parlor or check their pantry to see what provisions they have on hand that can be prepared in a short amount of time. The person’s ultimate solution will depend on various constraints they encounter (e.g., not having cash for the delivery, missing requisite recipe items, etc.). The more constraints
there are, the higher the likelihood that someone will be “forced off” the POLR and into an unexpected or “novel” reaction (4).

The meal example is likely familiar for most people. In fact, I imagine it has been the impetus for many unusual culinary concoctions, some delicious, and some less so. It is this uncertainty regarding the outcome of straying from the familiar that Moreau and Dahl say prevents a person from doing something different, unless under duress. In fact, their experiments reveal that “only when constraints are operating are people likely to stray from the POLR because to do so requires more cognitive resources and creates more uncertainty in the outcomes” (15 emphasis added). In other words, doing something different requires more effort and involves more risk. Though this does not seem like a groundbreaking observation, the takeaway isn’t that people are inherently lazy and afraid of the unknown. Instead, the payoff for Moreau and Dahl is in discovering the significant influence constraints have over how we behave.

It’s quite common now to see constraints used as methods of invention in popular culture. For almost twenty years reality competition shows have used constraints as a way to test contestants’ abilities on the fly and see how well they function outside their comfort zones. *Top Chef,* for example, is famous for asking credentialed chefs to complete cooking challenges under limitations they wouldn’t normally encounter; these situations range from the highly conceptual: “interpret your first food memory into a dish,” to the conventionally formal: “you can only use one hand,” to the unconventionally formal: “you can only use vending machine products for your ingredients.” Another show, *Project Runway,* which focuses on clothing design, has asked their contestants to “construct a dress out of party supplies” and “ask someone on the streets of New York to
give you their clothes, and you can only use that fabric for your garment.” The use of constraints on these shows is such a commonplace, in fact, that it’s actually become a familiar trope to see contestants flounder when given the rare opportunity to have complete freedom.²

Additionally, for the past three years, Book Riot has been promoting their “Read Harder” challenge, with the intent to “push your reading boundaries.” They list twenty-four constraints that have to be fulfilled within the year. Constraints like read “a book with a female protagonist over the age of 60,” “a book published posthumously,” and “a book with a cover you hate” have peppered their lists. They are clear that this challenge is not for external gratification, nor is it a test—no one ‘wins’ and no one keeps score. Instead, with this challenge they “encourage you to push yourself . . . to explore topics or formats or genres that you otherwise wouldn’t try,” and they commiserate with their participants that “. . . sometimes we all need help to even know which perspectives to try out. That’s what this is—a perspective shift . . .” In a recent episode of the podcast, “The Librarian is In,” New York Public Library employees Gwen Glazer, Frank Collerius, and Meredith Mann discuss the merits and pitfalls of a constraint-based reading challenge. Glazer and Mann honed in on the generative potential of being forced to choose books based on categories. Mann confessed, “I love the prescriptive element. It sets your brain

² For example, during a February 8, 2018 episode of a Top Chef segment called “Last Chance Kitchen,” where eliminated chefs get to have one final shot at reentering the primary competition, head judge of the series, Chef Tom Colicchio gave the two competing chefs access to a fully-stocked pantry, saying “This challenge we’re going to leave it wide open. You can do whatever you want. It’s entirely up to you to narrow down your choices . . . This is the best pantry you’ve had all season. No excuses not to cook your best. This is it. Cook your heart out.” (1:13). The chefs also had 45 minutes, one of the longest stints of time on this condensed version of the competition. Ultimately, both chefs cooked decent food, but following Ward’s POLR strategy, they both reverted to the familiar: Chef Flam used a lamb shoulder recipe he’s cooked for years, and Chef Luck cooked a chicken breast using components of recipes he’s learned from other chefs he has worked with.
going to think of things you wouldn’t normally look for” (15:14). Collerius, however, balked at such a prescripted approach to reading: “I love serendipity . . . [choosing a book] is very emotional. I love walking in the library and then seeing something on a shelf and thinking . . . ‘what is that?’ . . . it feels very special” (14:35). I offer this anecdote because I think it touches on an aspect of constraints that can be difficult to quantify in any formal way: some people just like to contend with rules and challenges. They thrive under limits, while others need to feel like they have freedom. I suggest though, that there is no such circumstance of ever being without limits. Constraints are a matter of degree. You’ll note that in Collerius’ description of his romantically-described ideal book encounter he was still operating under a set of constraints, such as what books were available in the library at the time of his visit.

The constraints I’ve been talking about thus far represent the familiar definitions of constraint (i.e., limit and restriction), roadblocks that obviously inhibit certain choices. However, the point I wish to highlight here, illustrated by the example above, is that the influence of constraints can occur whether the person is aware of it or not. This is a more subtle and broad conception of constraints, one that gets taken up in design theory. This version of constraint accounts for all of the daily influences that inform they way we engage with the world around us, and some designers try to anticipate as many of these constraints as possible when they design an object. In fact, design theory has a specific term to talk about all the possibilities a constraint might make possible: affordance.

**Affordances and Constraints**

In design terms, constraints are not only ‘limiting’ and ‘restrictive’ but also something closer to ‘conditions’ or ‘characteristics,’ the contours of any given set of
circumstances that create potential. In this way constraints are heavily linked to
“affordances,” a concept adopted from psychologist James Gibson, who wanted a way to
describe the range of possibilities an object’s unique traits (i.e., constraints) allow for. He
defines affordance as “the range of potential an object can have” (197). One of the most
useful aspects of affordances for Gibson is “[they] do not have to be visible, known, or
desirable.” This point is crucial for understanding constraints and their relationship to
affordances: constraints are the conditions under which any particular engagement with
an object occurs at a specific point in time, and affordances are all the possibilities that
the constraints allow for. In other words, constraints dictate how one encounters an
object’s affordances in a specific context. For example, a shoe has a potentially infinite
number of affordances based on its unique constraints including (but not limited to) its
size, shape, material, age, position in space and time, etc. When encountering a shoe, the
conventionally understood affordance would be to wear it on one’s foot. After all, this is
what the shoe is designed for.

However, when experienced under specific sets of constraints, the shoe’s other
affordances are revealed. Is there a creepy insect nearby and you have no way of getting
rid of it? The constraint of the insect, along with a limited access to another means of the
bug’s disposal, in addition to the constraint of the shoe’s hard sole and close proximity to
you affords insect extermination. What happens when an untrained puppy without any

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3 There are some minor disagreements in design theory about whether or not affordances must be
“perceived.” Gibson insists they do not have to be. See Don Norman’s *The Design of Everyday
Things* for his distinction between “real affordances” and “perceved affordances.” Also, Joanna
McGrenere and Wayne Ho’s “Affordances: Clarifying and Evolving a Concept” provides a clear
breakdown of the differences between Gibson’s initial definition and Norman’s adaptation. I
don’t entertain that distinction and prefer Gibson’s because, as McGrenere and Ho point out,
there are a number of flaws with Norman’s adaptation, even though he is the one who
popularized Gibson’s term.
supervision or toys is left alone in a room with shoes? The constraints of the puppy’s lack of discipline, supervision, and toys in addition to the shoe’s enticing smells and easily-accessible location on the floor affords the shoe’s potential for being a chew toy. It’s important to note that these two example sets of constraints and affordances I’ve offered are rather conventional. The really interesting aspect of constraints is that we never know what circumstances reveal what outcomes. We take for granted what an object can and cannot do, but there are, arguably, a potential sets of constraints that would reveal the infinite affordances of any object. In fact, it is the infinite possibilities constraints can produce that I find so provocative. There are innumerable affordances that have yet to be realized in any given encounter. In this way, constraints can behave as a type of invention-machine. And, as an invention-machine, constraints complicate our relationship(s) with various concepts associated with authorship (i.e., intention, imagination, inspiration, etc.).

In her recent book on form, Caroline Levine looks at how affordances can both fulfill, and operate outside of, a designer’s intention. For example, a fork is designed with the intent to afford holding, stabbing, and scooping (7). However, as with the shoe example, the fork’s affordances can also allow the fork to operate differently under different constraints. For example, if one is under the constraint of having an itch in a place they can’t reach, that fork becomes a back scratcher. Though the fork’s design was not intended for scratching, its tines afforded its ability to scratch, and the constraint of having an itchy back revealed, or intensified, the relationship with that particular affordance.

These “innumerable affordances” are very much akin to the pataphysical concept of imaginary solutions, which I will talk more about in Chapter 2.
One of the concerns in design is that the constraints of any object at any point in time are the potential conditions that allow for a designer’s unintended results, as well, and one cannot ever fully exhaust the potential affordances of an object to prevent these ‘unintensions.’ We may try to conceive of all the different ways in which one might use a fork other than eating (e.g., to pry open a lid, to stab an enemy in the eye, to comb your hair) but there are constraints that have yet to occur which could potentially reveal an affordance that could not be divined by inspiration and imagination alone. Conversely, there are potentially infinite constraints that could prevent the intended affordance of an object, creating infinite exceptions to the engagement with an item. For example, many people with limited range of motion are unable to use a standard fork effectively. Taking into account such ability constraints are how designers hone and develop products such as wide, soft, and bendable forks. It’s worth noting, though, that a great deal of design innovation is the result of responding to a constraint someone encountered rather than by anticipating the need in advance. This is why beta testing across a diverse sample of the population is so valuable: design precision tends to be the product of engagement and practice, responding to a constraint rather than being born solely out of inspiration.

One the other hand, the idea that affordances are the performance of an object’s potential and the constraint is what determines how that potential is realized in any given moment is also rather controversial. For example, some people, like Levine, view affordances as exhaustible: they can reach their reasonable formal limits. She insists, “[w]ith affordances, then, we can begin to grasp the constraints on form that are imposed by materiality itself. One cannot make a poem out of soup or a panopticon out of wool. In this sense, form and materiality are inextricable, and materiality is determinant” (9).
However, I see affordances as unlimited potential created by formal constraints and materiality as not necessarily determinant. Why can’t one make a poem out of soup or a panopticon out of wool? What are the conditions under which such tasks might be accomplished? As I’ve mentioned, we don’t fully know what an object can do until we encounter the constraint that demands it. I suggest it is in the *inexhaustible* potential of affordances that help us to take full advantage of constraints. That said, some designers see it as their goal to create such specifically precise affordances to the extent that an object’s design so strongly obscures most of the other apparent uses of an object, that there remains no other option, such as having an ‘H’ and a ‘C’ on different faucets to determine temperature.\(^5\) This approach to design embraces Ward’s path-of-least-resistance tendency with the goal that our relationships to designed objects should be as intuitive and self-evident as possible. However, regardless of design, exceptions can never be eradicated.

Levine uses the adjective “imaginative” to describe individuals who reveal affordances that aren’t readily apparent, but it’s actually quite the opposite (6). To credit affordances as the product of imagination ignores the force of constraints and, to a degree, flies in the face of all inventions and discoveries that that unintentionally occurred as the result of constraints (e.g., discovering penicillin) rather than inspiration. Furthermore, it’s troubling to privilege imagination and intuition because these assumptions take for granted a standardized version of ability that everyone shares and it supports a misleading idea of innate genius. Also, constraints do not need to be exceptionally interesting or provocative to reveal affordances. The seemingly mundane

\(^5\) However, it’s important to note that even such specific design traits don’t translate cross-culturally or cross-ability spectrums. There are still plenty of other affordances, exceptions to the design intention.
influences of necessity or merely unanticipated context are just as likely, if not more so, to reveal innovative affordances of an object. It is this appreciation for the seemingly mundane, which the concepts of affordances and constraints offer, that I think can be a useful way to reconsider writing and writing pedagogy.

Writing and Constraints

I’ve introduced the concepts of affordances and constraints in design terms in order to lay the groundwork for a conceptual understanding of the influence of constraints, in general. However, this project primarily takes its cues from the established history of constraints in writing, made popular by the experimental writing group, the Oulipo⁶ (an influence I examine in more depth in chapter 2).⁷ The Oulipo are well-known for their unconventional, prescriptive, and rigorously followed rule-based texts like, La Disparition (The Disappearance), Georges Perec’s book written entirely without the letter “e” (and the English translation, A Void, translated by Gilbert Adair that adheres to the same rule). It’s difficult to talk about Oulipian constraints without referencing Jan Baetens, who has compiled and parsed distinctions among the definition(s) and operations of constraints from various Oulipo members.⁸ In the spirit of the Oulipo, Baetens says we can think of constrained writing as “the use of any type of formal technique or program whose application is able to produce a sense of its making text by

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⁶ The proper condensed name of the workshop should be denoted as “OuLiPo,” but taking my cue from Daniel Leven Becker in Many Subtle Channels in Praise of Potential Literature, I will render the name as “Oulipo” from this point on “in order to reduce strain on your eyes and my shift key” (“A Note on Formatting”).
⁷ Though I’m focusing on the Oulipo, I want to acknowledge that, though they are one of the more popular ‘faces’ of constraint-based writing, they did not invent it. As Baetens points out, Lasos of Hermione invented the first lipogram (a text in which one or more letters are precluded by the writer) in the second half of the sixth century B.C. (“Expanding the Field” 59).
⁸ Also see Warren Motte’s “Constraint on the Move” in Oulipo for definitions of writing constraint from Oulipo members Jacques Roubaud, Jacques Jouet, and Marcel Bénabou.
itself, if need be without any previous ‘idea’ from the writer” (“Freewriting” 2). A constraint-ruled text, then, is opposed to a text in which an author attempts to articulate an idea that was realized before he or she sits down to write (2). In this way, writing can be divorced from the romantic ideas of genius. Additionally, Baetens notes another benefit that sounds not unlike Moreau and Dahl’s claims about POLR: “Thanks to writing under constraint, [the writer] is freed from the unconscious burden of the cliché, that is, the cliché of all that is written too easily . . . ” (“Ideology” 13). When one is writing under constraints, they are arrested from their own habits and impulses. The act of writing starts with writing itself and not an idealized notion of an author’s inspiration. The path-of least resistance in terms of writing are habits and cliché, and constraints challenge them.

However, in some ways, constraints have always been present in writing. In *Constraining Chance* Alison James acknowledges that even conventional rules of style and syntax, as well as literary forms influence the act of writing. Referencing the Oulipians, she parses out distinctions between traditional writing constraints such as rhyme, meter, and grammatical accuracy, while arbitrary constraints are typically less grounded in reason and context, such as not using a certain letter or word, or counting occurrences of a word. Sometimes the distinctions between these two categories can be a bit slippery. She points out that the primary differences between these two general distinctions of traditional and arbitrary is the convention of the traditional constraints and the unfamiliar and rigorously, or precisely, enforced nature of the arbitrary constraints. As an example of the distinction between traditional and arbitrary constraints, James recalls Raymond Queneau’s example of Gustave Flaubert’s famous efforts to avoid
repeating words in close proximity. Unnecessary repetition of words is a fairly common style suggestion for writers; however, this conventional style suggestion becomes an arbitrary constraint when a precise amount of space is declared between repeat occurrences of a word, such as fifteen or seventeen lines. James explains, “we witness a shift here from an aesthetically motivated principle (i.e., the avoidance of repetition) to a constraint that presents an exceptional and to some extent arbitrary challenge: why fifteen or seventeen lines rather than any other number?” (114). In other words, traditional constraints often have a precedent (i.e., poetic forms like sonnets), while arbitrary constraints often defy logic and convention (e.g., every sentence must end with the letter o) or intensify a conventional reason absurdly (e.g., each paragraph must have exactly seven active verbs). In another example, though a fundamentally constrained form of writing, a haiku is also a traditional literary genre, so writing a haiku as a haiku would be a traditional constraint, but writing a haiku as a response paper would be an arbitrary constraint.

Though sketching out the contours of these distinctions can be useful for differentiating potential forces of linguistic constraints, I agree with James that ultimately “defining sharp distinctions between familiar linguistic rules and arbitrary constraints is not very productive” (113). I don’t think these distinctions are necessary for discovering the affordances of a particular act of writing, but I do think that working through these differences (especially with students) can be useful down the line for making pedagogical choices, as well as for appreciating how constraints are omnipresent. Bateans observes, “The interaction between constraints and conventions is . . . one of the most fascinating aspects of any reflection on constrained writing. . . .[it becomes] more intriguing if one
limits the field of conventions to what is normally taken into account, that is, to the
domain of generic and grammatical regularities” (Baetens “Expanding the Field” 63). In
other words, one of the affordances of this Oulipian approach is that it plays with the
arbitrary dimension of all constraints. James notes, “Arbitrary constraints insist on the
arbitrary dimension of even the most time-honored form . . .” (114). It is the seemingly
arbitrariness of writing rules, in general, that these distinctions bring to light. The
capricious nature of formal grammar rules often frustrates many students for this very
reason. Additionally, as design’s use of affordances and constraints have illustrated,
constraints do not have to be unconventional to be influential. There is no way of
knowing in advance what constraints will produce what outcomes. Despite this rich
history of constraint-based writing, it’s worth looking at the specific conditions that have
kept them out of rhetoric and composition.

**Constraints in Rhetoric and Composition**

In their 2010 *Composition Studies* article, Laurie Gries and Collin Brooke observe
that “constrained writing has been underappreciated” in the composition classroom, and
they make a strong case for adopting constraints in rhetoric and composition pedagogy
(21). They conclude that in the process of producing arguments under the formal
constraints of slideware, like PowerPoint and Pecha Kucha, “students realize inventive
possibilities in their own work” that would have gone unnoticed in traditional writing
formats (23). Their results echo the established findings that constraints can productively
limits one’s access to the familiar. They suggest one reason why constraints aren’t more
popular in rhetoric and composition has to do with the fact that “typically, in the
composition classroom, we associate constrained writing with the current traditionalist
approach and thus neglect to explore how constraints can be an important part of the inventive process (21). It’s true that the heavily rule-based practice associated with current-traditional rhetoric started to garner some negative lip service in the mid-twentieth century in lieu of more process-based pedagogies, and though many still have strong opinions in opposition to CTR, it’s worth revisiting the circumstance in which how this reputation came to be.\(^9\)

The history of current-traditional rhetoric can be traced back to Harvard in the late 19\(^{th}\) century with the university’s president Charles W. Eliot overseeing a significant curricular shift from Greek, Latin, and oration to written English. Drill-based textbooks, such as Adam Sherman Hill’s *The Principles of Rhetoric and Their Application*, focused on the formal rules for “good use,” and they became the driving force of Harvard’s composition curriculum for over 30 years and inspired decades of grammar-driven pedagogy. Though there have been many significant changes in the study and practice of writing instruction in the decades since, the profound influence of this early curriculum on the contemporary American university cannot be overstated. However, it wasn’t until the late 1950s that these early courses and their grammar-focused pedagogy received the identifying label of “current-traditional rhetoric” (CTR).\(^{10}\) Though, by this time, rote

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\(^9\) Another reason could very well be that constraints are very popular in creative writing and literature courses, and, some might say that creative writing and composition-rhetoric have a complicated history, which is addressed in a number of places, most notably, in *The Elephants Teach*, D.G. Myers locates the seeds of today’s creative writing programs in the first modern composition courses at Harvard in the late nineteenth century, Tim Mayers’ *(Re)Writing Craft* has become one of the go-to texts for radically rethinking disciplinary divisions with its proposal that “creative writers and compositionists together should strive to invert the traditional hierarchy of English studies” (xv). Additionally Susan Miller, among many others, have addressed the frequent divisions of literature and rhetoric in many universities and colleges (45).

\(^{10}\) In his 1959 *Root for a New Rhetoric* Daniel Fogarty first used the term “current traditional rhetoric.” As Robert Connors points out, this was not an important term for Fogarty. In 1979, Richard Young added the hyphen between “current” and “traditional” in his NEH Summer
exercises in style and mechanics were no longer popular classroom practice, and CTR quickly became a mythologized, pedagogical bogeyman, an example of what not to do in the composition classroom. Many have suggested that these early courses were assigned a label for the sole purpose of producing negative critiques. In fact, Robert Connors has pointed out that CTR “became a convenient whipping boy, the term of choice after 1985 for describing whatever in nineteenth and twentieth century rhetorical or pedagogical history any given author found wanting” (8). That “darn old” current-traditional rhetoric is often used not only to describe the reactionary and derivative nature of the textbook tradition initiated by the shift to writing from speech, but also to serve as a straw man for all composition-rhetoric complaints: “Got a contemporary problem? Blame it on that darn old current traditional rhetoric” (8). Furthermore, what we think of as current-traditional rhetoric is, as Connors describes, “a palimpsest of theories and assumptions stretching back to classical antiquity,” though it is often treated as a “coherent, static whole (“Thirty Years” 208). As we see, CTR’s poor reputation is not entirely fair, but its unfavorable characterization has endured, primarily as a foil for many scholars to define new pedagogical theories against.

Despite CTR’s troubled reputation, it’s hard to ignore the influence of these early prescriptive composition courses, especially in many first-year English programs. Considering the large body of scholarship that denounces grammatical accuracy and syntactic clarity as principal goals, it’s worth looking at why CTR has maintained such a significant presence in rhetoric and composition. One answer suggests that the rule-based nature of CTR pedagogy makes teaching and assessment easier. Additionally, a deep-

Seminar. ‘Current-traditional rhetoric’ “seemed to indicate both the outmoded nature and the continuing power of older textbook writing pedagogies (Connors 4).
rooted institutional demand for standardization and utility places a great deal of value on discrete categories like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ because these translate well into textbooks, are easily reproducible, and make quantitative assessment easier for administrators: a student either writes correctly or doesn’t. However, we know that writing does not always fit neatly into such discrete categories; yet, style handbooks are still required texts for a large number of first-year English courses.\footnote{Though, of course not all handbooks are the same. Many contemporary versions of handbooks are self-conscious about teaching the situated nature of such rules. In chapter 4 I’ll address in how the CTR legacy like handbooks and 5-paragraph essay format represents an important need that traces back, as Connors notes, to antiquity.}

One of the challenges of a grammar-based pedagogy is that, in addition to the seemingly arbitrary nature of the rules that govern academic writing, these rules are also riddled with exceptions. These exceptions often frustrate students who have been trained their entire academic career to memorize and follow the rules. Some professors ban passive voice, while others teach its situated value. Some don’t permit personal reference, while others encourage it. Some are sticklers about punctuation accuracy, while others don’t care about, or notice, errors. As a result, students become paralyzed or frustrated with writing and worry more about if their writing is accurate than about paying attention to what their writing is doing.

**Another CTR**

As I alluded to, CTR was a straw-manned pedagogy almost by design. So, it’s worth asking what happens when we take our cue from constraints and affordances. Instead of taking for granted what CTR is, and bemoaning what it lacks, let’s consider what else can it do (or even, what else has it already done?). Fortunately, we already have one answer to these questions. One of the most famous American modernists,
Gertrude Stein, a writer who is known for her challenging, unconventional style, is a direct product of CTR pedagogy. Sharon Kirsch, who has recently reread Stein as a rhetorician (going so far as referring to her as the “the eccentric aunt of the rhetorical tradition” (120)) has traced the profound influence the prescriptive pedagogical methods of CTR had on her development as a writer up to “what became an extended meditation on language including the place of invention and the function of grammar, particularly in How to Write” (29). Stein was enrolled in Radcliffe College at Harvard in the 1890s, right as the CTR curriculum was taking off, where she “found herself negotiating the ostensible divide between composition and rhetoric in English 22, a two-semester writing course she took in 1894-1895” (291). Luckily, a great deal of Stein’s coursework from this time is still available, and Kirsch lists an array of feedback Stein received on her compositions from her professors. Some of the more noteworthy comments include “Last sentence queer”; “Your vehemence runs away with your syntax”; “?”; “You are severe,” and "Language a bit conventional.” (“Suppose” 291-2). This evidence of some of Stein’s earliest critics offers us a hint as to some of the constraints she was working within.

In her years after college, Stein’s experience with the conventional limits of grammar proved to be a productive constraint for Stein because she famously played with the complex relationships prescribed by formal writing style by creating instances of precise indeterminacy. Stein’s experiments with parts of speech, punctuation, and general style convention illustrate the other, generative ways in which language can perform. Instead of seeing the rote practice, memorization, and convention of CTR as oppressive, she saw these rules and conventions as opportunities for playing with what else they could teach us about language, and in doing so she revealed how grammar and repetition
afforded experimental poetry. For a Stein after CTR, grammar is not a set of rules that reign over language, but as Kirsch describes, the orientation to grammar Stein developed “can be used continually to discover and create relations between objects in the worlds in which we live. And, in the process, we are discovered and created by them” (“Suppose” 306).12

Stein’s time diagramming sentences and running through grammar drills in those early composition courses had the residual effect of intensifying her associations to the parts of speech and their syntactic relationships. Where others saw unbending rules to memorize for accuracy, Stein saw the emergent forces inherent in grammatical structure in the absurdity of, and the exceptions to, the rules. She pushed on language rules and in the act of doing so she encountered other affordances. Because she was unwilling to limit the study of writing to an ideology that was grounded in an idea of systematized perfection she discovered that grammar can be incredibly playful (“Suppose” 296).

Because Stein saw that language is not just the representation of ideas, but rather the potential means of generating ideas, she was able to reveal a different way of thinking about style grammar, style, and mechanics conventions. Stein’s treatment of language, itself, as a means of invention, according to Kirsch, makes her “a rhetorical theorist of the

12 Here Kirsch invokes language from Debra Hawhee’s well-known reframing of invention as invention-in-the-middle, which talks about the nonlinearity of rhetorical practices. When we fail to account for invention under the notion of a fragmented subjectivity, Hawhee argues that we ignore the force of kairos. As such, her idea of invention-in-the middle draws on the concept of the middle voice, which is neither active nor passive, yet both (32). This concept always occurs at the spur of the moment as a response to a particular encounter. In this sense, it’s kairotic. But there’s another duality at work here. Not only is the rhetor producing discourse relevant to the situation at hand, the situation at hand also produces the rhetor. In other words, the subject works on and is worked on by the situation (18). Kirsch argues that Stein’s rhetorical grammar operates as “invention-in-the-middle.”
probable, inventing a poetics of supposition grounded in situational practices of writing and reading. For Stein, as for the Sophists, rhetoric is an asignifying practice where it matters less what a statement is and more what it does or can do” (120).

For example, Marjorie Perloff’s close reading of a line from *Tender Buttons* illustrates how Stein’s careful diction and syntax highlight the potential of linguistic relationships. In the phrase “Roast potatoes for,” “roast” can either be a verb or an adjective, depending on “whether Stein's sentence is indicative or imperative: ‘We're having roast potatoes for dinner’ as opposed to ‘Please roast those potatoes for dinner,’ or ‘for me.’” (Grammar 36). Perloff continues to unpack the syntactic opportunity that the word “for” presents: “‘Roast potatoes’ are ‘for’ what or whom exactly? Why do we cook and eat them? Or are the potatoes an example, ‘Roast potatoes, for instance’? Furthermore, ‘for’ puns on ‘four’ (i.e., four potatoes, with the further echo of the well-known children's counting game, ‘One potato, two potato, three potato, four’” (Perloff Grammar 36). Rather then seeing grammar and syntax as a tool for achieving clear sense of meaning here, Stein intensifies the fact that one never be certain of meaning, grammar does not provide perfect conclusions or a stable meaning, as promised. Style, for Stein, is “an interactive, affirmative, and inventive register in which readers and writers access a continuous present, a rhetorical and kairotic space that requires continual negotiation of ones available means, a *poesis* of engagement” (Kirsch 74). Rather than a means for achieving the clarity through grammatical accuracy, which her early composition classes professed, Stein’s style asks how clarity operates, what makes it possible, and what do we lose by treating language as transparent. Precise syntax does not have to be precisely ‘accurate’ but can be precisely ‘appropriate’ for generating indeterminate possibility.
Perloff also unpacks additional questions and assumptions posed by the effects of grammar and syntax in translation. Reading a line from Stein’s *Pink Melon Joy* Perloff observes, “…grammar cannot explain why it is incorrect to say ‘I wish matches.’ Doesn’t ‘désire’ as in ‘Je désire des allumettes’ translate as both ‘want’ and ‘wish’? ‘I wish to have matches’ or ‘I wish for matches’ would do the trick . . . Can an infinitive or a mere preposition make such a difference?” (36). There is a line from Stein’s “Poetry and Grammar” that I think provides an emphatically affirmative answer to Perloff’s rhetorical question: “Prepositions can live one long life being really being nothing but absolutely nothing but mistaken and that makes them irritating if you feel that way about mistakes but certainly something that you can be continuously using and ever lastly enjoying. I like prepositions the best of all . . .” (213). Here Stein was not just accepting the established rules of prepositions, as in they show relationship so you can’t put them at the end of a sentence. Instead she asks what else can a preposition do? What are a preposition’s affordances? As Ulla E. Dydo notes in her introduction to *A Stein Reader*: “Like a child with a primer, [Stein] played a word or two until they became a new construction” (2).13

One notably valuable side effect of reframing CTR in terms of its affordances is that it joins constraints in helping to question the myth of genius associated with the

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13 Though, some scholars have read Stein’s relationship to her early composition classes a little differently. For example, Lisa Ruddick suggests that one of Stein’s professors at Harvard, William James, “Had come to represent to her everything she now questioned about the nineteenth century, and as she went about ‘killing the nineteenth century’ through a modernist literary practice, she pulverized the ideals that had once drawn her to James but now repelled her . . .” (1). However, Kirsch rightly points to the large body of Stein’s writing that overwhelmingly considered the function of language and counters such readings of Stein by observing that “she consistently and deliberately works within rhetorical and literary terms while reinventing them” (7).
romantics. Stein is not a genius because she was a conduit for inspiration, but rather she experienced the conditions that allowed her to see the affordances of CTR that were being taken for granted. The invention started with the language first, and this is a small but really significant detail that gets lost in conversations about writing. It’s not necessarily important to know (nor could it ever be possible to completely ‘know’) the particular set of constraints that allowed her to appreciate the affordances of the playful nature of grammar and syntax where others couldn’t. The effects of constraints are not necessarily transferrable. What design (and later as I’ll address, pataphysics) shows us is that there is a potential set of circumstances for every possible affordance. Christian Bök reminds us of bp Nichols’ “Pataphysical hardware Company” that presents such opportunities to consider “surrational innovations” (*Pataphysics* 85). Instead of rose seeds, why not a “Grow Your Own Stein Poem”? In this way we see the connections that constraints and affordances have to the conceptual art movement.

**Looking Forward**

In some ways, what I’ve been talking about here has a lot of resonance with what’s called “post-process” in the rhetoric-composition. However, that term, by the nature of its prefix, comes with the burden of its relationship to process and the copious versions of the negative critique that swirl around many of the definition-based claims for both process and post-process pedagogy. For this reason, I don’t think it serves this project to locate it amid those debates. More to the point, in some ways what I’m proposing is neither process nor post-process but more of an intensification of current-traditional rhetoric: a highly formal system of encounters with language through practice.
The irony that Stein offers evidence of is that if you push on CTR enough it starts to resemble post-process.

What follows is rooted in an interest to ask students to consider and contend with language first. As Baeten’s says, “Constraints are proofs of sovereignty as well as generosity, which cannot always be said of anti-constrained writing, in which authors are slaves to themselves (‘I cannot but write the way I do’) and masters of the game (‘I am myself and all those who write like me are just vulgar imitators’)” (“Doing Things”). Constraints can create the conditions through which students can become productively defamiliarized to both their own writing habits, specifically, and the accepted conventions of writing, in general. In fact, the very force of a constraint not only defamiliarizes habits of attention, but also can also allow the affordances that have yet to be realized to be realized. Because constraints can create the conditions for that which is otherwise, I suggest that wherever there are limits there is an opportunity for invention.

Each chapter that follows teases out various iterations of constraints and constraint-based productivity, serving as a sort of ‘pulse point’ to bring one particular aspect of the project into sharper relief. Chapter 2, “Pataphysics” looks at modernist and postmodernist constraint-based writing. Starting with the recent work with conceptual and procedural writing, it charts one of the roots of writing constraints back to theories of Alfred Jarry’s pataphysics and the Oulipian writing workshop, who were inspired by pataphysics and put many of its theories in practice. At the center of this practice is Christian Bök, a constraint-based writing and pataphysical theorist infamous for playing with the relationships among rules, chance, and exceptions as well as science, poetry, and linguistic experimentation. His work offers tangible examples and historical context for
understanding the often invisible influence of pataphysics. This chapter not only highlights a lineage of constraint-based writing, but also shows how writing was developing otherwise during the very time Stein was contending with CTR in Harvard’s composition classes. Chapter 3, “Defamiliarization” takes a closer look at the generative effects of constraint-based writing in terms of Russian formalist Viktor Schlovsky’s ostranenie, or defamiliarization. This concept of defamiliarization plays with challenging expectations one habitually develops over time. As an agent of defamiliarization, constraints can facilitate student ‘knowing themselves knowing’ (in the parlance of Stein), and challenges language’s transparency. Furthermore, I also look at how defamiliarization can potentially add to the fascinating work Kelly Pender has done on techne. Chapter 4 “Progymnasmata” revisits the pedagogical practices of the ancient rhetoricians. As a standardized set of pedagogical practices, I look at how the progymnasmata were a type of CTR thousands of years before CTR existed. Given what we now know about the affordances of CTR, I revisit the ancient progymnasmata with the intent to develop a contemporary version of the exercises with various types of constraints as the primary engine for writing practice, a type of non-instrumental bringing-forth proposed by Pender. Because I suggest that the progymnasmata were an ancient version of CTR, I use them here as a way of illustrating an intensification of CTR for the 21st century. Chapter 5 “Praxis” actually lays out some potential methods for this contemporary progymnasmata, offering categories for use and providing examples of constraint-based writing exercises in a contemporary classroom. The appendix includes a list of these potential constraints.
Because there is no way of knowing in advance what constraints will produce what outcomes, they are an ideal way to experiment with the forces of language in a classroom. Because we associate constrained writing with a current-traditionalist approach in composition and rhetoric, we neglect to explore how constraints can put students in the position to develop a different experience of invention. In addition to invention, the influence of constraints can help students revise their work. As Gries and Brooke observe students have a “difficult time ‘re-seeing’ their work” (23). I agree that this inability to see their work differently can inhibit their experience of the recursive nature writing. The threat of the blank page is a popular trope for a reason. It can be a daunting confrontation that often results in paralysis and a great deal of lackluster student writing. My hope is that these constraints become a useful option for occasional—or even regular—writing practice.
In 2004 Kenneth Goldsmith, a poet and creative writing professor at the University of Pennsylvania, started teaching a seminar titled “Uncreative Writing” with a stated purpose of teaching students to use “strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, [and] plundering as compositional methods” (Upenn). The assignments for this course ask students to write under unusual constraints, which include retyping multiple copies of the same text, transcribing audio clips, committing acts of graffiti, and altering Wikipedia pages in imperceptible ways (Uncreative 8). The final exam requires students to present and defend a completed paper from the Internet as their own work. “The secret,” according to Goldsmith, is that no one can fully suppress evidence of oneself: acts of writing emerge as a residue from the conscious and unconscious choices each student inevitably makes (9). He deemed the inaugural class a success and has gone on to teach a version of the course every few years.

In 2011, Goldsmith’s unconventional teaching practices started to gain notoriety when he published Uncreative Writing, a book about his course and its methods. His article in The Chronicle of Higher Education later that same year enraged many traditionalists, solidifying his reputation as an eccentric innovator to some and a fool to many who point to Goldsmith as evidence that the American higher education system has gone off the rails. He has since been accused of a wide range of perceived crimes, from teaching students to plagiarize to “robbing poetry of its joy” (9). Goldsmith continues to
rousing critics,\textsuperscript{14} taking an impish delight in challenging assumptions about texts and writing.

Goldsmith describes the ease with which his students initially took to his unusual teaching methods. However, he admits, it was not long before he noticed that their enthusiasm was limited to appreciating the novelty of the texts and sharing discoveries, but when asked to connect on a critical level, they had trouble. This trouble seemed to be evidence of particular biases students have about texts and writing, that quite often, their writing is “one dimensional”: “[t]o them, language is a transparent tool used to express logical, coherent, and conclusive thoughts according to a strict set of rules that, by the time they’ve entered college, they’ve pretty much mastered” (\textit{Uncreative} 216). While I would argue that most college students have not actually “mastered” the rules of English—nor, as Goldsmith would likely agree, do I necessarily think that should be their goal—the underlying point Goldsmith makes here warrants some consideration. Many people, not just students, do engage with language as a transparent tool, but language does not behave that way. So we are left with the question of how can one teach writing in a way that does not privilege ideas of romantic expression while also not privileging limiting notions of accuracy? How does one move away from mere mastery and toward facility in the writing classroom? These questions aren’t new, but I’ve proposed that it’s worth considering writing constraints as a potential answer, and as I mentioned in the previous chapter, this is a benefit that has gone relatively unnoticed in composition and rhetoric courses.

\textsuperscript{14} The comments section for that \textit{Chronicle} article is a good place to get sense of the level of ire he’s incited. Also, and most recently, his course, and subsequent book about \textit{Wasting Time on the Internet} has sparked discussions about how we learn, retain information, and spend our time.
However, my interest is not with Goldsmith, specifically, but rather the pedagogical purchase of constraint-based writing. My previous chapter touched on the historically complicated relationships many rhetoric and composition instructors have with current-traditional rhetoric, so I won’t rehearse that here. Instead, this chapter moves through the history of, and influences surrounding, constraint-based writing in order to investigate the history of these writing methods that have been relatively lost to rhetoric and composition instruction.

**Understanding Uncreative Writing**

The term “uncreative writing” is a bit of a misnomer. Goldsmith uses “uncreative” to denote the intended distance from the highly expressive implications of “creative,” and I am echoing “uncreative” here for the same reasons. In general, uncreative writing signifies writing practices that move away from romantic ideals of authorship that value self-expression; the general guiding principle of these works is that they are all products of a set of constraints or rules. The term “uncreative” isn’t widely popular, mainly because it seems to conflate a number of categories. In fact, Goldsmith often uses “uncreative writing” and “conceptual writing” interchangeably to address rule-based methods of dealing with language that play with both arbitrary constraints and digital technology’s facility with managing material language. For the purpose of clarity in this project I consider the terms conceptual writing and uncreative writing as under the larger umbrella of constraint-based writing.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Craig Dworkin coined the term “conceptual writing” in 2003, in the title for *The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, a gallery of online works that brought together texts from the traditions of conceptual art, the *Oulipo*, and avant-garde writing, in general. In 2011, Dworkin and Goldsmith edited the first collection of these writings, titled *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. 
Because conceptual writing often prioritizes the direction or outline of a project, many of its authors work with found material and source texts, selecting, altering, or satirizing the old material. Such writing tries to undermine the cult of the genius and complicates the notions of intention, imagination, and inspiration. A critical discourse surrounding the movement has grown among a coterie of academics in literature, philosophy, creative writing, and art. In the past couple decades, various anthologies, critical texts, and conferences have focused on this movement. Marjorie Perloff has characterized conceptual writing, and its related movements and aesthetics, as “unoriginal genius” in her 2010 book of the same title. Additionally, Jeff Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-time Capitalism* looks at conceptual writing as the “literature of the post-postmodern” (166). For Nealon, conceptual writing is an issue of intensity. By treating language as material and not privileging it solely as a vehicle of meaning, one is obliged to reckon with the multiple forces of representation all at once. When Goldsmith rewrote Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” by replacing the word “art” with “writing,” he opened up the possibility of thinking about writing as an act of physically manipulating information. In a world where we have a constant glut of information to contend with, actually inundating us at every turn, Nealon and Goldsmith both value the ability to acknowledge the abundant potential of text rather than privileging of singular meanings: instead of passive interpreters or receivers, or active transmitters of authentic expression, conceptual writing requires recursive engagement.

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16 These are certainly not the first or only times such an idea appeared. There are many other areas of writing that look at these effects (e.g., language poetry, etc.).
Approaches to uncreative writing are myriad. Some are acts of repetition like Goldsmith’s *Day*, a complete transcription of the entire edition of the *New York Times* from Friday, September 1, 2000.\(^{17}\) Some are acts of rearrangement, like Gregory Betts’ *If Language*, which includes 50 paragraphs, each a different anagram of the same 525 letters taken from an essay passage from another conceptual writer Steve McCaffery. Or, some are the result of a series of rules like Craig Dworkin’s *Parse*, which grammatically parses Edwin Abbot’s book, *How to Parse: An Attempt to Apply the Principles of Scholarship to English Grammar*. Some are acts of subtraction, like Christian Bök’s *Eunoia*, which is a serial lipogram, restricting each of its five main chapters to one of the five vowels while attempting to incorporate all existing univocalic words. Moreover, some texts push even further to the extreme limits of these acts, like *Between Words*, in which Elizabeth Clark rewrites the 1,274-line poem *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* by removing all of the words, leaving only the punctuation left to read.

While it could be easy to dismiss such practices as frivolous parlor tricks, Goldsmith’s particular pedagogical interests in uncreative writing reveal that there are untapped opportunities for these texts. His experiences teaching these texts in a ‘creative’ writing classroom show that uncreative writing can help students question singularly

\(^{17}\) This is one of the most extreme examples of conceptual writing. Filling over 800 pages, this text pushes at the limits of function and utility. Goldsmith, in a talk he gave at the White House for First Lady Michelle Obama’s poetry salon, offered that he, in fact, has not read the book all the way through, having fallen asleep whenever attempting to read the proofs. However, he also asserts this could very well be the greatest story ever told: the massive tome offers love, death, war, intrigue, crime, and adventure. Granted, this perspective still somewhat implies a reading toward plot, but *Day* also challenges one’s perspective, demanding its audience to consider questions of engagement such as “How does one transcribe a newspaper? According to section? Across columns?” “How does the choice of day affect the text?” “How does one go about reading such a transcription?” In fact, when I have students read and write uncreative texts in my classes, “How did you read this?” and “How did you write this?” are always the opening provocations for discussion. This difference from the traditional classroom focus on content is part of my interest in uncreative writing for composition-rhetoric pedagogy.
subject-driven notions of composition, and it asks students to consider questions like, “What is writing?” “What are the roles of authors?” “What influences writing?” and “Is innovation or originality an essential characteristic of strong writing?” Such fundamental provocations certainly did not start with Goldsmith and uncreative writing. They are the result of a legacy of textual play that has been practiced for centuries. However, for the purposes of comparing this legacy to the development of college composition courses, I will return again to the end of the 19th century when, at the same time the constraints of Harvard’s composition courses were influencing Gertrude Stein’s relationship to language, a man named Alfred Jarry was reading Nietzsche and devising Pataphysics, his science of imaginary solutions.\[18\]

**Alfred Jarry and Pataphysics**

Alfred Jarry, French writer, philosopher, inventor, and father of pataphysics, inspired an entire trajectory of experimental thought and writing at the end of the 19th century. Interested in the exceptional, (i.e., that which defies rules and categorization yet necessarily exists in relation to them), Jarry was a prevalent force in the formation of surrealism, avant-garde theatre, and the Oulipo. A significant number of contemporary scholars also acknowledge, and even celebrate, Jarry’s impact on contemporary art and philosophy.\[19\] Despite the apparent force of Jarry’s writings and philosophies, however, direct references to him and pataphysics often occur in passing or are altogether absent

\[18\] M. Bourdon is known to have taught Nietzsche to Jarry before French translations were published (Beaumont 21). I like to think about the Malcolm Gladwell-ian implications of Jarry being one of the earliest (and youngest) people in France to have access to Nietzsche’s ideas.\[19\] Gilles Deleuze, Harold Bloom, Marcel Duchamp, Antonin Artaud, Andre Breton, Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Christian Bök, Steve McCaffery, bp Nichol, and Roger Shattuck among others have cited their own works’ debt to Jarry.
from a great deal of mainstream academic discourse (or scattered in footnotes),\textsuperscript{20} only overtly appearing in the conversations of a seemingly small, but dedicated, coterie, most of whom focus primarily on the aesthetic value of Jarry’s work.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1911, four years after his death, Jarry’s manuscript *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, which he had been continuously revising in response to repeated publication rejection, was published. The novel not only recounts the adventures of the pataphysician who “invented” the science, but also it sketches out the premises behind the science of exceptions.\textsuperscript{22} The science of pataphysics remained rather obscure until after World War I, when it was promoted by the surrealists. This growing popularity eventually led to the founding of The Collège de ‘Pataphysique in 1948. The college was an organization of artists, writers, and scholars who published critical articles concerning Jarry and his work, and they performed Jarry’s ideas through their own artistic and literary subversions.

During the inaugural ceremony that marked the founding of the college, the organization’s first president, Dr. I.L. Sandomir, presented a speech that was later published under the title “Harangue Inaugurale” (Enns 114). One of the first issues

\textsuperscript{20} There is an argument to be made that the footnote is the ideal location for Jarry to live.

\textsuperscript{21} This has been rapidly changing over the past decade.

\textsuperscript{22} Pataphysics “is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter’s limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the later extends beyond physics. Ex. An epiphenomenon being often accidental, pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. ‘Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, will describe a universe which can be—and perhaps should be—envisaged in the place of the traditional one, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions, albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions, possess no longer even the virtue of originality” (*Exploits* 21-22).
Sandomir addressed in this speech was the inherent tension between the serious nature of an academic institution and the highly absurd practice of pataphysics:

Whoever says college, aren’t they talking about education? Whoever says education, aren’t they talking about utility, or the pretension of utility? Whoever says utility, aren’t they talking about something serious? Whoever says something serious, aren’t they talking about something anti-pataphysical? . . . But the seriousness of God and man, the utility of offices and institutions, the gravity and weight of educational systems cannot be anti-pataphysical because they cannot be proclaimed, nor want to be, pataphysical, because, by their very nature, they cannot be anything else … and thus, the college is ‘pataphysically founded. (115 Enns)

From the very beginning, the members of the The Collège de ‘Pataphysique were clearly concerned that the formation of an institution based on the practice of pataphysics might potentially transform into something educational, useful, or (worst of all) serious.23 Sandomir’s response to the question, however, was to suggest that this type of thinking is the problem, itself, for it compels a false binary: it is impossible to categorize systems as pataphysical or anti-pataphysical, as all systems are essentially unique and distinct (i.e., exceptional), and as such, they are unable to be anything other than what they particularly are. You might note that this is not unlike the nature of how design studies think of constraints and affordances. In this way, one might consider that pataphysical imaginary solutions are affordances that don’t yet have their constraints.

23 In fact, there continues to be evidence of this anxiety. When I was attempting to arrange a meeting with one of the most public pataphysicians of the 21st century, it took a number of exchanges with him to convince him that I was appropriately ‘unseriously’ serious and/or seriously ‘unserious’
According to the very principle of pataphysics there is no logical contradiction between the practice of pataphysics, as such, and the formation of a pataphysical institution.  

Because to have a deliberate function would imply that there are laws and rules that allegedly govern the behavior of that function (i.e., functions come with implicit expectations), pataphysics has no clearly delineated role in the world. Anthony Enns goes so far to observe, “the world is nothing more than a mass of ‘appearances’ or ‘fictions,’ and only pataphysicians, by recognizing the very inaccessibility of the real, are capable of seeing that the world itself does not exist” (116). Pataphysics shows that to be concerned with legitimacy at all is to miss the point. Pataphysics should not be an issue of definition but rather of action, of behaving as if. For, as Christin Bök explains, “Neither rhetorical nor theoretical, the as if constitutes a paradox of contingency, since reference is made to an impossibility, but from this impossibility an inference is made . . . The as if posits the possible consequences of an impossible inconsequence. The as if is simply the imaginary solution to the what if” (Pataphysics 25-26). In other words, as Jarry proposes, we are all pataphysicians whether we know it or not. Identity and definition are not the issue: behavior is.

This (lack of) anxiety over legitimacy explains why The Collège de ’Pataphysique explored existing scientific theories as well as theories that had been rejected by the scientific establishment. They like to play with the ways in which scientific laws are

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24 Often in the writings on pataphysics, members will assert that you cannot define pataphysics, and you cannot be a pataphysician because everyone is ‘always already’ experiencing the circumstances of becoming exceptional. In fact the ‘ is meant to differentiate between pataphysics itself and the application of pataphysics. Because to apply pataphysics risks an orientation to purpose. However, smaller groups, like the Canadian pataphysicians, also have taken up the ‘ to denote their version. For the purposes of this project I didn’t use the ‘ unless it was included in a citation.

25 Here is where we get a glimpse of Baudrillard’s attraction and motivation behind his relationship to pataphysics.
interpreted as facts rather than the hypothetical paradigms of thought that reflect the beliefs of a particular discourse community, despite the contradictory phenomena often existing in the material universe. Furthermore—and, again, reminiscent of the relationship between constraints and affordances—the members of *The Collège de ’Pataphysique* have also been known to invent their own imaginary solutions, which were not designed to be believed as facts but which playfully masquerade, or *behave* as facts for the sake of hypothetical arguments. For example, some of the ‘Department Chairs’ of *The Collège de ’Pataphysique* include Photosophistics, Aesthetic Mechanics and Comparative Graphology, Mental Alienation and Psychiatry, Crocodilology, Spoonerisms, and Experimental Necrobiosis (Brotchie 41-42). Such titles walk the line of satire and possibility. These ironic structures were actually meant to collapse under close scrutiny, thus pointing out the essential fictionality of any supposed ‘real solution’. By mimicking methods and procedures in their discovery of imaginary solutions, while at the same time pointing out the essentially imaginative content of existing scientific principles, the activities of *The Collège de ’Pataphysique* repeatedly show that pataphysics is not a type of actual science, nor is it a fake science, or even anti-scientific, but rather it celebrates the fact of science itself: that all scientific theories are composed entirely of exceptions. In other words, pataphysics can be thought of as an intensified science. Accordingly, many of the papers published by *The Collège de Pataphysique* point to existing scientific theories that are highly abstract, such as those found in

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26 Here is where one could read Jarry’s unwitting anticipation of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 
quantum physics, in order to illustrate the fact that scientific principles are not necessarily ‘real,’ but rather they are simply discursive constructions.\textsuperscript{27}

Though it was “\textit{occulted}”\textsuperscript{28} for roughly sixty years, the \textit{Collège}’s resurfaced enthusiasm for “useless scholarly research” gained momentum as the 20\textsuperscript{th} century came to a close, and as a result, this resurfacing inspired the formation of the London Institute of ‘Pataphysics\textsuperscript{29} (Fell 14). Furthermore, a particular brand of the philosophy has developed quite a following among contemporary Canadian academics and small pockets of scholars at the University of Pennsylvania and University of Buffalo. As Christian Bök, one of the foremost scholars of this Canadian-brand of pataphysics has observed, “Pataphysics not only studies the exception but has itself become an exception—dismissed and neglected despite its influence and relevance,” and he further insists, “Jarry has not only inspired the absurdity of every modern avant-garde but has also predicted the absurdity of nearly all modern technoscience” (9). So, while metaphysical science must either rule out or account for exceptions, pataphysical science regards exceptions as the rule, in that exceptions are a type of dynamic byproduct of systemic order, and one may not ever anticipate or recognize the potential value of an exception (i.e., “imaginary solution”).\textsuperscript{30}

\footnote{27 Again, Kuhn’s proposal that the laws of science are discursively created rather than empirically discovered is foreshadowed in Jarry’s work.}

\footnote{28 They “went underground,” which resulted in very few English translations of primary pataphysical work. These translations are increasing, yet another nod to the rise in popularity.}

\footnote{29 The change in notation from “pataphysics” to what is considered the more accurate or authentic “‘Pataphysics” (with the apostrophe before the p) is in response to Jarry’s comment in \textit{Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel} that the apostrophe distinguishes ‘pataphysics from that of a simple pun (e.g. \textit{patte à physique}, meaning “leg of physics”) (21).}

\footnote{30 Again, for the purposes of highlighting connections, this is not unlike the affordances and constraints I introduced in the previous chapter.}
Because of this unrecognizability, there are costs for explicitly evoking pataphysics in particular academic discourses, primarily because no such discipline exists. As Bök muses, “What then is there to study? What museum can house its relics? What codexes can record its axioms? Such a science may be no more than a ur—a last hope that has yet to come” (10). This is why what many would call absurd does not phase Jarry. He’s aware that when a coin is dropped, probability dictates that it will likely fall, and one is inclined to be concerned with whether it falls on heads or tails. However, he’s interested in all the possible conditions in which the coin would not fall, and just because that event does not happen does not mean that it cannot ever happen. For example, in Exploits, he asks, “Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round—a manifestly false proposition—since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only have noticed its shape at the moment of looking at the time?—perhaps under the pretext of utility” (23).

The pretext of utility, for Jarry, is a mere narrative that plagues the masses and limits creative engagement with possibility. One space that seems to perpetuate this pretext of utility is the composition classroom, a space that often encourages a misguided emphasis in formulaic approaches to writing, especially in regard to CTR, as I addressed in Chapter 1. Taking my cue from pataphysics, I want a composition classroom that does not shackle students with the burden of utility, but rather lets a version of utility be the residue of practice.

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31 This comment on the often oppressive forces of intention, expectation and/or habit on perception are really important to think about in terms of revision (i.e., re-seeing), especially—as I’ll touch on in Chs 3 and 4—for writing. I want to highlight the valuable pulses of defamiliarization that echo throughout, among, and between pataphysics, constraints, defamiliarization, and writing.
As I mentioned, many of the articles published by *The Collège de ’Pataphysique* possess a subtle humor often concealed by a pretense of academic gravity. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the writings of the college represent parodies or satires of scientific discourse whose far-fetched theories and impossible machines merely poke fun at the scientific establishment. This is hardly the case. To a certain extent, the humor of the pataphysicians retains an underlying earnestness. In other words, pataphysics remains inseparable from its seriousness because the very seriousness of science, when carried to its ultimate conclusions, inevitably becomes ludicrous.\(^{32}\) Shattuck points out, for example, that pataphysics reveals the lack of any fundamental difference between the comic and the serious: “The comic and the serious are identical: the comic is the serious hiding behind the mask of craziness; the serious taken seriously is inexorably crazy”\(^{33}\) (qtd. in Enns 127). Pataphysics is just one of the innumerable facets to Alfred Jarry. His work spans a spectrum of tone, content, and popularity.

The question of whether or not pataphysics is a legitimate area of study is one that Jarry would be pleased to know is still a contentious topic; the ambiguity of the “seriousness” of the ideas and the people associated with them has only become more clouded in the digital age. As biographer Jill Fell has observed, Jarry has created a productive machine, one which “makes us think that there is something out there that others have defined and of which we have never heard,” but at the same time, he instills doubt with his overt jokes and wild goose chases but it is this very irresolvable space that

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32 Consider space travel, DNA studies, cloning, organ transplants, etc.
33 Here one may be reminded of the influence of Zarathustran laughter: “Both [Jarry and Nietzsche] in effect attempt to dream up a ‘gay science,’ whose *joie de vivre* thrives wherever the tyranny of truth has increased our esteem for the lie and wherever the tyranny of reason has increased out esteem for the mad” (24 Bök).
creates the ideal conditions (for inspiration and innovation) in which students can learn the possibilities of language (14).

In her review of Joseph Carroll’s *Evolution and Literary Theory*, Ellen Dissanayake includes “pataphysics” in a category of “buzzwords from contemporary science” (229). She argues that literary scholars have a misunderstanding of science: “For them,” she says, “‘science’ means information theory, chaos or catastrophe theory, fractals, pataphysics, ‘autopoeisis’ or self-organization, emergence, cyborgs, hypertext, virtual signs and other aspects of sci-fi, or techno-politics” (229). This reference to pataphysics based on imprecision is just the type of confusion Jarry would appreciate: she defines the word as part of the language of contemporary science, in which literary scholars appropriate for their own use, failing to acknowledge that the word and concept were, in fact, coined by a playwright. She further protests, “These ‘scientific’ positions are used as trendy metaphors for talking about chance, uncertainty, accident, ideology, and multidimensionality in literary works or in the aims of their authors” (229). My motivation here is not to correct Dissanayake, on the contrary. I wish to view this as yet another type of influence, a dismissal that needs to exist in order to perpetuate the ambiguity and confusion surrounding Jarry and his imaginary science.

**Force of Influence**

Before I sketch out how Jarry’s influence circulates in contemporary discourse, I want to nod to the obvious influences on Jarry’s work. For example, Henri Bergson was Jarry’s teacher and along with M Bourdon provided Jarry early copies of Nietzsche.34

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34 Nietzsche’s influence on Jarry is undeniable. Jarry’s supermale has clear links to Nietzsche’s übermensch. The playful styles of Zarathustra and Dr. Faustaroll are also very similar. In fact, Anthony Enns suggests, “the relationship between pataphysics and humor is better understood through a consideration of Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of laughter...Nietzsche’s theory
Also, because of his interest in the forces implicit in scientific discourses, Jarry was drawn to the works of scientists who pushed the creative envelope. *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* behaves almost like an encyclopedic reference to these influences, dedicating various chapters to such scientists as Lord Kelvin and Sir Charles Vernon Boys, as well as writers and artists who also gravitated to unexplored possibilities in their work. Additionally, chapter seven of *Exploits* consists of a list of twenty-seven allusions to texts, known by Jarry scholars as *livres pairs*. He does not mention the texts by name, but rather by enigmatic references such as the “ancient mariner’s crossbow” from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, “two and a half leagues of the earth’s crust” from Jules Verne’s *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and “Scapin’s lottery ticket” from Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian’s *Les Deux Billets*, to name a few. Such nods to texts and people appear often in Jarry’s work.

As far as people who have been influenced by Jarry, there seem to be too many to name. Among the widely-circulated scholars in the academy who cite Jarry, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Harold Bloom offer some of the most overt references to him, though he shows up in minor references in Derrida and Artaud. He has also inspired various maintains the promise that laughter can be used to expose the underlying fictions which structure the world. Nietzsche, like Jarry, attempts to use laughter as a way of criticizing and resisting these fictions, thus endowing humor with a liberatory and subversive potential . . .” (43).

35 i.e. Sir William Thompson. Kelvin is another undeniable influence on Jarry. His *Popular Lectures and Addresses, vol. 1, Constitution of Matter* was translated into French in 1893. Seemingly surreal (yet scientifically utilized) items found in Kelvin’s work inspired the limitless and whimsical approach to the imaginary science Jarry outlines.

36 A British physicist known for his innovation, Boys inspired Jarry with his book *Soap Bubbles: Their Colours and the Forces Which Mould Them* (1890). This type of science (that of investigating the characteristics and forces of something as whimsical as soap bubbles) is a clear influence over Jarry’s imaginary science.

37 See Ben Fisher’s *The Pataphysician's Library: An Exploration of Alfred Jarry's ‘Livres Pairs’* for a thorough investigation of and commentary on Jarry’s textual influences.
pockets of artistic movements, such as surrealism, dada, and Oulipo, and there is a coterie of Canadian poets who have cultivated what some have called a Zarathustran ‘pataphysics. Further, Jarry’s name and/or the word “‘pataphysics” appears occasionally in passing or in the footnotes of contemporary scholarship in the humanities. Also, Jarry is a familiar figure in French and theatre studies. Finally, in the past decade there have been steadily growing occurrences of pataphysics appearances in pop culture.39

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom borrows the word “*clinamen,*” from Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. Meaning a type of swerve, or movement, at the atomic level that induces change, Bloom uses *clinamen* as one of his “six revisionary movements” tracing a “strong poet’s life cycle,” the term serves as a description for a poet’s misreading (or misprision) of his predecessors (10). Bloom argues that because such misprision allows a poet to evade influence, differentiating himself from his influences (i.e., becoming exceptional), “the study of Poetic Influence is necessarily a branch of ‘Pataphysics” (42). In this sense, earlier forms no longer restrain subsequent forms since the “*clinamen stems always from a pataphysical sense of the arbitrary,*” (or

38 Interestingly, the Canadians have taken to adding a second apostrophe to the word. The first apostrophe was designed to distinguish the word from a pun (and/or to differentiate pataphysics from applied pataphysics), and the second apostrophe is designed to distinguish the French ‘pataphysics from the Canadian. I find such a distinction an interesting mix of an investment in identity that seems to be in tension with the ideas of pataphysical exceptions, but also it affirms the idea that there is no singular, accessible pataphysics, but a series of infinite exceptional pataphysics.

39 The European Graduate School has an online journal of ‘pataphysics titled *Semiophagy*; there are many personal web-pages dedicated to ‘pataphysics; one can “like” ‘pataphysics on Facebook; the word “pataphysics” is in the Beatles’ song “Maxwell’s Silver Hammer”; Pablo Lopez, an American writer, invented the figure of speech “pataphor” (the analogy being that a pataphor is to ‘pataphysics as metaphor is to metaphysics); there is a band named Pataphysics; and there is London Institute of ‘Pataphysics which has another archive (the other being in Paris). This proliferation of the word presents the ‘danger’ of invoking it in academic discourse, the ‘danger’ being that of discredit. Again, this is a concern that Jarry would have enjoyed.
as Christian Bök notes, the “equal haphazardness” of cause and effect (45)). Bloom declares, “‘pataphysics proves to be truly accurate; in the world of all poets all irregularities are indeed ‘regular exceptions’; the recurrence of vision is itself a law governing exceptions…If a creative interpretation is thus necessarily a misinterpretation, we must accept this apparent absurdity. It is absurdity of the highest mode” (42). This reading both challenges and reinforces the idea of an authentic influence. So, though misinterpretations imply that there is a true interpretation to be had, all misinterpretations are valid in their own creative absurdity. Bloom’s appropriation of Jarry seems to be an exact translation of his ideas about science applied to poetic creation. Bök observes, “what repeats is not a rule of repetition and imitation but a game of competition and agitation, in which the clinamen is the smallest possible aberration that can make the greatest possible difference” (Bok 45). The act of misreading and the question of the intentionality (or lack thereof) surrounding the act becomes an interesting question when we consider the possible relationships between metaphysics and pataphysics. Bök’s take is that “‘Pataphysics misreads metaphysics in order to disrupt it, confuse it, or deflect it, transposing the relationship between royal paradigm and a nomad paralogy until such a philosophy of exceptions goes even so far as to misread itself” (45).

The act of misreading also is an interesting question in regard to academic relationships. Like Bloom’s influence of poetic predecessors, there are genealogies of influence among the ‘Pataphysicians (e.g., the Italian Futurists, the French Oulipians, the Canadian ‘Zarathustran ‘‘Pataphysicians), but unlike the poetic influence Bloom outlines, this lineage is not necessarily supposed to be considered as such; though, the influences

40 Such theories are reminiscent of the popularized notions of chaos theory that circulate in popular culture.
are not necessarily meant to be ignored, either. These are more a type of oscillating
network of cohabitants of a group that may or may not be pataphysicians. As Bök points
out, they “reinterpret their antecedent practitioners, misreading them in order to avoid the
normalization of such abnormalities. Each predecessor is (mis)interpreted as a problem
requiring a solution” (45). For the purposes of situating some of these relationships, I’ll
review some of the primary connections.

**Oulipian Lineages**

One of the most recognized examples of Jarry’s influence in evident in the Oulipo
(*l’ouvroir de littérature potentielle*), or the “workshop of potential literature,” formed on
November 24, 1960, as a subcommittee of *The Collège de ‘Pataphysique* (under the
name *Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale*) with ten members from varied
backgrounds (Motte 1). They soon dropped their affiliation to the *Collège de
‘Pataphysique* and changed their name, but the pataphysical influence on the group is
unmistakable. Though they avoid appearing attached to any specific theories, the Oulipo
has endeavored to explore the “. . . use of constraint, either through pushing familiar
constraints to the limit of their possibilities or through systematic research into new
constraints,” and they view themselves as a community invested in experimental research
for the benefit of all writers (Motte 43). In true pataphysical fashion, most of the group’s
work seeks to interrogate the limits of the reasonable, to create the conditions of
possibility that allow for answers to question that have yet to be asked. Overall, the
Oulipo's approach to writing is based in part on their opposition to the conventional
notion that writing solely emerges from unfettered imagination and inspiration, choosing
instead to play with rules and form.

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41 Mathematicians, professors, writers, and pataphysicians.
As I addressed in the previous chapter, the assumption that a rule serves to limit creativity is naïve; in fact, it is the limit itself, which makes writing possible. As Oulipian Marcel Bènabou argues, “Even the most rabid critics of formalism are forced to admit that there are formal demands which a work [of writing] cannot elude” (Motte 41).

Christian Bök rightly describes the Oulipo as exploring “the possibility of potentiality” (Pataphysics 65), noting that these writers “reject the belief that freedom is born from the haphazard rejection of a structured constraint” (67). Rather, Oulipians impose constraints in order to perpetually and simultaneously enact the pataphyscial as if.

In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” Bök addresses a bit of his unease with Oulipian practices. Referencing his own work, Eunoia, as evidence of his own “misgivings about the influence of Oulipo,” Bök expresses concern that by privileging the constraint one loses sight of the literary value of the language. He worries that writing inspired by constraints seems to incite writing that’s more of rote exercise that anything else, and he also complains, “[t]he works often do not fulfill enough of their potential to make them any more interesting than a fumbled sleight” (126). This sort of reaction reveals an uncharacteristically unpataphysical investment in the ideal on Bök’s part, but his observations aren’t necessarily incorrect. Constraints are not a guaranteed method of ‘fulfilling potential,’ which is why I find them so valuable for writing exercise: they avoid the pull of perfection that students in a lot of process-based pedagogies strive for.42

In the preface to Against Expression, Dworkin makes an observation about conceptual writing that might serve as a useful response to Bök’s concerns, differentiating, “the question remains not whether one of these works could have been done better, but whether it could possibly have been done differently at all,” a type of

42 I will address this in more detail in chapter 4.
revision of the modernist ‘make it new’ to a postmodernist ‘make it different,’ (or pataphyscial as if?) (xxxix). This revision seems to support a reading of the constraint as primary text, for it is, arguably, the mechanism that creates the conditions for difference. While many do see the constraint as a valuable text in itself, there are some differing options in the Oulipo.

As far as Oulipian guidelines for constraints, you’ll remember from the previous chapter that James distilled the types of constraints to the arbitrary and the traditional. Warren Motte has identified the inherent hierarchy in François Le Lionnais’ conception of formal constraint: 1) minimal—ruled by the basic constraints of the text’s language; 2) intermediate—guided by genre and convention; and 3) maximal—deliberately imposing artificial constraint (11). From this list, Motte concludes that the Oulipo is “unanimous” in its investment in the “maximal” constraint (11). However, the questions of how and what these constraints can produce have caused division in the Oulipian ranks. For example, Jaques Roubaud dubs Raymond Queneau’s approach to constraint “unicity,” meaning that a constraint may produce many texts and these texts can be disseminated, a type of “applied Oulipo” (91). Some argue that a constraint should only give “rise to one text only,” and finally, some have supported an “ultra” approach to constraint, which dictates, “the only admissible text, for the Oulipian method being the text that actually formulates the constraint, and in doing so, exhausts it” (91). I’m particularly interested in these relationships between constraint, the texts they produce, and how they are communicated. For example, the Against Expression anthology of conceptual writing prints the constraint in a paratextual paragraph prior to every excerpt. There is a rhetorical politics to this relationship that seems potentially fruitful for invention.
pedagogy. For the general purposes of thinking through these constraints in a pedagogical way and for consistency, I will adhere to James’ distinction I addressed in chapter 1, regarding the traditional and arbitrary in which traditional constraints are those conventionally familiar (e.g., rhyme scheme) and arbitrary constraints are either wholly unfamiliar (e.g. every work must have exactly 5 letters) or a familiar constraint taken to an unfamiliar intensity (e.g. you must use exactly 4 semicolons).

The physical role of constraint opens up questions of textual politics similar to the ideological biases the Oulipians discuss. For an example of a conceptual text’s relationship with its constraint, I’ll spend the next couple pages looking at how Bök’s *Eunoia* offers an interesting case of this relationship because the constraint is present as an explanatory paratext at the end of the book. Like the answers to problems in the back of a seventh grade Algebra textbook, “The New Ennui” sits in the back of *Eunoia* and waits to be discovered. Unlike the answers in a textbook, however, their existence is not overtly advertised elsewhere in the text. One does not get to the end of chapter “A” and find a helpful note: ‘Check your reading! Go to page 111 and see if your work matches the author’s.’ This is not to say that one is not compelled in other ways to jump ahead. “The New Ennui” is listed a space apart from the other chapters, in the contents. Also, Bök dedicates the text “for the new ennui in you,” which endorses an intimate connection, encouraging one to turn ahead to see what the “new ennui” has to say.

It’s also worth noting that the constraint not only gets included in Bök’s text, but also it gets a title and its own section. “The New Ennui” includes more than just an explanation of the textual constraints, offering up explanation for the cover art, the frontpiece, and background information on the poems and their inspiration. If conceptual
writing is, as Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology indicates, “against expression,” Bök does not take this characteristic too seriously, for “The New Ennui” discusses Bök’s personal writing experience and his personal acknowledgements. There is nothing about this constraint that opposes expression. One might read this as evidence of the exceptional component of the pataphyscial constraint. As Bök explains, “To explore the rule is to be emancipated from it by becoming the master of its potential for surprise, whereas to ignore the rule is to be imprisoned in it by becoming the slave to the reprise of intention” (*Pataphysics* 71 original emphasis). The univocalic words available to him for this text lent themselves well to discussion about the acts of writing. In a sense, the text was co-composing the unexpressive expression of Bök’s act of writing with its affordances.

Arguably, this information at the end of the text is essential to the reading experience of *Eunoia*. Unlike in my analogy of an Algebra textbook, these paragraphs at the end of the book are certainly not answers (approaching the text with an intention for a single answer would be to miss the opportunity) but are instead, part of the experience of reading, of the text calling attention to itself. Returning to Bök’s investment in Roubaud’s rule that a text written under constraints must mention the constraint demands a self-reflexive text (*Pataphysics* 71). It is this self-reflexivity I find interesting for Bök’s *Eunoia* because one of the constraints for his text seemingly attempts to fulfill this requirement: “All chapters must allude to the art of writing” (111). Every chapter, in fact, is not alone in his nuanced reading of expressive tendencies in conceptual writing. In *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff contends that conceptual approaches to writing cannot be entirely devoid of expression: “However unoriginal actual words and phrases are, this type of writing is always a product of choice, and hence of individual taste” (169).

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43 It’s worth noting that in light of the deliberate moves away from expressivist approaches to writing in the work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin, Bök
alludes to the art of writing, and all the chapters except “O” refer to the tensions created by avant-garde writing or writing under constraint. In “A” we have a “madcap vandal” running around, shirking convention, creating the “Awkward grammar” that “appalls a craftsman” (12). We are specifically told about the “law as harsh as a fatwa” that “bans all paragraphs that lack an A…” Similarly, “E” addresses the politics of constraint-based writing, depicting the composing rebel as a type of hero:

Relentless, the rebel peddles these theses, even when vexed peers deem the new precepts ‘mere dreck.’ The plebes resent newer verse:

nevertheless the rebel perseveres, never deterred, never dejected, heedless, even when hecklers heckle the vehement speeches. (32)

Whereas the indefinite article “A” leaves the identity of the “madcap vandal” open, this chapter puts Bök in the company of the “hecklers,” with the pronoun “we”: “we detest depthless pretenses. . .we prefer genteel speech, where sense redeems senselessness,” preventing him from playing the role of the rebel (32).

If “E” limits Bök’s agency “I,” puts Bök in the subject position, struggling against “dimwits” and “nitwits” (50). However, the first line “Writing is inhibiting,” undermines such a reading, by placing the gerund “writing,” itself, as a potential subject, drawing attention to the very agency of the text when left to the devices of its constraint. Thus, “I,” like a devoted work of constraint-based writing, calls into question the idea of authorship not just by leaving a text up to interpretation, but by pointing out that under

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44 Many argue that “I” chapter complicates the question of subjectivity. Sean Braune, for example, suggests that the chapter “questions whether or not the “I” as a signifier of subjectivity has ever been able to fulfill its intended purpose,” pointing out that “Bök ends the chapter by equating ‘I’ with nothingness” (144).
constraints a text can essentially write itself. Chapter “O,” as I pointed out, does not reference experimental writing tensions at all. Though the constraints do not dictate that it has to address a specific type of writing, I argue that because all of the other chapters address the tensions between traditional writing and experimental writing, the chapter offers evidence of 1) Bök’s ‘pataphysical “swerve” away from his own proclivities toward constraint-based writing, creating an exception to the text, or 2) “O” taking control of the text and denying Bök’s thematic bias, or 3) an alternate approach to critique, one that pokes fun at tradition: one could certainly attempt to read the writing section of “O” as mocking the reverence for traditional approaches to language, alluding to the Word as God and referencing established figureheads: “Profs from Oxford,” “Dons,” “Wordsworth” “Monks.” The conflation of worship and words in the chapter works as a heavy-handed mockery of stuffy, outdated approaches to literacy. The “U” seemingly turns the “E” rebel hero slightly to the left, giving us Ubu who “puns puns,” “blurs untruth” at “trustful schmucks” and “bluff[s] dumbstruck numbskulls (such chumps)” (77). This chapter, more than any other, draws attention to the instability and questionable ‘legitimacy’ of conceptual writing practices. Jarry’s King Ubu does not take himself seriously, and laughs at those who do. Thus, Eunoia’s readers are reminded that

45 Bök confesses that he experienced this textual agency overpowering his own, calling it “uncanny.”
46 Echoes of Lucretius’ clinaman.
47 In Sean Braune’s reading of the letter “N” as a cipher in Eunoia, he insists that the “word of God” in chapter “O” becomes the N that collapses the inchoate meaning of the chapter and solidifies it” (144). In other words, the force of mythology in the chapter compels a piousness that one could read as a tension between tradition and innovation.
48 In Exploits, Dr. Faustaroll has a companion, Bosse-de-Nage whose only response consists of two syllables: “ha ha.” This type of playful response that does not seem productive on a superficial level, yet, propels and motivates untold productivity is the type of provocation I hope to encourage by bringing into play Jarry’s work: “‘Ha ha,’ he said succinctly; and he did not lose himself in further considerations.”
there is a generosity with which one can approach constraint-based writing, both in the acts of composing and reading in order to take advantage of the text’s agency, because, as Bök notes, the text begins to reveal its influence over the act of writing.\textsuperscript{49}

**Constraints and Practice**

Often, the Oulipo proposes [its constraints] freely to other writers who are, one imagines, beached, blocked, brutalized by the false prophets of genius and inspiration. (Motte “Raymond Queneau” 203)

Bök’s lipogram is just one of countless approaches to constraint-based writing. The act of recontextualization can be a constraint, as in the case of Goldsmith’s *Fidget*\textsuperscript{50}, or the act of rearrangement, as in the case of Brion Gysin’s *First Cut Ups*\textsuperscript{51} or predetermined procedural rules, as in the case of Katie Degentesh’s “The Only Miracle’s I Know Are Simply Tricks That People Play on One Another.”\textsuperscript{52} Also, Darren Wershler’s *Tapeworm Foundry* is a sort of invention-machine, running through a perpetual (by nature of its unique conjunction “andor”) call for procedurally-driven (andor conceptual) constraint-based writing:

\[\ldots andor write poems on the backs of stolen bank deposit slips and then surreptitiously return them to the bank andor use a vcr to dub dub poets reading rub a dub dub three men in a tub and then dub this reading over the credits of all the movies that you rent andor turn it up to eleven andor \]

\textsuperscript{49} See note 45
\textsuperscript{50} *Fidget* meticulously documents every movement made by Goldsmith's body on Bloomsday (June 16) 1997 from 10 am to 11 pm.
\textsuperscript{51} A rearrangement of word clippings from newspapers.
\textsuperscript{52} A poem from the book *The Anger Scale* in which poem titles are taken from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and then are generated by running the Inventory’s questions through Google.
translate the Æneid into pig latin andor write poems using only words
found in the California registry of license plates . . . (Tapeworm)

There are myriad difference uses for these constraint-based writings in the classroom. They can be helpful for teaching invention, style, and arrangement, for example. Also, when we take seriously, that revision is literally “seeing again,” then all constraint-based writing, as processes of defamiliarization (as we’ll see in Chapter 3), are acts of revision. However, for the sake of pedagogical facility, it’s useful to note the individual forces of different types of constraints. For example, because a great deal of constraint-based writing starts with a source text, those constraints lend themselves particularly well for revision exercises.

One of the most famous examples of this, is the cut-up method: chopping up an already written text and rearranging the sections to rewrite the piece. Anagrams are also a source-text based constraint, which can work really well as a long-term project because students can repeatedly return to it and always-already defamiliarized. Because an anagram is potentially never “done,” students are always under the influence of its invitation. As opposed to a writing journal, which asks students to dive more consciously into their subjective experience with writing, a semester-long anagram project demands a constant return to and engagement with writing, not as a self-reflective act, but as a practice with writing, itself.

Students often have strong reactions to constraint-based writing. Some become intimidated, because they don’t think they are capable of such daunting tasks, others can become irritated because they do not see the immediate payoff for such seemingly silly exercises. It’s worth noting that examples can be incredibly useful as motivational
encouragement or as a challenge. Also, because there are so many examples of these
types of constraints, sometimes, the examples, themselves, serve as a generative
provocation to students to see the extreme potential of linguistic facility. One example I
often give students is Christian Bök’s anagrammatic response to Micah Lexier’s
provocation, (see figure 1). This example has prevents students from immediately giving
up, seeing that the task is not impossible, it just takes a type of skill set they are not often
asked to use. Another useful example of an anagrammatic constraint is the Canadian

(Figure 2.1: Lexier and Bök)

poet Gregory Betts’ *If Language*, which reworks a passage by Steve McCaffery, using
the same 525 letters to compose a poems 56 times. What’s interesting to note with a
source-text constraint, though, is that it is potentially finite: there is a theoretical point of
exhaustion.

Of course, based on logical probability, such conceptual anagrammatics should be
finite, statistically unsustainable exercises in composition. In fact, anagrams are often
discussed in terms of increasing difficulty as each version subsequently limits the options
for future compositions within the constraint. Betts suggests, too, that the audience for such exhaustive experiments is “very small” and “very specific” (121). But, Bök responds that such unsustainability can be a generative force, changing the very nature of possibility in its unwavering demand to consider alternatives. He describes Betts’s composition process in terms of creating a linguistic “multiverse” where finite letters have the possibility for nearly infinite parallel expansions, one of which he demonstrates in his own back cover endorsement of Betts’ book by using the same 525 letters Betts uses. By bringing these constraint-based exercises to the composition classroom, we continue this line of argument, placing defamiliarizing engagements with texts within pataphysical searches for exceptions, where constraints delimit but also encourage a continual making, or bringing-forth through provocation.

In addition to revision under constraint, the concept of rhetorical invention in constraint-based writing is interesting because many, as I’ve noted, suggest that the composition of the constraint, itself, is the act of invention, while a writer producing a work from a constraint is merely following orders. For example, one of Goldsmith’s invention-centered constraints asked his students to write graffiti. With the freedom to choose their content, location, and medium, his students’ projects demonstrate a wide range of approaches to the constraint: “Some chose to work almost invisibly, inscribing a section of Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own in micography53 using a ball point pen on the skin of a banana and placing it back.” Some wrote, “advertising slogans in red

53 While using the dictation function in Word to transcribe this quotation from Goldsmith’s book, the software heard “in my coffee” instead of “micrography,” thus performing a pataphysical imaginary solution, and resultantly, offering another possible constraint activity that uses the constraint of the computer software (in the tradition of Flarf) to reinterpret Goldsmith’s constraint of transcribing a piece of audio. This type of vigilance to the swerve of language is, I think, one of the most generative side-effect of defamiliarization: an awareness of the potential to shake one out of habit.
lipstick across washroom mirrors,” and some made, “their most secret data very public, hoisting enormous flags at the campus flag poles in the middle of the night emblazoned with their bank card pin numbers” (210). These acts of writing, within their context, reveal various types of affordances form the constraint of ‘performing’ graffiti. The context intensifies the idea of how one can write publicly.

While I will talk about specific constraint-based classroom writing practice in more detail in chapter 5, I wanted to highlight now the often disoriented reaction students can have when they first encounter a constraint-based assignment. Many are usually not very familiar with writing in a way that does not treat language solely as a conduit for meaning. This disruption in the familiar is similar to the constraints that cause someone to avoid the POLR. Asking students to become unfamiliar with their writing creates the opportunity for them to see other affordances. In the next chapter, I’ll address how an already established process and history of ‘becoming unfamiliar’ with texts can help to rethink ideas of practice in rhetoric and composition.
CHAPTER 3

DEFAMILIARIZATION

I believe rhetoric should be more than creating and communicating meaning. I believe it should be about undergoing an experience with language, about hearing its excesses, and about realizing the limits of literacy.

(Pender 121)

It was then that I invented the term 'defamiliarization' [ostranenie]. And—today I have reached the point where I can admit that I have made grammatical mistakes—I wrote one n. I should have written strannyj [strange, with two n's]. And so off it went with one n, and like a dog with a severed ear, runs about the world.

(Shklovsky On the Theory of Prose 73)

Despite their similar interest in the generation of meaning from the slightest phonemic difference (“cat” and “hat,” for example), no one, as far as I know, has mentioned the fact that “De Saussure” and “Dr. Seuss” are almost perfect anagrams.

(188 Dworkin Illegible 2003)

In 1922, Viktor Shklovsky, Russian writer and theorist, fell in love with writer Elsa Triolet while he was exiled in Berlin. He wrote to Triolet several times a day under a single constraint she requested: he could not write about his love for her. True to his promise, Shklovsky’s letters address various aspects of his life at the time, from his daily events in Germany to his opinions about art and politics (and even occasionally playing with the text, itself, for letter 19 is printed with large red X’s over the text). Never explicitly mentioning his deep affection for Triolet, the charming, heartbreaking, and often silly letters now comprise the novel, Zoo, or Letters Not about Love, and tell one of the most interesting unrequited love stories of the 20th century.
The fact that Shklovsky had to contend with his affection under such a constraint is appropriate considering his theory of defamiliarization,\textsuperscript{54} the condition of making \textit{visible} that which has become \textit{invisible} as a result of habit, or “automization” (5). Though Shklovsky focuses more on literary devices as a method for altering one’s relationship with a text, I am interested in interrogating the potential of arbitrary textual constraints for creating the conditions under which defamiliarization may occur. For example, in his 1971 introduction to \textit{Zoo}, Richard Sheldon identifies the generative nature of Triolet’s constraint, noting that the act of prohibiting “love” not only forced Shklovsky to experience (and manifest) his affection differently, but also it helped to renovate the epistolary novel, in general, offering another perspective of the genre in its ability to communicate the “highly personal” through the seemingly impersonal (xxx-xxxii).\textsuperscript{55}

Shklovsky first introduced the concept of defamiliarization in his essay “The Resurrection of the Word,” and he developed it further in “Art as Device.”\textsuperscript{56} Defamiliarization occurs when a reader is forced to see a text in a different way, and as a result, their experience of the text is altered. One of the payoffs of defamiliarization is that, like constraints, it encourages conditions for engaging with a text that are not intrinsically imagination-driven. In other words, if you simply ask someone to “Look at

\textsuperscript{54} From the Russian word “ostranenie,” which Shklovsky coined. I am citing the 1990 translation by Ben Sher who invents his own word “enstrangement” as a translation for ostranenie. There is a case to be made for using another option, “estrangement,” which some translators prefer because “defamiliarization” often gets lazily linked to “unfamiliar,” which has the tendency to lose the uncanny aspect of the condition, the ‘seeing again but differently’ component, whereas “estrangement” invokes more of a violent disorientation. Though I am interested in the distinction, for this purposes of this project, I am using “defamiliarization” throughout the dissertation for consistency because “defamiliarization” is the most frequently used in the sources I cite.

\textsuperscript{55} An echo of the pataphyscial imaginary solution as well as the affordance that was revealed by way of the constraint: he didn’t intend to revitalize the epistolary novel, but it was one of the affordances the constraint created the conditions for.

\textsuperscript{56} Again, Benjamin Sher’s translation here. “Device” is often translated as “technique” elsewhere, which is noteworthy for reasons that should become obvious throughout the rest of this chapter.
this differently,” the person will still be looking within limits of her own habits, experiences, motivations, and imagination. However, when one is forced to see a text otherwise through altered conditions, the shift in orientation that occurs can challenge what one takes for granted, preventing the myopia that comes from habit. Shklovsky goes as far to suggest that when we view something out of habit we are not actually seeing it at all: we render the text invisible.

Defamiliarization drastically changed the scope of literary theory; as Peter Steiner notes in his historical account of Shklovsky’s work, up to the end of the 19th century, traditional literary scholarship focused on what texts said, “[f]orm was relegated to a mere auxiliary mechanism necessary for expressing content, but completely dependent on it,” and Shklovsky’s formalism radically changed the attention paid to how a text could operate (47). This renewed focus on the how of language gets at the heart of an attention to, and facility with, language on its own terms, which, as I proposed in chapter 1, still has a great deal of potential for development in composition pedagogy. Again, if this sounds familiar to the ways in which affordances and constraints operate in design studies, you are not mistaken. Even though Shklovsky is famous for his literary formalism—and has to some extent gone ‘out of style’ in literary studies—his theory of defamiliarization gets taken up fairly often in design studies. For example, in “Making by Making Strange: Defamiliarization and the Design of Domestic Technologies,” design theorists Genevieve Bell, Mark Blythe, and Phoebe Sengers use the principles of defamiliarization as a method for investigating new possibilities for “domestic technologies,” (i.e., home appliances and goods). They claim, “[m]aking domestic life and technologies strange provides designers with the opportunity to actively reflect on,
rather than passively propagate, the existing politics and culture of home life and to
develop new alternatives for design” (150). In other words, they find ways to
defamiliarize the average experiences of domesticity in order to test other design
potentials. In terms of affordances and constraints, they are deliberately altering
constraints in order to discover new affordances. They adapted this method from Don
Norman, the man who in The Psychology of Everyday Things popularized Gibson’s
concept of affordances. According to Bell et al., Norman’s defamiliarization methods
have become “standard method in usability studies” (153). They are careful in their study
to recognize that they are aware that “[d]efamiliarization is explicitly not a scientific
method,” but rather, they adopt the principles introduced by Shklovsky to use
ethnography as a defamiliarizing force. Specifically, they use historical ethnography as
their method for experimenting with the various ways people from a previous era might
encounter elements of modern domesticity, like a refrigerator or a garbage disposal.

They cite C.S. Lewis’ novel That Hideous Strength as an example of this type of
defamiliarization. In the fantasy, Merlin—from Arthurian legend—is resurrected as a
guest of a mid-twentieth century academic. While he appreciates some of the comforts
and innovations the twentieth century affords, he is also struck by some of the
characteristics of modern domesticity that seem a little troubling. For example, even
though Merlin finds the bed “softer than sleep itself . . .when [he] rise[s] from it [he]
find[s] [he] must put on [his] own clothes with [his] own hands as if [he] were a peasant”
(151). So, by mapping Merlin’s own cultural familiarity onto the mid-twentieth century,
observers are reminded that modern people may have more, and improved, creature
comforts, but they also have a much different concept (and value) of privacy and
autonomy (for various social, economic, political, etc. reasons). Though Lewis’ story is pure fantasy, this inspired Bell et al., to consider ways in which other types of cultural juxtapositions could help to defamiliarize, and thus make them aware of values to consider (or challenge) in their designs. Actually, this method is reminiscent of pretty much any fish-out of water story, where someone from another place finds themselves in our world and through the defamiliarizing effects of their gaze, we are forced to question some of the most fundamental characteristics of our daily lives.57

With this explicit connection between design and defamiliarization, we can start to see now how defamiliarization, in a manner of speaking, introduced itself into this project. In fact, it’s been a case of defamiliarization refusing to be ignored. Because, as this chapter will show, the concept of defamiliarization has enough tendrils of influence in pataphysics and constraint-based design theory (and into a project of reestablishing the rhetorical concept of techne), that I couldn’t not talk about defamiliarization if I wanted to (thought, luckily, I did). This chapter will show how defamiliarization operates and in what ways constraints may act as agents of defamiliarization. Finally, I will show how the influence of defamiliarization (by way of Pender’s Heideggerian reading of techne) can help think through questions of and techne and instrumentality.

**Toward Generative Disruption**

Both the artist and the scientist endeavor to place the phenomenal world into some alternative formation that will facilitate a new seeing.

(Ramsay 31)

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57 Bronson Pinchot’s Balki Bartokomous from *Perfect Strangers*, Robin Williams’ Mork from Ork, in *Mork and Mindy*, Brendan Fraser’s Linkovich "Link" Chomovsky in *Encino Man* are some of the many familiar examples of this figure.
The terms Shklovsky uses to describe defamiliarization represent a seemingly static division between prosaic and poetic language: for him, prose is recognized, fossilized, economical, easy, correct, habitual, dead, unconscious, invisible, and algebraic, while poetry is visible, alive, conscious, distorted, laborious, foreign, and vibrant (13). Of these distinctions, the most significant is that of recognition. For Shklovsky, to recognize an object, is to take it for granted, to render it invisible, while to view or see a defamiliarized object is to experience it otherwise, to pay a different type of attention to it. Though he appears to reinforce a stark binary, it is important to avoid reducing poetry and prose into competing values of inherently good and bad. Instead, Shklovsky sees these two forces on a dynamic spectrum, one part of a pulsing network of language. In his terms, some words “fossilize” from repetition and new words and linguistic relationships take their place. “Words are dead” because they have become familiar and habitual, and this loss can be altered by “the poet,” who attempts to forge “living words” in order to start new lifecycles where these words can “live, fossilize and finally die” (“Resurrection” 41).

However, when words “die” they are not necessarily devoid of all potential force. Poetry (or poetic device), for Shklovsky, is recuperative in that it makes the viewer encounter a text without any of the conventions one accumulates through linguistic habit, so it alters one’s experience with the ordinary through the unexpected. Though, where Shklovsky’s defamiliarization was interested primarily in the effects of a text’s meaning (i.e., interpretation), the constraints I propose seek to defamiliarize a writer’s experience with the act of writing, in which the effects of the text might play only a small part.
There are countless methods and devices that can produce formalist
defamiliarization. Terry Eagleton gives an example of poetic language: “If you approach
me at the bus stop and murmur, ‘Thou still unravished bride of quietness,’ I am
instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary,” a style of language one does not
necessarily expect while waiting for transport. This play between the expected and
unexpected has the potential to shake one out an unconscious state (2). Shklovsky gives
an example from Hamsun’s *Hunger* in which the narrator uses poetic imagery and
metaphor to describe a woman’s breasts: “Two white miracles,” which, “showed through
her blouse” (10). In fact, Shklovsky makes a point to address the specific opportunities
for defamiliarization in relation to the erotic, noting metaphor’s potential to defamiliarize
innumerable everyday objects as genitals as well as innuendo’s potential to turn the most
average object or relationship into something intensely sexual.59

Shklovsky also gives an example from Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer,” in which the
author uses point of view to defamiliarize a scene by telling it from the perspective of a
horse, even after the horse dies (7). Though these examples do not necessarily sound
revolutionary to a contemporary audience—anyone with even a cursory experience with
modernist literature has encountered defamiliarization to some extent—these examples
do illustrate a rupture in the expected transmission of information. Also, it is important to
remember that the poetic, for Shklovsky, is always in flux, inevitably moving toward
“recognition,”60 and once it has become commonplace, it no longer serves to

58 From “Ode to a Grecian Urn”
59 E.g., the defamiliarizing force of a well-placed and timed “that’s what s/he said”
60 Remember, recognition is the act of something becoming so familiar it disappears—almost the
opposite of a constraint revealing an affordance (but I’m being loose here for the sake of making
connections).
defamiliarize. As such, the artist’s job is to perpetually find different ways to jolt the easily recognizable from the oppressive force of habit. Two examples from the late 20th century are Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’s *Blair Witch Project*, both of which defamiliarize one’s experience from the expected conventions of genre with form instead of meaning. However, defamiliarization should not be mistaken for merely doing something weird for the sake of weird; such an endeavor would not disrupt experience but merely fulfill an expectation; instead, defamiliarization makes the everyday reappear. As a way to think through this difference, consider this example: if you move to a new house, you aren’t experiencing defamiliarization, you’re experience a wholly different condition. However, if all of your furniture in your current house were moved two inches to the left, you would experience defamiliarization, a queer sense of difference.

This is why, pataphysically speaking, daily encounters with traditional constraints (such as traffic, schedules, etc.) do not necessarily produce imaginary solutions, but actual solutions. To be clear, for Jarry these are still exceptions—just ‘unexceptional exceptions’—and the potential is there, but because on the spectrum of defamiliarization, these run-of-the-mill constraints tend toward the habitual and familiar, they don’t have the same intensity as a defamiliarizing force as strictly unexpected constraints would likely have. Another way of thinking about this is in terms of poetic meter. Ababa rhyme scheme is certainly a constraint (a traditional constraint in James’ terms), and though it can be generative, it’s less likely to jar a writer out of habit than, say, the arbitrary

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61 As an example of this flux, anyone who is familiar with Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, in which the deceased Addie Bundren narrates part of the story, might not experience the defamiliarizing effects of Tolstoy’s horse with the same intensity. Artists and writers are continually in the process of playing with intensifications of defamiliarizing.
constraint “You can only use every third letter from the alphabet” because rhyme scheme is conventional; it isn’t as jarring. However, that doesn’t mean that it can’t defamiliarize, either.\textsuperscript{62} It’s just a question of scale.\textsuperscript{63}

Because Shklovsky observes that language is continuously moving in intensity between poetry and prose, between novelty and habit, it is the poet’s responsibility to create exceptional configurations that will defamiliarize at first, only to fossilize into the invisibility of habit (e.g., cliché, etc.). In short, poetry is an intensification of language, whose force is eventually exhausted by repetitive use. Shklovsky discusses the moment of defamiliarization as an origin, an experience of something for the first time (6). He offers another example from Tolstoy, pointing out that in order to tear an object away from its habitual “recognition,” the author defamiliarizes it by “not calling it by its name, but describing it as if seen for the first time; an event, as if it were happening for the first time” (6). In his diary, Tolstoy’s discusses the costs of being submerged in habit through a personal experience with habitualization:

As I was walking around dusting things off in my room, I came to the sofa. For the life of me, I couldn’t recall whether I had already dusted it off or not. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I felt that it was already impossible to remember it. If I had in fact dusted the sofa and forgotten that I have done so, (i.e., if I had acted unconsciously) then this is tantamount to not having done it at all. If someone had seen me doing this consciously, then it might have been possible to restore this in my mind. If on the other hand, no one had been observing me or observing me only

\textsuperscript{62} This is a similar relationship to James traditional and arbitrary constraints from Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{63} Again, it’s not accidental that there are similarities between defamiliarization and constraints. In fact, constraints might be considered as a type of material defamiliarization.
unconsciously, if the complex life of many people takes place entirely on
the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life has never been. (qtd in
Shklovsky 5)

As Tolstoy’s anecdote illustrates, left undisturbed, the perpetual state of habit slowly eats
away at every aspect of life. As a result, the commonplace is a site of irretrievable loss.
Again, one does not simply avoid this loss by doing something odd (e.g., “let’s rip up our
papers!”), such an event would merely be fulfilling an expectation of oddity. This
difference is where the arbitrary nature of constraints hold so much value. When even the
most minor arbitrary constraint like a word count, syllable, or letter restriction draws
attention away from unconscious writing habits, it creates the conditions of possibility for
students to write for the ‘first time.’ The sense of loss Tolstoy discusses introduces an
interesting question for composition pedagogy: if students write out of habit, in an
unconscious state of merely putting words on the page, have they actually written at all?
Though this question may appear to be a flippant appropriation or a silly metaphor, I
suggest it has some very powerful implications worth considering for pedagogical
practice. In *Techne, from Neoclassicism to Postmodernism: Understanding Writing as a
Useful, Teachable Art* Kelly Pender reestablishes an orientation to *techne* that appreciates
its varied (and often contradictory) definitions, especially regarding instrumentality. This
return to *techne* can help to look at how defamiliarization might operate in a classroom.

**Defamiliarization and Techne**

When we understand writing as a *techne*, we are understanding it
as a form of *poiesis*, that is, as a form of productive knowledge
that engages its user in a process of making.

(Pender 141)
What is potentiality for the Oulipians is tantamount to [defamiliarization] for the Russian Formalists, insofar as both concepts theorize the poesis of novelty in terms of an as if, in which to be [defamiliarized] is to pose imaginary solutions to problematic formalities

(Bök Pataphysics 74)

In his discussion of defamiliarization, Eagleton references Heidegger’s description of Vincent van Gogh’s “A Pair of Shoes” in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” suggesting, “when van Gogh shows us a pair of peasant shoes he estranges them, allowing their profoundly authentic shoeness to shine forth” (56). Eagleton also invokes Heidegger’s model of a knowable object, the hammer, when he discusses the mutable effects of our relationships with an object as a result of defamiliarization: “when the hammer breaks, when we cease to take it for granted, its familiarity is stripped from it and it yields up to us its authentic being. A broken hammer is more of a hammer than an unbroken one” (56). In these examples we see Heidegger’s version of an object making itself known by an arrest from habituated encounters (the first through an act of the artist, the second through an object’s constraint). Eagleton’s reading of Heidegger in relation to the Russian Formalists, like Shklovsky, is particularly generative when read alongside Kelly Pender’s recent work on techne. Though she never mentions Shklovsky, the Russian Formalists, or the actual term defamiliarization (or estrangement), I suggest Pender’s reading of techne is uniquely useful for thinking about the (re)application of texts that defamiliarization initiates (83).

64 Eagleton prefers the term ‘estrangement,’ though. See note #2 in this chapter.
65 “Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death” (Heidegger 14).
In *Techne*, Pender points out that some of the significant characteristics of *techne* are invisible forces that are taken for granted in the foundation of rhetoric and composition, such as the pedagogical principles of instrumentality commonly associated with CTR. In order to develop the concept of *techne* further and reestablish its relevance to the field, she places various definitions of the concept in relation to each other on two continua: epistemology and axiology (7). The act of parsing the concept of *techne* in this way reveals five composite definitions from which she can draw: “1. *Techne* as a “how-to” guide or handbook. 2. *Techne* as a rational ability to effect a useful result. 3. *Techne* as a means of inventing new social possibilities. 4. *Techne* as a means of producing resources. 5. *Techne* as a non-instrumental mode of bringing-forth” (16). Notice that #1 and #5 are not dissimilar to the reconsideration of CTR that I talked about in Chapter 1 in reference to Stein. *Techne* #1 represents the grammar-based textbook pedagogy many ascribe to CTR and *techne* #5 is a version of what resulted from Stein’s intensified attention to language by way of CTR. Because of my affinity for this relationship, I am most interested in these two composites of Pender’s. Though we see the evidence of *techne* #1 in CTR’s textbook boom, and it denotes one of the more popular understandings of *techne*, Pender (influenced by Heidegger’s emphatically non-instrumental take on *techne*) looks at the possibilities for *techne* #5. As I’ve alluded to already, Pender is quite right to reiterate that these two are not diametrically opposed.

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66 Pender is careful to note that though her reading is influenced by Heidegger we should not think of this fifth *techne* “exclusively as Heidegger’s” (35). However, I draw attention to his influence here especially considering Deleuze’s acknowledgement of Alfred Jarry as an “unrecognized precursor to Heidegger” (91). This gives us yet another potentially generative connection to the concept of defamiliarization. Deleuze writes that “Being shows itself in technology by the very fact that it withdraws from it: what defines the loss of Being is rather the forgetting of forgetting, the withdrawal of withdrawal. . .it is the culmination of metaphysics in technology that makes possible the overcoming of metaphysics, that is pataphysics” (93).
Rather, when we take the instrumentality referenced in techne #1 (formal textbook-based pedagogy) and push on it, we can begin to consider the potential for a different type of instrumentality that can be brought about from techne #5, a non-instrumental ‘bringing forth.’ In other words, with this techne #5, Pender complicates approaches to techne that limit the scope of writing to reproducible classroom exercises. I suggest that Pender’s take on non-instrumentality in this fifth version of techne accounts for a potential that cannot be reproduced, but can be practiced. The difference here is that reproducibility implies a predetermined outcome, while practice is the act of encountering language without a necessarily quantifiable result. Constraints present one opportunity for practicing this type of non-instrumental bringing forth.

Though many have already looked to techne to negotiate the questions of writing instruction, Pender’s project is noteworthy in that she proposes a serious reconsideration of the relationship between techne’s associations with the rational, controllable activity of the author. For Pender, the answer to the pedagogy question involves a “productive contradiction within techne, the one that explains why getting beyond the limits of rational control is not primarily a matter of getting rid of them” (137). This is why it is important to consider defamiliarization not (only) as the effects of doing something weird for the sake of weird but as the productive tensions that occur when the ‘weird’ and ‘expected’ contend with each other. Her view of techne demands an approach to writing as “way of doing something, of bringing something into being” instead of focusing on any one subject matter or content issue, and the potential benefits of approaching writing this way appear in flashes throughout a number of composition rhetoric texts (166).

67 Greg Ulmer, Jody Shipka, Victor Vitanza, etc.
At the core of Pender’s argument lies Heidegger’s distinction between art and equipment in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” and her attention to this difference leads to a number of provocative questions, such as “do our efforts to make language useful turn it into equipment whose value lies mainly in its usefulness?” (110). I don’t think the importance of such a question can be overstated, particularly under the contemporary university model where a student’s opportunities to experience language on its own terms (rather than in the service of a singular, measurable goal) are extremely limited. Pender further asks, “are we teaching processes of making instead of creating? . . .if so, are we making it more difficult for students to experience and appreciate the ability of language to ‘shine forth’ as something valuable in and of itself—or, worse, actually diminishing the ability of language to do that?” (110). Anyone who has tried to teach writing as writing and not only as a vehicle for content, has likely experienced some of the confusion it can cause with students who have been trained from grade school to produce writing in service of something else, usually an ideal product, often rooted in accuracy or in some other form of an ideal.

More specifically, when I say “writing as writing” I’m borrowing this from Pender’s characterization of how to teach writing that doesn’t reduce language to an instrument. Pender’s “teaching writing as writing” makes a case for “techne as knowledge that provides an opening through which the being of a work can come into appearance in the world”\(^68\) (35). For Pender, to treat language instrumentally is to render it invisible, not unlike Shklovsky’s habitualized language. In order to discourage this invisibility, she describes a writing instruction that does not privilege linearity or interpretation (such a relationship would only serve to encourage instrumentality).

\(^{68}\) An approach not dissimilar to Shklovsky’s interest in defamiliarization as making a text visible.
Instead, she’s interested in an approach to *techne* focuses on writing, itself, rather than writing for an express purpose. Following her generative provocation to “complicate our understanding of how one actually comes to experience writing as writing,” I suggest that constraint-based writing, as a type of defamiliarization, provides innumerable conditions for manufacturing the particular kind of attention necessary for the pedagogical goals Pender proposes (152). She is clear that she is not merely adopting Heidegger’s approach to *techne*, and I submit a similar declaimer. Rather, I’d like to show how the constraint-based writing I’ve been talking about here might be a useful way to think about the type of approach to instruction Pender gestures to through both the Russian Formalists and Jarry.

In terms of Pender’s project, I suggest that constraint-based writing is always an act of making. The process of “making” is not inherently better than “creating,” in fact, thinking about these acts as opposed misinterprets their complex relationship. As Pender points out, “they cannot be separated in such a way that would allow us to associate the former with instrumentally valuable writing and the latter with inherently valuable writing because one kind of writing is both the inherent possibility and the necessary condition of the other” (142). She reference’s Joseph Dunne’s concerns about the effects that reason has over the creative process and how these concerns get to the heart of the assumptions most make about creativity and inventiveness, and her “goal is to demonstrate why we can’t understand rational control as an impediment to creativity and inventiveness” (136). Using constraints as a way for texts to make visible their own potential opens an opportunity for the freedom to explore language on its own terms without the burden of being in service of one outcome.
For the purpose of offering a metaphor for the productive contradiction of *techne*, Pender invokes Jean Paulhan, the French literary critic (and I quote at length here because the full metaphor provides such obvious, and relevant ties to the conditions of constraint-based writing):

> The hand-rail that is erected at the edge of an abyss by a foresighted mayor could give a traveler the impression that his freedom is being infringed upon. The traveler is wrong, of course. All he would need to jump, if he really wants to, would be a little bit of energy. And in any case, the hand-rail allows him to get closer to the abyss, and to see every nook and cranny. Rhetoric is just the same. (85)

Pender uses the metaphor to show how rhetoric behaves in a space of productive contradiction between the rational and irrational; however, this also serves as an accurate illustration of how a limit can potentially produce a greater sense of freedom than the absence of a limit. Like the guardrail, arbitrary writing constraints are the conditions of possibility for allowing one to write, in Shklovsky’s terms, “for the first time.” In fact, when Shklovsky writes that the “algebrization,” or “habituation” of things is antithetical to art, it is the result of art’s potential to impart the experience of things as they are perceived and not as they are known (or “recognized”), to look at something for its *potential* to be otherwise (13).

**Indeterminacy and (Non)Instrumental Praxis: Some Recursive Connections**

The goals of a writing pedagogy that approach writing on its own terms, then, is to make texts strange\(^{69}\) to make forms difficult, to challenge the lengths and/or frequencies of perception. For Shklovsky, the act of defamiliarization is always the result

\(^{69}\) Note, not to necessarily make strange texts.
of artistic influence, it is “a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important” (11). However, whereas Shklovsky introduced poetic devices such as diction, metaphor, as the means by which defamiliarization occurs, I suggest the productive constraints that developed out of the pataphysical tradition of the exceptional present another means of defamiliarization that serve to wrench one away from habit in the very act of composing. What happens when we don’t have a preconceived intention for what a particular ‘usefulness’ will look like? If we take for granted that all “bringing forth” is an act of creating imaginary solutions?

Pender admits that “there are times . . . when we use language to accomplish predetermined, external goals, and our need to make it work efficiently toward those goals keeps us from noticing its materiality,” Pender she is quick to add, “there are also times when we don’t do that—times when we become too aware of how words sound and of how they look on the page to be satisfied by (or interested in) what we are trying to make them do or mean” (120). But I don’t think it can be overstated that we can never know which theories, pedagogies, and genres of rhetoric will make that experience happen at which times. The issue for instrumentality then becomes a case of practice all the way down. Pender clarifies, “[u]ltimately, then, this case for instrumentality isn’t a case for instrumentality at all. It’s a case for indeterminacy—a case for recognizing the indeterminacy in all language that makes the question about value nearly impossible to answer” (121). This is where I return again to constraints.

Though as Pender suggests, an approach to writing pedagogy that appreciates a non-instrumental mode of bringing forth is also not non-instrumental, either. Rather, this case for indeterminacy that Pender makes introduces a type of movement toward
potential instrumentality, or more specifically, the conditions in which instrumentality may or may not be realized. Though I keep saying that constraints can make this happen, I should clarify that the indeterminacy applies to the constraint-based practice, as well. Just as a player at football practice never knows if, when, or how running drills will help him to do what he needs to during a game, students practicing with constraints may never know if, when, or how their experiences will influence their future writing performance. Even more to the point, and returning again to the constraints and affordances of chapter 1, the football player may never know that those hundreds of hours at practice were the conditions that allowed for him to have the muscle memory and reflexes to successfully catch his young son falling off a swing-set in the nick of time 10 years later. The residual effects of practice can never be fully known. What kind of affordances do constraint-based writing practice develop in students? They don’t know until they encounter the constraint, and even then they may never know. Knowing (i.e., the instrumentality, the precise outcome) is not the point.71

I don’t think the connections brought about here are inconsequential. In terms of Pender’s techne, aren’t constraints a type of ‘bringing forth”? And are they not instrumental, in that one can never guarantee or know in advance what a constraint will produce, but are they not a type practice, a non-instrumental way of engagement that

70 I’ll return to this again in the next chapter with Debra Hawhee and kairos
71 This is where one might be thinking, ‘Well, it’s the point when I have to identify course objectives,’ or ‘It’s the point when I have to offer assessment,” or “It’s the point when students ask when they ‘will ever use this.’” These largely institutional concerns certainly can’t be ignored, nor do they have to be. In a way, this is one of the payoffs of Pender’s techne #5: she opens up a way of talking about instrumentality that values practice on it’s own terms. Moreover, a number of post-process pedagogies talk about pedagogy in terms of essences or feelings. They describe an aura of what a class would be like. The payoff for constraint-based practice is that it offers a communicable mode of engagement, one that could even be taught to other teachers. Additionally, the freedom of these exercises to use daily or strategically also makes it easier to identify potential functions of instrumentality.
creates the possibilities for potential instrumentality? In other words constraints are not an immediately transferable skill; however, the act of practicing writing under constraints can be a type of instrumentality, in that one develops a set of abilities through the acts of practice. We see this type of productive indeterminacy in examples of so-called ‘experimental’ writing in cases like Stein, and the Oulipians, of which Jarry is a progenitor. Though I want to avoid being too glib with my connections here, but is Pender’s non-instrumental recuperation of techne not a pataphyscial solution for rhetoric and composition pedagogy? Again, I’m not concerned with definition or ownership, or any sort of claim-staking here. Rather, I’d merely like to gesture to the persistent pulses as they continue to pop up. The next chapter will start to look more closely at how constraint-based practice might look in a composition classroom.
‘knowing when’ is difficult to gauge, let alone teach, and it must be achieved through practice.

(Hawhee 85)

In his 2013 article in *Rhetoric Review*, Matthew J. Nunes traces the roots of the 5-paragraph essay—one of the most emblematic forms of CTR pedagogy—back to the ancient *progymnasmata*. Most people take for granted that the five-paragraph essay was a product of current-traditionalism, but as Nunes points out, it has “deep historical roots,” and one of the main reasons it has endured, despite CTR’s outmoded status, is that regardless of it’s theoretical unpopularity, the form continues to serve a purpose (309). He suggests “[o]ur assumptions have led us to overlook the fact that some of the “traditional” aspects of current-traditional might actually have a long history” (311). In her 2016 article in *Pedagogy*, Elizabeth Kalbfleisch echoes Nunes when she argues that because much of our field developed “on critiques of, and opposition to, current-traditional rhetoric,” the value of classical techniques have gone unrecognized (39). She goes on to note the appropriate timeliness of revisiting classical pedagogy at this moment in our field’s development because “[. . .] with current-traditional practices well problematized, there is perhaps space to reach back into the legacy of rhetorical pedagogy to see what it still offers us in a post-current-traditional era” (39).

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72 Though obviously not mentioned, I think this also speaks to the viability of Pender’s project with *techne*. 73
Like all of the forms and practices associated with CTR, the five-paragraph essay garners a great deal of criticism (while still seeming to maintain a prolific presence in American writing pedagogy). Among the five-paragraph essay’s detractors include Kimberly Wesley who says the form, “squelches complex ideas that do not fit neatly into three boxes” (58-59). Jeanetta Miller claims that it merely serves to relieve “anxious students” of “responsibility to make decisions about form and organization” (99). Michelle Tremmel says the five-paragraph essay “precludes meaningful thinking and organizing,” (34) and Lil Brannon has gone as far as characterizing the five-paragraph format as “indoctrination” (19). These critiques of the essay form also implicitly critique the instrumentality or techne they represent (i.e., Pender’s techne #1 from the previous chapter). Wesley, Miller, Tremmel, and Brannon all are operating under the assumption that formal restriction and limited choices necessarily preclude various complexities of thinking, and the past three chapters here have addressed ways in which we can complicate such assumptions. There are some people, of course, who find merit in the five-paragraph essay. Robert Perrin, for example insists that the essay template “has been misrepresented and maligned, sadly and sorely abused,” and it “is a more flexible format than its critics like to pretend” (312-13). What the critics fail to see is that this particular style is merely a constraint, and like all constraints, it is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad.’ It presents a way of encountering a text. Like all the other constraints I’ve been talking about thus far, it asks students to make particular choices at particular times. I suggest the problem—if there is one—isn’t with the form itself, but the ways in which the form is
taken up. For example, why not a five-paragraph essay that has to include a name of a color in every sentence? A five-paragraph essay in which each sentence is a chiasmus? How about a five-paragraph essay written from the perspective of the paper the student is composing on? Or, a five-paragraph essay compiled only from advertising slogans? Or, even a five-paragraph essay only written in the form of rebuttals? As I mentioned, the issue is not with the form, but rather the burden of expectation that gets imbued into the form. When we ask students to reproduce a genre, the focal point becomes the genre and not the act of writing itself. Over time, shortcuts, hacks, tips, etc. develop and the style becomes worn out and taken for granted. This phenomenon does not just happen with students and essays. You won’t have to hunt for long to find an example of someone taking a genre for granted. Movies have even been made with the express purpose of poking fun at the taken-for-granted-ness of genres.73 Once people start making assumptions then it, in Shklovsky’s terms, fossilizes and becomes invisible. However, a genre can be revitalized through defamiliarization.

To be clear, I’m not making a case for or against the five-paragraph essay. I’m more interested in Nunes’ project of connecting a popular CTR form to the progymnasmata. It makes sense that a classical curriculum that effectively trained students in rhetorical practices for hundreds of years seems worthy of reconsideration for use in today’s instruction, not because it’s old, but because evidence of its influence still endures. There is a need for practice, for a method to hold on to in even the most unusual classrooms. This is why I think doubling down on rules has the potential to be more productive than something like a traditionally expressive-based pedagogy. The situated

73 *Scary Movie*, for example. In fact, one could ask students to write under the constraint of a *Scary Movie*-style parody of a five-paragraph essay. What characteristics would one highlight in such a parody?
practice of the *progymnasmata*, primarily the ability to respond to the forces of persuasion inherent in linguistic style, certainly have a place in current education, even in regard to writing instruction that extends beyond the first year level. The inclination for Nunes (and others) to return to the exercises is not unwarranted, and it does some interesting things for us in revealing the connection to CTR. For example, Nunes situates the five-paragraph essay’s connection to the *progymnasmata* where Donald Clark pinpoints the end of the explicit influence of the exercises: at the end of the seventeenth century, coinciding with the end of Ramist rhetorical approaches. He notes that though the form of writing practice that developed from the *progymnasmata* exercises in the sixteenth-century English grammar school is “not identical to today’s five-paragraph theme, some similarities are nevertheless present” (308). He further observes that “[w]hat is most important is that the five-paragraph essay has its roots in theme-writing which not only has a long history before the current-traditional period but was used for many of the same purposes for which the five paragraph essay is used today” (308-309). Though it is no secret that CTR developed out of a new-classicist approach to writing pedagogy in the American academy, Nunes’ explicit tracing of CTR to the *progymnasmata* is useful not only for purposes of recovery, but also because it can help us to reframe the ways in we view CTR’s function in rhetoric as well as formal practice, in general.

Though their projects are very different, what Nunes is doing here is not unrelated to Pender’s return to *techne*. It’s not simply an appropriation, or full-scale transplant of the ancient concept, but rather an interrogation into the potential it holds for contemporary (what Pender calls “postmodern” uses). In fact, as I addressed in the previous chapter, we would do well to consider what a *progymnasmata* informed by
Pender’s 5th techne (i.e., the non-instrumental bringing forth) would look like. With an interest in practice, we can reconsider the *progymnasmata* as a starting point for a contemporary version of practice. In the recurring situated practice of the *progymnasmata*, I see the pataphysical value of useful play (i.e., playful utility, or non-instrumental bringing forth), a sense of Pender’s call for teaching writing as writing instead of in service of one specific outcome.

I suggest that a reinvention of the *progymnasmata*, one that emphasizes the playful utility of their situated practice and the generative potential to reveal affordances that comes from contending with constraints, can successfully respond to a number of pedagogical concerns still left unanswered in discussions about process and post-process pedagogy. Though some scholars have already proposed a revitalization of the *progymnasmata*—or at least a version of the practice that the exercises represent—these new approaches still often start from the place of authorial inspiration rather than with the text, itself. This chapter looks at what the *progymnasmata* were, what they are now, and what they could potentially be. With this in mind, I examine the opportunities for instruction that some are now attempting to recover. Because this project identifies a specific need that has a potentially infinite number of solutions, my goal is not necessarily to dismiss or replace any established pedagogies, but instead, to add to or fruitfully complicate that which already exists.

**A Brief History of the Progymnasmata**

The *progymnasmata* were rhetorical exercises divided into fourteen discrete sections, and they focused on repetitive practice in specific genres such as fable,
narration, anecdote, maxim, comparison, description, and thesis, to name a few. \textsuperscript{74} The term “progymnasmata” first appeared in the 4th century in Chapter 28 of the rhetorical handbook known as Rhetoric for Alexander (Kennedy xi). The author of this first known handbook says, “if students understand the forms and styles of composition as practices in the progymnasmata, they will have a plentiful supply of material for writing and speaking” (xi). Pedagogically speaking, they occupied “that vital middle ground between a young child’s grammatical work and the older student’s themes and declamations” (Fleming 109). The exercises were usually written first and then read to the teacher or class (x). Crowley and Hawhee note that the popularity of the exercises was even evident in Aristotle’s teaching: there is an indication he used the progymnasmata exercise “thesis” to train his students (31). They also note that there is evidence of progymnasmata-influenced “thesis” training up to the sixteenth century in Europe (a fact which I already mentioned that Nunes observes and uses develop in his connection of the five-paragraph essay to the progymnasmata).

Because students were required to train in the progymnasmata before they could progress to more intensive rhetorical instruction, the exercises were designed, as I’ve noted, to provide students with the necessary experience to respond appropriately to the

\textsuperscript{74} Unless otherwise cited, all general information about progymnasmata in this chapter comes from Kennedy’s Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric and Writings from the Greco-Roman World. Though there are four fairly well-circulated versions of classical progymnasmata (Aelius Theon’s, Hermogene’s, Aphthonius’, and Nicolaus the Sophist’s), and it is widely accepted that Theon’s was the first. When I talk about progymnasmata I primarily invoke Aphthonius’ because his provides examples, which encouraged the imitation I address in this paper. Also, Kennedy documents that his was the most popular version used in schools up through the seventeenth century. I use progymnasmata as a sort of place-marker in this paper, not only to invoke the actual preliminary exercises, but also that which is holding the place for the possibilities of reinterpretation an application available to teachers of reading and writing. Generally speaking, the recursive, formal, situated nature of these exercises is what I find valuable.
idiosyncratic nature of any situation they would encounter in their advanced study and after. However, the nature of and goals for these responses have been interpreted and taken up in different ways. Crowley and Hawhee indicate that the exercises were “popular for so long because they are carefully sequenced: they begin with simple paraphrases . . . and end with sophisticated exercises in deliberative and forensic rhetoric” (32). In this way they enforced a strictly linear development of skill, one in which each exercise following the last revisits a previous skill and then builds on another task. This basic move of review and building on the previous lesson is still one of the basic principles of pedagogical practice used today.

David Fleming is one of a relatively small group in rhetoric and composition who argues for a return to the *progymnasmata*; he believes the exercises offer a more suitable alternative to any of the writing pedagogies subscribed under, or derived from, the product/process dichotomy (106). For example, when Fleming reviews Isocrates’ three elements of education (i.e., the student supplies ability, the teacher supplies the art, and the two together engage in the practical application), he observes that it is the third category, the one that deals with the collaborative practices between teacher and student, that rhetorical pedagogy has slowly lost sight of (188). In “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” he specifically addresses how inattentiveness to this category created a large gap between what he sees to be the extremities of both first year writing and heavily theoretical study in rhetoric at the graduate and professional level (181). Fleming sees this pedagogical triad is a useful paradigm to help rhetoric scholars hook into something that has been difficult for us to articulate: the complications of balancing theory and fundamental practice in the classroom, especially in collaboration with instructors. He is
particularly interested in the value of practice ("Progymnasmata" 108). He deems practice, though it “has lost its primacy in educational theory,” to be the “single most important way in which students acquire rhetorical abilities” (108). In Chapter 5 I’ll address the role of the teacher in constraint-based practice and how it can be really useful for a sense of collaboration, because you can all work on a constraint together at the same time.

These exercises are a structured system, but one that, depending on how one implements them, allows for affordances to be discovered. Fleming’s goal to reclaim practice here is a variation on a theme of the same concerns that Nunes and Kalbfleisch make regarding a return to classical pedagogy. It also echoes Pender’s desire to address theory and practice. The more popular opinion, however, sees these exercises as outdated relics that reinforce antiquated pedagogical goals, not unlike the well-known critiques of CTR: they are too formulaic and restrictive. H. I. Marrou, for example, has called the exercises "excessively meticulous, legalistic,” (241). James J. Murphy refers to them a “grueling sequence of sometimes petty and dull exercises” (68). As I’ve noted, however, the very purpose of the progymnasmata was to develop a type of dexterity, to prepare students for various situations they will encounter, like making decisions, and responding appropriately in discussions. Quintilian writes of the progymnasmata that “[t]hese are, in a sense, weapons always to be kept ready, to be used as the occasion demands,” so it is important to note that these were not exercises to be memorized and applied directly, a prefabricated response to a universal situation, but rather a mode of practice that added tools to one’s rhetorical tool belt (II, 1.12).
The structure and sequence were, arguably, the conditions that allowed for a type of gymnastics of the mind, intended to hone one’s ability to respond not only to the expected, or probable conditions of a situation, but more importantly, to be dexterous enough to attend to the unexpected just as effectively. While linguistic dexterity and the ability to respond appropriately on demand were some of the outcomes of progymnasmata-based instruction, what is most valuable about these exercises is that they cultivated a particular type of facility (not just dexterity) that only comes from experience. In this sense, the most valuable aspect of these exercises was the practice, the act of doing them.

Though not everyone may be interested in the progymnasmata for the same reasons, there are a number of people who join Fleming with an interest in revitalizing this classical rhetoric pedagogy. However, in this group there are a fairly wide variety of understandings of what the exercises were and what they did. The act of adapting something inherently personalizes it, and so we are now seeing versions of the exercises that are caricatures of the original, having different traits enhanced, or distorted to fit each group’s needs.

Contemporary Appearances of Progymnasmata

In “Progymnasmata, Then and Now” Christy Desmet notes, “philosophies of alternative literacy education that featured the progymnasmata began appearing in manifestos and curricula in the 1990s” (185). Citing groups like “earnest parents” “home-school discussion groups” “parochial schools” “online for-profit courses aimed at the Christian and home-school population,” she identifies communities of educators invested in adapting the progymnasmata for elementary and high school education (185). In her
investigation as to why and how these ancient exercises gained popularity in education outside the university setting, she discovered a pamphlet titled “Classical Education and the Homeschool” that justifies the adoption of the progymnasmata for reasons involving the “perceived harmony between classical methods of reasoning and Biblical hermeneutics” (186). The rhetorical tradition’s investment in character as a type of proof lends itself well to groups who want to coopt an idea of ethics in service of contemporary narratives about morality. For example, the Institute for Excellence in Writing is an organization that sells materials primarily to homeschooling teachers and parents, and one of their writing textbooks, Adam Muller’s Classical Rhetoric through Structure and Style: Writing Lessons Based on the Progymnasmata, is a direct adoption of the progymnasmata, including exercises for nine of the fourteen classical categories. The introduction of the book notes, “We would be remiss to exclude the Bible from these texts. It would be an absolute injustice to ignore the literary contributions of the Bible . . .” (5). In fact Desmet observes that there seems to be a move to use the classical methods as a “corrective to narrow fundamentalism in Christian Education” (186). In another example, the Classical School of Wichita has also published their own progymnasmata workbook titled Writing the Classical Way by Eileen Cunningham and Amy Alexander. The school’s stated purpose is to “help your children reach their God-given potential” through the classical model of education. On their website they provide a comparison of modern and classical pedagogy, explaining that modern education “assumes all students are exactly the same and each student will perform in the same manner” and classical education “places its trust in a true, good and beautiful Creator who willingly sacrificed
himself for our sins. Classical education embraces an educational curriculum that students verify with their life’s calling” (Classical School).

Furthermore, there is also an inherent (overt in some cases) motivation in other groups to reclaim a particular type of tradition, one that returns to a, “Great Books approach to reading,” and there is a general affinity for ‘Tradition’ in some cases, where an organization’s curriculum “aims to cultivate a sense of Western tradition” (Desmet 186). The draw for these groups seems to be the overwhelming sense of patriotic legacy and custom (i.e., ‘getting back to basics’), as well as the ethical and moral component of the lessons that often gets highlighted. For example, Muller caution’s students that “[w]ith your newly discovered capacity for persuasion . . .comes a new responsibility. Remember to always persuade your audience—whether it is a friend, sibling or stranger—toward the good. This is one of the noblest functions of language” (5).

Around the same time the progymnasmata were becoming popular in these alternative-pedagogy spaces, they were also garnering a renewed attention in college composition texts. Desmet credits the wide-reaching publication of Kennedy’s translations of the progymnasmata as a major influence. Unlike the alternative pedagogy circles, these texts have a tendency to focus less on morals and more on practice. Several scholars have created textbooks for college rhetoric and composition classes based on ancient rhetoric pedagogy. For example, Frank D’Angelo’s Composition in the Classical Tradition claims that a strong rhetor is one who is aware of their civic responsibility and can act appropriately in their role as a citizen. He values the progymnasmata exercises for their ability to “help speakers and writers develop the rhetorical skills needed for participation in a civil society” (2). He goes on to say that to cultivate rhetorical skills is
to enable speakers and writers to speak and write about public issues and to develop an ethical framework for being responsible citizens (2). While Pender agrees that there are possibilities for positive ethical and political change that reside within language, she observes that we can never anticipate how or within which types of writing such changes will (or can) be realized or experienced. As she concludes, [w]riting is much too contradictory for such knowledge” (113). So, one of the valuable components of the progymnasmata is the fact that they are situated, this characteristic allows for a lot of freedom with practice, and in this practice, students can experience these contradictions.

Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee’s Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students approaches the progymnasmata from a more historically-situated perspective and maintain the belief that “lots of patterned practice at composing can further enliven rhetorical habits of mind” (xiv). Because the main guiding principle of their textbook is kairos, the significance of time and place to a rhetorical situation, Crowley and Hawhee make sure to emphasize the contingent nature of progymnasmata practice, and they provide extensive opportunities for a type of open-ended practice at the end each chapter designed to emphasize the “elasticity of language and formats . . . present[ing] opportunities for focused practice while allowing developing rhetors to explore rhetorical possibilities” (33). Although they present their book as a method of rhetorical composition practice, they express a hope that it will offer a synthesis of rhetorical history and instruction, as well, so the work they introduce is not just about completing exercises but in understanding the context and history of the instructional methods (xv). To this end, they specifically address in the preface that too often modern classrooms treat such activities and exercises as “busy work,” something to fill time between “real”
assignments. This is a nod to another aspect I appreciate about a constraint-based *progymnasmata*. When you are not teaching in service of an ideal form, all practice is worthwhile.

Again, this is similar to the critiques of CTR pedagogy, like the five-paragraph essay. The pedagogical emphasis in antiquity was on constant activity, engagement, and practice, and Crowley and Hawhee point out that this value of practice is very much like the immersion technique of foreign language pedagogy, wherein students only speak and hear the language being learned (xv). A practice-oriented textbook like Crowley and Hawhee’s, then, emphasizes writing as a tool of exploration rather than simply a way of recording what students have gathered from their reading. For example, in the preface, Crowley and Hawhee acknowledge their own rhetorical situation and draw attention to the appropriate style choices they make, thus modeling the kind of engagement they hope to teach (xii). In doing so, they highlight the potential freedom the exercises have:

The *progymnasmata* may look and feel artificial or formulaic to contemporary writers. However, the directions for amplification that accompany some of them are meant to be freely interpreted; for example not every encomium must have the same number of parts, and the parts need not always appear in the same order. This freedom of interpretation and arrangement is what distinguishes classical exercises from the prescriptive formulas laid down in modern school rhetoric. *Practice in these exercises should be neither formulaic or dull.* (33, emphasis mine).

Crowley and Hawhee go on to encourage the students reading their textbook to approach each exercise with “the spirit of play” (33). This call to engage with the assignment with
a playful spirit along with the recognition that “freedom of interpretation and arrangement” is one way of making constraints and restrictive formalism cites of invention.

The sort of action and practice that Crowley and Hawhee talk about in their textbook is the foundation of classical pedagogy, and thinking in terms of action can offer a way to understand why practice alone is a viable pedagogical method. They are not alone with this observation. James J. Murphy notes that Roman rhetorical education “aimed at practical ability rather than mere knowledge” (A Short History 41). However, Murphy’s next sentence offers an opportunity for parsing out a more subtle difference: “This ability was to be ‘in’ the person, not in his books.” This follow-up sentence successfully highlights one of the small, yet significant, differences I want to discern between these successful contemporary returns to progymnasmata that he, and Crowley and Hawhee offer and the version I am teasing out. A constraint-based progymnasmata moves away from an idea of student agency as the primary diving force of practice. Rather, practice is a situated action that, as I introduced in chapter 1, is acting in response to constraints that shake students out of the POLR Ward has diagnosed. This is achieved by action that, yes, is on the part of the students but is necessarily in relation to the force of constraints.

Drawing from the classical understanding that physical training and discourse were intricately tied together, Hawhee identifies a type of memorization that takes place when one engages in practice. This memorization is not an act of consciously recalling; rather, metis, a type of body memory, is like kairos in that it is a departure from rationality, “not limited to a seat of reason or conscious adherence to a set of precepts”
(Bodily 70 my emphasis). She explains the type of trained, unconscious responses, which the body enacts are similar to rhetorical moments of kairos when “complete creative control or sheer accommodation is rendered impossible” (70 emphasis mine). Like physical training, the progymnasmata develop a student’s ability to respond appropriately when needed, selecting amid a myriad of alternatives. Such a method teaches discernment and judgment when choosing the bases for action; however, it is important to note that this presents a more complex system of reasoning than consciously asking oneself “is this good or bad, right or wrong?” While their version of the progymnasmata is historically grounded and more conscious of the fluidity of language, and while I really appreciate this approach, and have used the book successful in my own teaching, these methods still privilege a conscious, rational, subject who can make produce desired outcomes through deliberate choices. Its ultimate goals of providing a desired outcome are still akin to the instrumental techne (#I) Pender identifies (23).

However, it’s worth noting that this practice-centric orientation to the exercises is often still at odds with the other way of seeing them that highlights the ethical component of the ancient tradition. For example, Fleming’s most recent article on the progymnasmata seeks to read them more “Quintilianistically,” because most of the contemporary adoptions of the exercises focus on the classroom practice, and “if unattached to any larger educational project, can promote a fetishizing of exercise at the expense of moral character and civic purpose” (125). Quintilian must be brought back to the exercises, according to Fleming, because he “embeds that assignment sequence in a comprehensive philosophy of education—literary, moral, and civic” (125). While I appreciate Fleming’s goals, I think that he is a little off base with his diagnosis of the
problem. His aversion to ‘fetishizing’ exercise is reminiscent of the 5-paragraph essay detractors. The very reason that the *progymnasmata* seem to be gaining in popularity is that they allow for repeated practice.

**A Different CTR**

The five-paragraph essay is just one of many constraints we inherit from classical pedagogy, and not unlike the slideware that Gries and Brooke cite, or the arbitrary Oulipian constraints, it presents an opportunity to do otherwise, to encounter a text again from the first time (i.e., to re-see, to be defamiliarized). The utility of this encounter is in the encounter itself. As the connections of some of the most fundamental formal practices of CTR that were carried over from the ancient pedagogies show us, forms, by nature of their formality allow for new affordances with each engagement.

As I addressed in Chapter 2, the excuse of utility, for Jarry, is a narrative that paralyzes engagement with possibility, but the solution is not to denounce utility. Just as pataphysics is not in opposition to seriousness (i.e., it is the very seriousness of science that, when intensified, inevitably becomes ludicrous), play is not in opposition to utility. What happens when we thinking about the utility of formal exercises differently? In chapter 1 I addressed how this difference looked for Gertrude Stein. Many have offered that, regarding style, the classical approach makes more sense and is more effective with students because the *progymnasmata* is a way to teach an approach to style that takes the rhetorical situation in account, rather than replying on individual expression to communicate effectively.

This is not to say that expressivist approaches to writing pedagogy cannot be useful tools for teaching style. In fact, following Jeffrey Walker’s reading of the complex
relationship between rhetoric and poetics presents an opportunity to reorient our understanding of the rhetorical force of poetics. In other words, it should not be surprising that a contemporary version of the *progymnasmata* might resemble something like ‘poetry,’ a type of (to borrow from Goldsmith) “uncreative” poetry. Additionally, you’ll notice that it is “poetic” language that Shklovsky talks about in terms of defamiliarization. So, I want to be clear that constraints aren’t the only means by which we can experience defamiliarization. However, what I’ve been addressing here is not necessarily a poetry pedagogy—though a great deal of what students may write in constraint-based *progymnasmata* may, in fact, look more like what some consider poetry. The point is to avoid the impulse identifying the product of practice as either poetry or prose: it’s a remainder of practice. Just like running up stairs doesn’t look like a soccer match, doesn’t mean that it is not (one of) the conditions that develop the skills for one to successfully participate in a soccer match. That’s also not to say that I’m making a claim one way or another about the place for poetry in the composition classroom. There are a number of textbooks out there that include poetry as a text for rhetoric and composition. Instead, though, for this project I’m focusing on the defamiliarizing effects of constraints because they translate so well into a *progymnasmata* format, regardless of what the writing that comes from the practice looks like. Also, constraints (and their affordances) fit productively into a networked conversation among the various tendrils of pataphysical imaginary solutions that I’ve attempted to tease out here. Finally, constraints are more friendly to contemporary rhetoric and composition classrooms that often have a student population with a wide range of experience with language. When writing with

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75 He is, of course, not the only one to make this distinction. Crowley and Hawhee point this out in their textbook, etc.
constraints, we get to teach Pender’s writing as writing, which in turn allows everyone in the class, including the instructor, to approach a piece of writing as if for the first time.

There are plenty of arguments for the agency of language in writing and pedagogy. However, as Pender points out, “rather than relying on Heidegger, these critiques called on post-structuralist and postmodernist theorists to explain what is at risk when writing is brought forth as an instrument” (78). I think these arguments have been and continue to be useful for thinking through various approaches to rhetoric and composition pedagogy. However, in their arguments against instrumentality, they often overlook or balk at any notion of classroom practice. I appreciate that talking about ways in which non-instrumentality can influence ‘instrumental’ practice in a classroom, but the fact of the matter is that classes occur in space and time and teachers have to do something in those classes. So rather than talking about the general aura that a classroom might have, I’m taking seriously the fact that there are various and specific practices that have the ability to create the conditions these theories talk about. As anyone who has taught (or even attended) a pedagogy seminar will attest, teachers (especially new teachers) do well when they have tangible methods with which to experiment. In other words, merely theorizing about classroom practice often does little to change what occurs in a classroom. We would do well to look at how the constraints of practice by the sheer act of the practice, itself create affordances.

**Moving Toward Praxis**

Ultimately, what I have been addressing in this chapter is that the persistent desire to chase after measurable and quantifiable instrumentality in the classroom in many ways undermines the very principles of what practice does. We see calls for this echoing
throughout conversations about American education. Recently Andi, one of my friends who homeschools her children, asked for people to share the things they wished they’d been taught in high school and things they were forced to learn that they have never used. The answers she received pretty much matched the worn-out commonplaces one would expect, such as, “I wish someone had taught me to balance a checkbook!” “Teach them about credit cards,” “Every student who graduates from high school should know how to change the tires and oil in their car,” “I have never once in my life used Calculus—pointless” “Now that we have smartphones, learning history dates has become a waste of time,” “I had to memorize and recite the poem ‘Casey at the Bat,’ and that has never once come in handy.”

Aside from some of the obvious troubles with these comments (who uses a checkbook, anymore?), the issue here is that people are taking for granted that they didn’t learn anything from doing these tasks because there is no direct, quantifiable path from the action to some sort of measurable (preferably lucrative) skill. I took Calculus and, no I have never had a need for finding a derivative, but I’d be misguided to assume the hours I spent meticulously working through the challenging steps of Calculus problems didn’t have some effect on the ways I think, approach complex tasks, and concentrate, in general. Furthermore, yes, of course, no one is likely going to get a job reciting “Casey at the Bat,” from memory, but there are plenty of activities that require the abilities to memorize, clearly recite, and publicly speak. In other words, assuming that a practice isn’t valuable because you can’t immediately identify and apply the exact skill somewhere else is to fundamentally misunderstand the point of an education. The same thing applies to my comment about the outdated reference to a checkbook. One may
never use a checkbook, but the *practice* of tracking of expenses and keeping a running mathematical tally can have all sorts of beneficial effects down the road. Furthermore, these points are still privileging utility and monetary recompense—what about the other affordances? Another friend of mine recently just broke a tie for the first place award at a bar quiz by chugging a beer in 22 seconds. No one suggested that lesson be added to my friend’s homeschool curriculum.

With this view of practice in mine, I outline in the next chapter a version of a *progymnasmata* driven by constraints. Though, as I’ve shown in this chapter, there are a already a handful of contemporary *progymnasmata*, and they all seem to highlight different strengths and/or weaknesses. I like the association of situated practice that the *progymnasmata* offer, and across all the versions available that is one of the characteristics that persists (though they offer different ways to approach the situated practice). In other words, I am using the term *progymnasmata* loosely here because though I frame the constraints in order of perceived difficulty, they do not have to go an order and they don’t build on each other. Though I use lore to set up and describe some classroom practices, these are in no way meant to be instructions, merely examples of what has gone well and what didn’t.
CHAPTER 5

PRAXIS

Testimonials about classroom successes always have the feeling of hearing someone tell about their experiences on drugs (You should have been there, we had these mushrooms and . . .)

(Dworkin 604)

linguistic disruptions can focus attention on rhetorical and compositional choices in a way that makes all reading a close reading

(Dworkin 604)

I had the same English teacher for all three years of junior high school. It’s one of the most impressionable experiences of my education because this woman became intimately familiar with all her students and tailored her teaching accordingly. We’d have bi-weekly meetings with her about what we were reading, and she was always prepared, having pored through our reading journals closely. There was no hiding from Mrs. Brown: she saw everything. For one of my interviews with her in 7th grade, I was all set to talk to her about The Bell Jar, anticipating due praise for choosing such a mature work of literature. I’d even prepared a clever observation about Plath’s fig tree metaphor.

She started our meeting with a stern look and declared, “Erica, it’s about time we addressed a serious problem.” I was horrified. Surely, she was mistaken. She continued, “You are far too safe with your reading choices. You are never going to grow if you stick to what is comfortable. From now on you can only read a well-known work of literature
for every two westerns or science fiction books you read.” “This isn’t fair,” I protested, “I thought reading was supposed to be fun! I thought I was supposed to be challenging myself!” “Ah,” she replied, “there is your problem. You assume reading science fiction and westerns cannot be fun and challenging. Make it three.”

I’ve thought about that exchange often, but it wasn’t until I became a teacher that I appreciated what a gift that shift in perspective can be for a student. As I’ve addressed in this dissertation, we all bring our habits—evident in our writing styles, personal preferences, unconscious aversions, and cumulative experiences—to bear on our reading and writing. I, along with many others, think that one of the many ways we can improve is to jar us out of these habits. However, the goal shouldn’t necessarily be to break bad habits (or replace essentially ‘bad’ habits for ‘good’ habits) because those qualifications don’t really exist in a vacuum. I still don’t like westerns, but I can hold my own in a conversation about Louis L’Amour, and I never would have learned how much I love the \textit{A Wrinkle in Time} series if it hadn’t been for Mrs. Brown’s rule for me.

It’s worth noting that this anecdote hits at a very real problem teachers run into: time. There are very few teachers I know who have the small class sizes and the available time to be that intimately aware of their students’ individual habits. This is where I think constraints can be incredibly useful. They redistribute the workload of a writing classroom to involve the students more actively in the act of practice. Foreknowledge of habits is not required in order to assign constraints. In fact, constraints often help to reveal habits and preferences.

In this chapter I lay out some guidelines to help determine what constraints can be the most useful in particular classroom situations. My goal is not to be exhaustive, but
rather to plant the seeds of inspiration for individual classroom use. For the purposes of thinking about constraints in terms of a practice, I’ve grouped them into six broad categories:

- Category A: Letter constraints
- Category B: Sentence, word, and paragraph constraints
- Category C: Grammar, style, and punctuation constraints
- Category D: Advanced procedural and/or source-based constraints
- Category E: Remediation constraints
- Category F: “Illegible” constraints

As I noted in the previous chapter, while the ancient progymnasmata were linear, building progressively on the activity that came before it, these activities can be randomly, or strategically, applied. That said, they are listed in order of progressively increasing difficulty,\(^{76}\) so categories A-C are often more useful in introductory writing classes, and categories D-F are often more effective for challenging projects or in an advanced-level course. Below I also assign numbers to pedagogical activities (1: In-Class Exercises, 2: Revision, 3: Invention, 4: Homework, 5: Long-Term Projects, 6: Assignment Alternatives, and 7: Close Reading). Like the constraint categories, these are not discrete, but rather just one potential metric for organization. For each of the 7 activity groups, I note the constraint categories I have found work best for those activities, and I provide a general guideline for practice. My reason for providing these examples is not to have teachers recreate these scenarios—the kairotic nature of teaching makes exact replication impossible—but rather to inspire a personalized adoption of constraints in individual pedagogical situations. A more developed list of constraint examples, arranged by category, can be found in the appendix of this dissertation.

\(^{76}\) Just as the ancient progymnasmata progresses from simpler, concrete exercises and build to more abstract exercises (Hagaman 24).
1: In-Class Exercises: Category A, Category B, Category C

Letter constraints (category A) often work well for in-class practice. An instructor can put a sentence on the board and ask the class to revise it by restricting the use of a particular letter (e.g., “you can’t use the letter ‘P’; “the letters ‘R’ and ‘A’ cannot appear next to each other [even across a space]”; “no words can start with a vowel”). When these constraints are completed together in class everyone has the same amount of time and can work with the same constraint, if desired. Also, the group can discuss the results together so students are exposed to the various approaches of their peers. This discussion can be particularly instructive because those who are skeptical, hesitant, or generally struggling are frequently inspired when they see other students’ results.

For example, I recently asked my 102 Research and Writing class to rewrite the sentence “I love you” without using the letter “o.” I gave them 10 minutes to work, and told them there was no other rule except the absence of “o.” Some quickly got around the problem of “you” with “ya,” or another pronoun or proper name. However, “love” seemed to pose more of a challenge. Some responses relied on similes: “I like ya bunches,” or “I care.” Some translated “love” as a physical attraction, while some took the romantic path: “Man, that girl is fine,” “I wanna kiss her,” “He makes me happy,” “This girl inspires deep feelings.” Some more abstract and/or artistic thinkers used alternatives to standard English, drawing an eyeball, a heart, and a pointing finger or using text-speak: “I luv u.” One student channeled an ornate, poetic style: “Thine eyes are like sparkling jewels making my heart swell with affection.” Some students used languages other than English: “je t'aime.” Two students didn’t write anything: one

77 In this chapter, the examples of comments students said in class discussion were recreated from my teaching journal notes and photographs of the classroom white/chalkboard their contributions.
claimed it was too hard, and one insisted that I was trying to trick him. One typically aloof student was hesitant to share because he was worried he hadn’t “done it right,” but he eventually offered the following: “Fasten that seatbelt.” This sparked a set of reactions from his peers ranging from frustration to envy: “Does that even count, Ms. Fischer?” “That’s not love, that’s care.” “Caring for someone’s safety is one of the most basic acts of love.” “Wait, I thought we were talking about love love.” “What in the world is love love?” “Man, that’s the type of love grandmas have for you,” etc.

After sharing, we had a lively class discussion about the steps they took to complete the assignment, prompted by the following questions: How did you approach this? How many methods did you try? What didn’t work? Which one was your favorite? Why? Then we discussed the versions, themselves, close reading the differences and discussing the rhetorical effects of each one: In what circumstances would each statement be the most effective? The most appropriate? Which ones would you say to/about your mom? Which one would you say is the closest equivalent to “I love you”? As the conversation died down, I went to move on and one student insisted, “Okay, we’re warmed up now. Give us another one.”

Of course, constraint writing isn’t always this successful. Students will turn quickly if they feel too uncomfortable or if the constraint proves to be too difficult, especially in introductory writing classes. For example, in the same class on another day, I asked the students to take their thesis statement for their rough draft and rewrite it so the last letter of each word was the same as the first letter of the word that came after it. Chaos ensued. Normally reasonable students feigned a comical level of confusion. I had to explain the constraint 4 times, and then most of them claimed to have unique issues
(e.g., “There’s no other word I can use,” etc.) that prevented them from completing the task. Instead of abandoning the assignment, I asked one student to volunteer her sentence, and we easily fulfilled the constraint as a class. I then told them to do their own for homework. The key in this situation was to not let the frustration dictate what happened because then they would learn to feign confusion whenever they didn’t like a particular constraint or assignment. From my experience, the general best practices for in-class constraint writing when using letters seem to be 1) make it communal, 2) make it accessible, and 3) spend plenty of time on reflection afterward.

2: Revision: Category A, Category B, Category C

As I’ve mentioned earlier in this dissertation, I heavily stress revision as “re-seeing” because most students have learned to approach revision as an act of correction, a paradigm I’m convinced is partially responsible for student writing paralysis. Because of this, the revising process in my class takes many forms. However, this is where teachers who prefer the more traditional approaches to writing pedagogy (focusing on syntactic clarity, mechanical accuracy, etc.) can still benefit from the generative effects of the more manageable constraints, particularly those focusing on word choice, grammar, syntax, and mechanics.

That said, I think most writing teachers would agree that good grammar does not guarantee good writing. Other factors like having provocative ideas, using precise diction, paying attention to rhythm and organization, etc. all influence writing quality. In order to help students improve their attention to writing outside of the isolated event of the writing classroom, it’s important to get students to pay attention to these things, in general, not just in response to a specific assignment. In other words, practicing the type
of thoughtful play constraints require exposes students to a different relationship with writing, in general, that I think transcends the classroom in a way that rote grammar exercises do not. Instead of training students to write “correctly,” I use constraints as a way to help students to see their writing differently, and a frequent by-product of this difference can often be a result that resembles accuracy.

For example, a student in an ENG 102 class had the following sentence in his paper: “My main argument for my essay, which is about the topic of video games and if they influence violence in children, my response to that is that they don't.” This is a standard example of “awkward writing.” A careful reading can glean the gist, but it’s unnecessarily wordy and unfocused. Instead of writing “awkward” next to the sentence, I gave him the following constraints: 1) write this 2 times without using any being verbs or pronouns and 2) write this two times using exactly 9 words in each sentence. He gave me the following sentences: 1a) Video games don’t influence violence in children. 1b) Video games don’t make children violent. 2a) I don’t think video games cause violence in children. 2b) Violent children are not created by watching video games. Though some might not deem these sentences ideal either, all four of them are a vast improvement on what he originally had for this rhetorical situation (i.e., a formal academic essay) because his idea was more clearly communicated. To him, the original sentence made sense, so he had to get outside of himself (i.e., be defamiliarized to the writing) in order to see the sentence differently, and the constraints let him do that. It’s also worth noting that the two constraints I gave him weren’t wholly arbitrary, but they certainly weren’t prescriptive, either.
It’s also worth noting that those constraints I proposed were far from the only options. Any number of constraints could have yielded similar results. He had five prepositions in that sucker. I’m fairly certain that telling him, “You can only use one preposition” would have been just as effective, as would myriad other versions. Although, I had another student waiting to talk to me, and I wasn’t sure if I’d have to explain what a preposition was, so the two I chose to use were somewhat strategic. Additionally, because I often comment digitally, I have a short-cut comment bank that produces 10 different versions of these types of simple constraints. When I type “pre,” the phrase “You can only use one preposition” pops up and I move on. It switches the burden of revision from the teacher to the student. Also, because I often comment digitally, I have a record of my comments saved on Dropbox, so when I’m reading a final draft that still has noticeable clarity issues, I can open up my comments on the rough draft and can check to see if I’ve given a student a constraint that they hadn’t followed. I’ve found that follow-up can be a useful component of revision constraints, so, often, when I know that I might have a light class day, I’ll tell students to bring in sentences from their papers I’ve assigned constraints to in order to share with the class. I’ve also emailed students before, asking them “Did you do the constraints I gave you on page three?” I know that sounds like a ridiculous amount of work for a busy teacher, but it’s not at all time consuming if you keep a tally while you grade and email in small groups with a blind cc. Also, if you follow up once early in the semester, it creates a panoptic effect where the students do what you ask because they never know when you are going

78 I’ve seen teachers simply correct awkward sentences in student work because it’s often easier than trying to explain what the problem is. How much a student learns from those types of ‘comments’ is questionable.
79 Also, note, this has nothing to do with the actual student engagement with the constraint.
to check back in. Finally, at the University of South Carolina we have one-on-one conferences with our students in 101 and 102 class, and if not instructed to prepare, students usually come to the meeting with nothing to discuss, so having a revision constraint to follow-up on can be a really productive use of that time.

These revision constraints also work well in peer review because students are often anxious about commenting on work because they don’t see themselves as writing “experts” and don’t feel qualified to respond to a peer’s work. Constraints take the burden of perceived expertise out of the equation and can empower students to trust their gut: if something is unnecessarily hard to read, point it out, and give the author a short constraint. At the very least they are pointing to a potential problem. It also gives students a concrete reason to revisit their own work because for so many of them, the goal isn’t to write well but to fill the paper and forget about it.

Many students are perfectly adept at putting their thoughts and experiences into words as long as they are speaking instead of writing, but the act of translating their thoughts to paper often trips them up. The burden of the blank page and a class assignment can causes students to break out the “indeed”s and pile extra words into sentences. The comment “awkward” (i.e., “see what you wrote differently”) isn’t as effective as giving them a new perspective that demands them to see the writing differently—don’t forget the value of constraints for breaking out of the POLR. Overall, I have found the best practices for revision constraints to be 1) make it simple, 2) encourage use in peer review and 3) follow up, by email, in person, or in class when you can.
3: Brain-storming, invention, and play: Category D, Category F

While categories A, B, and C work well for looking at existing acts of writing differently, constraints can also be a productive method of invention. For example, Category D, the advanced procedural and/or source-based constraints (often inspired by Oulipian procedures) can serve as a type of idea-engine, getting students to write from a place that isn’t familiar to them. Category F offers examples of already-composed constraints. Though these constraints could be replicated, I’ve found that they more effectively serve as provocative jumping-off points to get students to think about the extremes, complexities, and potential limits of constraint-based writing, particularly for thinking about how constraints can generate new ideas.

For example, palimpsests (i.e., taking a source text, like an old book, and repurposing the pages to communicate a new idea) can get students to think about a number of complex factors surrounding authorship and the functions of texts. When I want to challenge a student at a loss for ideas, I’ll show them the popular palimpsest A Humument. In 1966, Tom Philips gave himself a constraint to find a used book for and alter every page. The book he discovered was A Human Document, written in 1892 by W.H. Mallock. Phillips folded the title page, contracting the words “a human document” into a new word he liked: “a humument.” “An earthy word,” he explains in the afterword to the fifth edition reviewed by Adam Smyth in the London Review of Books, “I like even the effortful sound of it.” As Smyth notes, A Humument reveals stories that were “. . . in one sense always there in Mallock, just lost amid the torrent of other text. This is authorship as pruning, a process of erasure or cutting away that finds in the buttoned-up A Human Document a teeming world of
humor, sex, sadness and art that would have baffled and shocked the conservative Mallock.”

Philips used each page as a canvas of sorts to paint over words he wanted to obscure and highlight the text of his “new” version. As I mentioned earlier, I enjoy showing this book to students to get them thinking about the idea of a “source text” differently than something you merely cite from. Interestingly, Phillips has continued to transform the book, repeatedly revising it through the years, altering pages he’s previously altered. Because palimpsests encourage a wide array of fruitful conversation topics, they can be used in a number of different ways, but I’ve found that they seem to be one the most useful as a method of invention. I like to keep old books and old student papers (with the student’s permission and their name removed) handy, and when one of my advanced writing students is at a loss or wants to be challenged, it’s an easy, yet generative, constraint to hand them a text and tell them to use it to make something new. You can add more constraints, or let them interpret that general one on their own.

Another one of my favorite versions of these invention-centered constraints is to have students write constraints for each other. This assignment hints to the Oulipian conception of the “ultra” approach to constraint-based writing that dictates: “the only admissible text, for the Oulipian method being the text that actually formulates the constraint, and in doing so, exhausts it” (Motte 91). This assignment has also provoked questions about authorship. For example, when a student writes a text using another student’s constraint is the product a collaboration? (This question is one of the more provocative ones). An interesting trend I’ve noticed over the years is that there are three general categories of reactions students have to this exercise: 1) those who tend to be the
most frustrated by constraints often write the most challenging limitations when given the freedom to impose them on their peers, 2) students who are excited by constraints become very proud and sometimes even possessive of their constraint, referring to it as “theirs” in subsequent discussions and 3) less enthusiastic students will ‘phone in’ their constraint, asking their peer to do something that can be easily achieved with little attention paid to the constraint. An interesting by-product of this last occurrence has been both relief from the peer and disappointment that they didn’t get a more challenging one.

In one class I told the students they had a week to write 2-3 paragraphs on a topic of their choosing—just a short passage or two on any topic using a constraint a peer had assigned. One of my advanced writing students asked his peer to “only use words that begin with ‘h’.” What the student ended up writing was a mediation on hairpins:

Haughty hairstylists haunt hundreds. However, having hope helps; hair-care hasn’t holy (sic) hindered helpless humans. Handfuls have honed hairstyles: having hairpins handy has helped. Hairpins hold. Hairpins heighten. Hairpins halt hats. Hairpins help hide horrible hair. Hairpins have historical heft, helping heroines have handsome hair. Helen (of Troy) had hairpins? Hugo (Obermaier) hypothesizes…

What was interesting about this particular example was not just the result, which was fine, but rather the student’s approach to the assignment and the conversations the constraint (and its execution) stimulated in class. When asked how he went about writing his piece, he said he researched for about 30 minutes, recording keywords that began with “h” as well as general keywords that didn’t. He then sorted words into parts of speech and went to an online thesaurus and looked up all the non-h keywords in hopes of finding
synonyms beginning with “h.” He then went to a Scrabble vocabulary website and sorted through words beginning with “h” to form a bank of language to fill out his word bank before he started. He mentioned that because this process was so foreign to how he usually wrote, it didn’t feel like an assignment for a writing class. For example, he never would have chosen to write about hairpins, and in the process learned that they have existed since 25,000 BC and Hugo Obermaier was one of the archaeologists who found evidence of them at a dig site at the beginning of the 20th century. Also, he admitted he had never thought so much about the importance of certain types of words. For example, he couldn’t think of, or find, a preposition that began with “h,” which limited his options for sentence structure. While discussing his process, he received a provocative question from another student: “You broke the rule a couple of times [using “holy” instead of “wholly” and putting “of Troy” and “Obermaier” in parenthesis in order to clarify context]. How do you justify breaking rules in those cases but not others? Why not just keep breaking the rule?” The student responded that he felt justified because one case was a convenient use of a word that sounded similar and the other cases were unnecessary, yet, clarifying information. He wasn’t just arbitrarily breaking the rules; he was doing so strategically. Though I was quite satisfied with his answer, a number of students in the class didn’t buy it, and we had a fairly lengthy, impromptu discussion about the ethics of constraint writing, questioning when the value of breaking a rule is worth more or less than blindly following them. (Though I didn’t pursue it at the time I regret not making a comparison of this debate to the breaking of traditional grammar rules). One student referenced Bök’s Eunoia (which we’d previously read in class) and

80 He even asked me if there is a preposition with h. I couldn’t think of one, but I didn’t know definitely or not. This is one of my favorite examples because I would never have a student ask me such a question if we were following more standard writing methods.
his section “And Sometimes” which included words that only have the letter y as the vowel (e.g., syzygy). She pointed out that by looking at the words that didn’t fit neatly into the univocalic rule (i.e., “y” isn’t always a vowel), Bök was able to write another small section.\textsuperscript{81}

As I mentioned earlier, for me, the payoff in these cases wasn’t necessarily the actual writing produced, but the process and subsequent discussion of the methods afterward. I find it infinitely more difficult to get students to talk about their writing with this much interest and care in classes where I haven’t introduced constraint writing. Overall, I’ve found the best practices for invention-centered constraint writing seem to be 1) encourage play and generosity (i.e. a general \textit{ethos} of “why not?” because that’s often where the ideas emerge), 2) actively engage (ask questions and brainstorm) with students before, during, and/or after the writing process, and 3) let them share their process and encourage class input afterward.

\textbf{4: Homework:} Category A, Category B, Category C, Category D, Category E, Cat. F

Constraints can work really well as homework assignments because students have time and resources to play around with options. A potential pitfall, however, is that without the influence of an immediate peer group participating around them, less motivated students can be prone to giving up more easily on their own. A few ways I have extended the communal influences outside the classroom are with a “class café” thread on Blackboard and by framing the activity as a game, with a window of acceptable results (e.g. “You have to have at least 4 answers, but the student with the most ‘wins’\textsuperscript{82}).

\textsuperscript{81} This was an advanced writing class.
\textsuperscript{82} My version of “winning” comes in the form of a signed “free absence” card, or a signed “free late assignment card,” and I really play up bragging rights. Obviously, these only work for my teaching style because I keep track of absences and I don’t accept late work. You can use
When I teach Advanced Writing, constraints are the focal point of the entire course rather than an occasional practice. I don’t think this necessarily has to be the case, but I’ve found Advanced Writing courses to be an ideal opportunity to really immerse students in constraints, and I have noticed that this immersion results in a general tone of enthusiasm that builds exponentially throughout the semester. For example, during the 9th week of an Advanced Writing course in 2011, I assigned the following homework prompt: “Make a statement that communicates the focus of this course. Each word has to begin with a vowel.” The students had to post at least one response to the discussion board by midnight before the class. One student posted: “Er Ic Af Isch Er Erlkh Arp Erv Inc Ek Ing Av As El Els Onj Ac Obsc At Ozz I Amb Ersm Ithd An Ah Arr Isj Enn Iff Erd Ozdd Er Eksm Ithj Ord Ind Up Uls Em Ily And Ers Onkr Ist In E.” Though I didn’t require them to comment on each other’s posts, another student responded, “To be fair, this is just a bunch of nonsense. I feel like you took the easy way out by just typing whatever. It says to begin each word with a vowel. Those aren’t words.” Yet another student replied, “No!!! Read closely!!!! It’s all our names broken up by our vowels. She’s naming all the members of the class while obscuring our identities . . . . breaking us up by our vowels! It’s not nonsense at all. I’m so jealous I didn’t think of it. I spent 2 hours on my response and it’s no wear (sic) near as cool as this.” This proved to be a fascinating.

When composing constraints verbs should be precise or precisely ambiguous.
turning point in the class because it created a type of genial policing of rigor and attention to detail that I don’t think I could have asked them to do with as much success.

For example, the students in that particular semester started meeting outside of class to discuss and workshop their constraints. They reportedly liked the support they received from each other, even when they were being a little harsh. On student even said, “It feels like a weird club we’ve created where we’re all experiencing this strange class that no one else understands.” They’d even commiserated that their roommates and parents were baffled by their assignments. Five years later, I still talk to one of the students from that class regularly. She still tells people it was the “hardest, weirdest, and most memorable class” she had in college. Though this all sounds pretty lofty and it was an admittedly unique experience (I could never replicate that class again), my other Advanced Writing classes did have a similar sense of community, just from experiencing the difficulty together in class. After a lot of reflection I’ve concluded that the unique and seemingly irrational component of the assignments does set it up as an archetypal “wacky college class,” but there’s another component, I think, that helps create a communal feel to this type of course: they aren’t ever talking about each other’s writing in terms of accuracy. Sure, there are value judgments, like the one on Blackboard I noted earlier, but constraint-based writing doesn’t focused on institutional ideas of “good” and “bad” writing, so the metric is in perpetual slippage. A student who struggled with one constraint can really excel at the next one, and because of this fluidity, no one ever feels inadequate or self-conscious. Again, I am curious if this phenomenon is unique to advanced-level classes or classes that commit to constraints for the entire curriculum. I have never had this type of peer response in an introductory level course.
Because constraints don’t have a singular ideal outcome, the possibilities for engagement are potentially endless which can encourage a perpetual, active engagement and/or curiosity. Homework assignments are an effective way to encourage this. In fact, evidence of engagement is something that I take into account when I grade constraint writing. I discuss this in more detail in the assessment section below. Also, it’s worth noting that homework doesn’t have to involve incredibly demanding writing constraints, as I discuss more in section 6 there are more accessible activities from category E that you can assign as an alternative to homework. Crossword puzzles, story boards, memes, playlists, and even cooking/baking can work well as genre constraints for remediated homework assignments. In general, I’ve found the best practices for homework constraint writing to be 1) support student interaction outside of class on Blackboard, in assigned pairs, or in organic groups, 2) be specific (or specifically ambiguous) with the language of your constraint and assign a specific rubric of desired outcomes if you have certain expectations; 3) give them time to discuss their experience in class.

5: Long-Term Projects: Category D, Category E

Long-term projects are terrific for giving enough time for rumination. Often when given a long span of time for the typical process-based assignment, students will wait until the last minute to write a paper. Allowing students to work on something that is challenging over an extended period of time tempts them to return to the project over and over again to try and “crack” the constraint. Additionally, as I noted with the earlier examples, if you allow for the long-term project to be communal, students will motivate their peers. Two examples of these conditions occurred with a semester-long class
“book” and a particularly difficult constraint I asked one of my advanced writing classes to attempt.

The second time I had an opportunity to teach Advanced Writing I was able to get a small class of 16 students in a seminar room. Because it struck me as the ideal conditions for testing a wide variety of approaches, I took advantage of the manageable size and tried a couple long-term course projects. The most surprisingly generative constraint was the course-long “book,” in which each student had possession of the class “journal” for a week. The constraint was to 1) “fill” at least one page and 2) not lose it. Some entries were personal reflections; some were formal-academic responses to the course reading; and some passages were attempts at constraint-based writing. Some deliberately engaged with the texts the came before them, and some were seemingly isolated, self-directed contributions. The result was a snapshot of the course in one text.

In response to their work I changed their final project to a close reading response of the communal text they’d created. The close reading of their own work was not only an interesting practice in self-assessment, but it marked a change from the way students were reading at the beginning of the semester. They were more detail-oriented and willing explore alternative lines of thought.

Another long-term assignment I tried that did not work out as well was inspired by Betts’ If Language anagrams. I told the class they had all semester to use the same 525 letters from If Language to rewrite their own paragraph. For inspiration, we talked about how Betts had assumed he had exhausted the possibilities for the anagram until Bok wrote a blurb for his book with the 525 letters. My mantra was “take for granted it’s possible.” It was a disaster. At the end of the semester, when no one had been able to
complete it, we talked about the challenges of the assignment and recommendations for improving it. One of the students suggested that it might have been easier to divide the letters up arbitrarily, and give each student 32 or 33 letters to write a sentence or two on their own and then try to find a way to make the sentences work together. Another student, building off of that suggestion, offered that a barter system could be implemented where they could trade letters with each other as they worked. Another student thought that might have made it harder and would have liked for us to spend the first 20 minutes of each class all semester working toward a paragraph together. I don’t think I’d be willing to offer up close to 10 hours of a semester’s class time for that, but in hindsight I could have incorporated the assignment into class throughout the semester more frequently. What was striking about both these suggestions, however, was, yet again, the preference for community. With this in mind, I think the best practices for facilitating long-term constraints in class include 1) reference it regularly: check on progress, get updates, dedicate a little bit of every time each week for feedback from the students, 2) be willing to adapt the assignment to fit the needs of the class, and 3) have a significant motivating factor like a grade or a final presentation.

6: Assignment Alternatives: Category D, Category E, Category F

As I have noted, constraint category D often seems to promote invention and category F exposes students to examples of completed constraints, so these two categories along with E (remediation constraints) work well for inspiring assignment alternatives. When I say “assignment alternatives” I mean allowing students to self-select a constraint-based writing project in place of a standard assignment. The ENG 102 course at the University of South Carolina requires students to complete a remediation of a
formal academic argument, so I use these categories for that quite frequently. Though, I have noticed that most students stick to familiar genre constraints when I let them self-select. I receive a lot of pamphlets, websites, commercials, and interviews for remediation and I’m assuming this is because these are easily executed and fairly comfortable. I don’t think familiar genres are necessarily less generative than more unconventional constraints for assignment alternatives; however, the more nontraditional genres do seem to present more surprises for students to think about (and/or unconscious respond to), and really interesting results can come from those surprises.

For example, I mentioned in passing to one of my 102 classes that one of my Advanced Writing students made a board game as an assignment, and I thought it would fun to see someone from 102 try to translate their research paper into a board game for the final remediation assignment to see how that would work. One of my students, inspired by the comment, translated her research paper on insomnia to a board game, which she called Catching Zs. The game was a sort of hybrid of Trivial Pursuit and Monopoly where the players had to successfully “catch” enough “z’s” by moving around the board, answering questions about insomnia and general sleep-related matters. The questions were facts she’d discovered in her research, like “True or false: if you find that a specific medicine helps you sleep well, stick with it and take it whenever you need to sleep,” (false: medicine should always be a last resort and used sparingly because long-term use could exacerbate sleep problems). There were “lose a turn” spaces on the board and “wild cards” mixed in with the questions, which had scenarios like, “you exercised today and didn’t have any caffeine after noon: you earned an extra z!” or “you took your phone to bed with you: loose 2 z’s.” The first person to “catch” 10 “z’s” wins the game.
She used cardboard for the base, plastic figures from a hobby shop for the players, a pair of dice to move the players, white index cards for the questions and wild cards, color index cards for the “Z’s,” and stored it all in a clothing gift-box she decorated with markers and stickers.

It’s worth noting that the information she presented in the game is exactly the type of information she would have used in one of the more traditional classroom genres, like a pamphlet or a website, so choosing to do the board game didn’t alter the content much. However, what I found to be the greatest successes of her remediation were the clever title and her rulebook. There is an ever-growing need for paid writers to do these types of work: marketing and packaging snappy, clever and/or provocative paratexts (taglines, titles, tweets, etc.) and methodical, technical writing. By self-selecting the constraint of the board game she put herself in the position of having to try two very different, yet useful, types of writing.

Another example of an alternative assignment I borrowed from Goldsmith: create an act of graffiti. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation I discuss what his students did. When I tried the assignment, my students wrote on toilet paper in public restrooms; wrote on streets in chalk; went early to movie theaters and taped notes to seats; hung signs from trees on campus; made stickers, and taped them to products in stores, to name a few. Depending on the class, I’ll often ask for pictures or it doesn’t count. An instructor can do this and have them present what they did and talk about the act of translating something from paper into a public act of writing; that’s part of the constraint: figure out how to perform their argument/idea in a way they deem appropriate.

84 Two of my former Advanced Writing students work in this type of writing position: one for CNN and one for the University of South Carolina.
It’s also important to note that these assignment alternatives don’t have to be significant time-intensive projects. Often, when I need extra time at the beginning of class to prepare or set-up technology, I’ll write a constraint on the board that acts as a replacement for a traditional introductory assignment. Depending on the personality of your class, these can be fun conceptual translation activities like, “Pick three smells that best translate your reaction to the reading for today. What order would you have your audience smell them? Why?”, “Give your text a mascot. What does the costume and logo look like? Why?”, or “If you had to have a celebrity record themselves reading your last paper, who would it be? Why?” These exercises move beyond the notion of print text-based limitations and ask students to explore conceptual limitations. I’ve found the best practices for assignment alternative constraints to be 1) frame this rhetorically: ask how the alternative behaves in comparison to the 2) provide opportunities for student to present their work in class for feedback, and 3) ask follow-up questions about the student’s specific experiences (struggles and successes) with the alternative medium.

7: Close Reading: Category F (though all the categories require strong close reading)

These are examples of already-composed conceptual constraints. My favorite text to use in class is *Against Expression: An Anthology of Creative Writing* because it has two introductory essays by the editors about constraint-based writing, includes the constraint as a paratext with each excerpt, and offers a wide range of examples. Though they could be adapted to be constraints, I’ve found that for even the most eager advanced-level student, they can be overwhelming to try to do. Instead, I find them useful for giving these examples to students to read and ask them “How did you read this?” These also serve as the focal point for really generative discussions about the nature of paratext
in constraint-based writing: how does knowing what the constraint/procedure was change
the way you read the text as opposed to not knowing? Almost always, students seem to
 crave the paratextual explanation. I’ve found it’s not unlike students who want a literature
teacher to tell them what the author of a particular book intended. In my Advanced
Writing classes I have introduced this section with essay “The Death of the Author” and
“What is an Author?” but, though challenging and generative, that is the pretty obvious
route. There are plenty of other essays that would make terrific parings. The source-texts
of these constraints can also be interesting supplemental pairings.

Because constraint-based writing is a popular practice but often completely
unfamiliar to students, it can be really fruitful to introduce them to published examples.
Exposing students to these texts not only illustrates successful constraint writing, but
also, as I noted, it challenges students’ assumptions about the very act of reading. The
reactions these texts invoke are often really strong. For example, one of the first texts I
gave one of my advanced writing classes was an excerpt from Elizabeth Clark’s *Between
Words*. Using Raymond Roussel’s 1274-line poem *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* as its
source, Clark removes the words, leaving just the punctuation behind as, what she calls, a
“landscape of grammar” or punctuation. Two students became instantly agitated with this
text: “This isn’t even writing!” “How are we even supposed to *read* this?” As I
mentioned, this is usually the first question I always ask them, “How *do* you read this?”
The first time I gave students this text, I fought back, insisting they humor me and gave
them 20 minutes to write a close reading response, telling them to respond to the text in
any way they saw fit.
The second time I gave this example to a class I remembered this exchange and was prepared for indignation, so before I gave them the excerpt I put four items on the board: a period, a comma, an exclamation point, and a pair of parenthesis. I asked them to tell me what those things meant. The short discussion went relatively smoothly, eliciting responses such as “Well, a dot is a point, a distinct space on a map.” “Well, if that’s a period, it’s final, the end of a sentence and a comma is a pause saying ‘I’m not finished, yet.’” and “Parenthesis show information that’s not important.” I was particularly fond of one student’s response that insisted parenthesis indicate a whisper or a secret. That comment got a lot of other students to participate: “How is it a whisper? I always thought parenthesis were like yelling.” “No! Italics are like yelling.” If they don’t naturally disagree, I often like to challenge them and create doubt or disagreement because it spurs discussion. This time, after the small introduction, there was less aggressive resistance to the Clark piece and they were more willing to take their time close reading the punctuation. However, in both cases, after their private close reading time was up, we had a serious discussion about method: how does one read a text like this? What are some other possibilities we haven’t considered for reading a text like this? What can we learn from attempting to read a text like this? What relationship does the source text have to this version?, etc. What I especially enjoy about Clark’s piece is that is has been read quite differently. The punctuation has been retranslated into a musical score (a symphonic arrangement in 4 movements) drawing from the relationships of the punctuation to read as notes and dynamic markings. The Edges Ensemble played the score on May 8, 2010. I use this example of proof that there are always other possibilities to consider.\footnote{Though, admittedly, I usually usually stay away from introducing pataphysics into the class} It’s one of my favorite examples of the pataphysically exceptional. With
this in mind, I have found the best practices for close reading constraint writing to be 1) introduce students to a wide variety of texts and potential perspectives they hadn’t considered, and show the texts in various contexts (who reads these outside of classrooms?, how can they perform outside of classroom?, how do we see evidence of these texts in other place?), 2) require participation in class discussion, 3) vary when you give the students access to the paratextual information about source texts and constraints, and 4) really support the spirit of possibility and the exception.

**Challenges, Assessment, and Feedback: Facilitating Grading, and Responding**

Asking students to step out of their comfort zone often produces strong reactions, particularly when they don’t see an immediate correlation to an accessible, measurable benefit. This seems to be the obvious result of the assessment-centered pedagogy they have received for the majority of their academic career, where they are told what will be on a test and then are taught to reproduce ideal test results. However, it also seems to be picking at a general discomfort that results from asking students to do something wholly unfamiliar: the potentially generative force of defamiliarization, which I talk about in Chapter 3. I think the crux of successful classroom praxis comes from making sure this discomfort is productive and not inhibiting.

There are often students who like to game the system and claim that they can’t complete the constraint assignment. It’s “too hard,” or even “impossible.” To be fair, I think there are some students who really aren’t trying to get away with something and are genuinely hindered by anxiety. To that end, over the years I have developed a response to this resistance, regardless of the cause, by requiring an alternative assignment for students who claim they cannot complete the constraint: “If you can’t complete the assignment, discussions. I want the constraints to be about practice.
than you are required to turn in a 1500-word response explaining why the assignment couldn’t be completed, listing the methods you exhausted, and the formal reasons for why you propose it can’t be done.” Also, it’s important to note that not completing a constraint shouldn’t be considered a failure as long as the student can discuss what they did and what they struggled with. The product doesn’t have to be the goal. The value of these activities comes from the engagement with them.

Two helpful discussions on how to assess unconventional writing can be found in Jody Shipka’s *Toward a Composition Made Whole* and Patricia Suzanne Sullivan’s *Experimental Writing in Composition*. In her chapter “Making Things Fit In (any number of) New Ways” in Shipka insists that students should leave a writing course, “[e]xhibiting a more nuanced awareness of the various choices they make, or even fail to make, throughout the process of producing a text and to carefully consider the effects those choices might have on others” (85). My pedagogy is obviously interested in this desire to help remove students away from the institutional forces limiting their writing practices and to encourage them to consider alternatives, and I appreciated Shipka’s attention to the assessment issues that arise when addressing alternative approaches to writing.

Assessment is such a sticky issue of balancing the departmental requirements of quantitative assessment and making sure that students don’t make the false assumption that writing differently means the work doesn’t have to be rigorous and thoughtful. She insists, and I agree, “students [should] assume responsibility for describing, evaluating, and sharing with others the purposes and potentials of their work” (112). To this end, she asks students to compose a statement of goals and choices in order to document the thoughts, connections, and motivations during their moments of invention. She explains,
“It is less important that I am able to identify connections or choices that students may or may not have thought to make than it is that students are prepared to share . . . how and why their texts make or fail to make, particular meanings” (133). By orienting students to the idea that what they are producing has the potential to behave in a variety of ways in which they have not intended, or even considered, teachers are inherently asking students to develop a type of rhetorical orientation to writing, and for me, successful assessment of this orientation requires an identifiable method of engagement on the student’s part. Though, where Shipka likes to have student identify their goals, I avoid focusing on goals. This is why you’ll notice in all the examples I list above, a great deal of time is spent on discussing process and showing evidence of work, even when it doesn’t produce and ideal result, self-evaluating, and perpetually asking “how?”

This is where Sullivan’s work in experimental writing has been helpful for me to think about assessment. In her chapter “The Crisis of Judgment in Composition: Evaluating Experimental Student Writing” she rightly asserts that using traditional methods of assessment to evaluate nontraditional writing methods undermines the generative nature of such writing. Paradoxically, I have often used rubrics, the height of traditional writing assessment, to provide feedback for some constraint-based writing assignments, because of the familiarity and structure they offer. Though I agree with Sullivan’s argument that traditional assessment cannot be forcibly applied in every case, I do think rubrics can create a sense of security for students in some cases, knowing what it is they will be required to do to receive a good grade, a concern should not be dismissed.

So, when I do use rubrics, I make “evidence of engagement” a primary category, asking
students to show evidence of their efforts without placing a strong emphasis on a particular outcome.

For most of the constraints I use, the act of doing something within the restrictions is productive enough on its own. You’ll also note that a great deal of these constraints happen in person (especially for my 101 and 102 classes), or on Blackboard, and I think most teachers have their tricks for spurning on discussion, and those are easily applied with constraints, as well. Part of my goal in offering these examples and the recalled responses from my students was to illustrate the types of questions and, for lack of a better word, tricks to keep students from disengaging. This type of facilitation takes practice and a willingness to work through challenges and unforeseen pitfalls, and it also requires a few invisible constraints created by the instructor. For example, I take extra time the first two classes of the semester to make sure I have every student’s name memorized, so no one gets away with being silent in class. I also, at the recommendation of a colleague, keep a teaching journal where I write notes about what happened each day. It’s a small thing, but it makes huge difference.

However, there are other methods of facilitation that I’ve seen others use to great success. A colleague of mine who frequently uses challenging texts in class will continually ask questions and pause, if no one answers, then she’ll answer the question with multiple possibilities, ask more questions, pause, and then offer more suggestions. After a while, the students become comfortable and start chiming in. This works well for in-class discussion, and then for written assignments she allows students the option of a more traditional assignment or to challenge themselves with another approach. However, the general idea with these practices is really not much different than all questions about
pedagogical practice: try it out and modify it for your needs. Things that work one day might not work in the next, and vice versa. The biggest piece of advice I can offer is to not treat them like the “wacky other writing,” that you pull out for special occasions.

In the attached appendices, you’ll see the categories I’ve just outlined, each with examples of the respective constraint category. These examples are only a guideline and can obviously be altered at will for individual circumstances.
A PATAPHYSICAL POSTSCRIPT

We too shall become solemn, fat, and Ubu-like and shall publish extremely classical books [and] another lot of young people will appear, and consider us completely out of date, and they will write ballads to express their loathing of us, and that is just the way things should always be.

(Jarry Selected 85)

If you have a brother and he loves cheese, that’s physics. If you have a brother, and therefore he loves cheese, that’s metaphysics. If you don’t have a brother and he loves cheese, that’s pataphysics.

(Becker 143)

Just asking students to engage with these odd activities can be challenging. As I occasionally discover, students can be resistant to difference: more and more, instructors have students who crave identifiable instrumentality; they invest a great deal in the narrative of acquiring transferable skills. However, what I hoped to demonstrate here is maybe we need to question our assumptions about what skills lead to what ends and if, ultimately, we should be placing any priority on even answering such questions. In the Canadian branch of pataphysics, Christian Bök describes the various sites of ‘research,’ known as ‘pataphyscial laboratories.’ The research from these laboratories is, as he explains, in tension with ‘theory’ because theories are concerned with the forces of language after or before writing takes place, rather than during (when research happens). Because, eventually, theory subordinates thought to instrumentalism, the active research a pataphysician performs, according to Bök, differs from the theories of a metaphysician.

86 I have composed this section under a constraint. Can you tell what it is? Does it matter? Are you reading this differently than you would if you didn’t know it was the product of a constraint?
ultimately because a pataphysician coordinates with “ludic experimentalism” (84). As an epiphenomenon, pataphysics neither seeks to define or identify, but rather, can’t help but revel in particularities that occur in the act of research.

Since these observations present an opportunity to look at how a type of playful utility can be fostered in a laboratory, we should start by looking at our own university settings. At most universities we see that in regard to languages a ‘lab’ rarely seems to be a place that encourages non-instrumental practices. Language labs and writing labs normalize an orientation to language that seeks to ignore, subsume, or explain away the very exceptional singularities that writing enacts. Jarry, then, reveals a potential association, a rhythmical encounter with paradoxical indeterminacy, continually navigating dual hierarchies, neither cancelling nor surpassing the negating force of dialectic.

Exceptions are the rule, and as such, we can be free to express amazement at the ridiculous logic behind any assumption of standardized metrics, wherever they might be brandished. The myth of systemic normalization will inevitably incite the disintegration of the very paradox of the proverbial flaw that perfects the thing that it disrupts because rules must break their own rules. Of course, even this has exceptions: “All the way to the great synthesis, which must unite the two sides of a true ‘pataphysics’ . . .” (Deleuze 76).

Bök says, even this historical trajectory of exception must experience a type of revision, disrupting the normalization of pataphysical deviations so that with each incoming generation of pataphysicians there’s an awareness of their own impermanence, an anticipation of their inherent irrelevance (76). Oulipians love paying homage; there are names on the wall of Bibliothèque Elsa-Triolet: anagrams of famous authors, like
Gertrude Stein=\textit{strident grue}=strident crane. Then, aren’t there the Oulipian-proximate, like Danielewski? “Calvino tweaking on meth and conspiracy theories” is the description a Oulipian granted \textit{House of Leaves} (Becker 259). The Oulipian membership has been very limited, with mostly male members. However, recently there has been progress; elected in 2000, Anne Garréta became the first female member to join the group. Two years later, she won the \textit{Prix Médicis} for having “fame that didn’t match her talent.”

Can we consider possible ‘anticipatory plagiarism’ instead of influence? They hint this is so. It’s an interesting circumstance to consider how many of the Oulipians are retroactively discovered. Becker cites Roubaud’s debt to Lewis Carroll’s wordplay, yet “If Through the Looking Glass is based on a game of Chess, his loose methods reveal such an informality that it could never be called Oulipian,” (Becker 256). In June 2001 there was a proposed (and ratified) vote for the Oulipo to be nominated for a Nobel Prize. Years later, and they are still waiting.

For two years, Bergson was Jarry’s teacher, and many people have been known to read Bergson’s theories of laughter into pataphysics, but M Bourdon at \textit{lycée de Rennes} influenced Jarry, also. Bourdon scandalously taught untranslated Nietzsche to students, encouraging an orientation to laughter noticeably different than Bergson’s. Though there is no concrete evidence besides these lessons, most everyone agrees pataphysics owes a debt to Nietzsche. The pataphysical swerve is somewhere among these men.

Make no mistake, pataphysicians like some of these Oulipians, should never be imagined as practical jokesters. They do not need to force laughter because it is the very condition of life, itself. Pataphysics has always been the case, and we can see evidence in history: Cal Clements insists the sophists were the Greek pataphysicians (85).
Eventually, this project still ends with a number of questions. Though here I’ve laid out a method for teaching, these methods should never be misconstrued for anything like an answer. These constraints are merely one method of have writers practice another engagement with language: some days you run, and some days you lift weights. Because, before we take these ideas too seriously, or not seriously enough, we would do well to acknowledge that even a member thought Oulipians to be rats who ‘spend time building labyrinths from which to escape.’ If one is constructing the conditions under which they liberate themselves, is it even an act of liberation? Also, what about the anxiety around identifying the constraint--a desire to know the ‘prison guard’? Are constraints less about freedom and more about the ways in which one performs imprisonment?
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APPENDIX A

CATEGORY A: LETTER CONSTRAINTS

1. The only vowels you can use are I, E, and A
2. You can’t use the letter P
3. You must use the letter X exactly five times
4. Each word must have either an “R” a “Y” an “I” a “G” and “O” or “X” or an “L” in it
5. You cannot use the same letter twice in each word
6. Revise your sentence so the first letter of every word is also the same as the last letter of the word that precedes it:
   EX: She explains some exceptional language exercises.
7. No words can start with a vowel
8. Abecedarious: the first letter of each word runs through the alphabet
9. Pangram: each sentence must include each letter of the alphabet at least once
10. Rhopalism: each word in a sentence must have exactly one more letter than the word that came before it.
11. Alliteratives: all the words must begin with the same letter. (Another version permits you to change letters with each sentence or paragraph).
12. You can only use the first 13 letters of the alphabet

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87 A note on all the constraint ‘Categories’: these are obviously not discrete, static divisions (e.g., “You can only use words 5 letters long,” could both be in category A or B, for example.) Also, keep in mind that most of these are merely structures and letters, number, forms, etc. can easily be exchanged for others.
13. The letters “R” and “A” cannot ever appear next to each other (even across a space).

14. Exactly 4 words in each sentence must begin with the letter w

15. The first letter of each sentence in each of your paragraphs must spell out your name. Yes, you must use the longest version of your name (e.g., “Samantha,” not “Sam”).

16. You can only use words 5 letters long.

17. The first letter of each line (not sentence) has to spell out your mother’s name.

18. Pilish: The lengths of consecutive words match the values of the consecutive digits of pi (3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899, etc.)

19. Pick a color. You can only use words that start or end with the letters in that color.

20. Shuffle Scrabble tiles and pick out 1. You can only use words that begin with that letter.

21. You can only use the letters that have curves.
Appendix B

Category B: Sentence, Word, and Paragraph Constraints

1. Each sentence must have a synonym of the word “elusive”

2. You must use each of the conjunctions (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So) exactly one time in each paragraph

3. You cannot use any word ending in “ing”

4. Pick up a book (or use the one provided by your instructor), flip to the 18th page and look that the 8th word in the 18th line on the page. That word must appear exactly 10 times in your composition.

5. Each sentence must alternate between exactly three words and exactly twelve words

6. Each sentence must be a chiasmus and have either a semi-colon or a colon

7. You must have an extended metaphor in your paragraph

8. Each sentence must have 16 syllables

9. Each sentence must be written in hyperbole

10. Rewrite every sentence of your argument to be a rhetorical question.

11. Every other sentence must use personification.

12. You can only make ironic statements

13. Trade papers with a partner and rewrite each of their paragraphs using only 3 chiasmus sentences.

14. Your argument must be written in this order: “Counterargument, rebuttal, conclusion, example, example, example, introduction”

15. Write a paragraph containing 6 sentences in which you can arrange the sentences in any order.
16. Translate the main argument of the essay you just read into a rhetorical question

17. The first word and the last word in each sentence must rhyme

18. You should have the letters “art” appear consecutively at least 20 times

19. Each sentence must have a word ending in “tion”

20. You cannot use any words that begins and ends with the same letter

21. Do not repeat the same word twice in a paragraph

22. Each sentence can only use 15 letters. You can repeat the letters within the sentence, but you can’t use more than 15 different letters

23. Every other word has to rhyme

24. All of your adjective and adverbs have to end in L

25. Rewrite your paragraph to remove all the occurrences of one of its letters. Then rewrite it again, banning another letter, and another, and another.
APPENDIX C

CATEGORY C: GRAMMAR, STYLE, AND PUNCTUATION CONSTRAINTS

These can be useful for looking at the arbitrary nature of traditional writing conventions. Also, one of the reasons I consider cards to be the best medium for teachers to use is that you can weed out anything you don’t want to address in class. For example, if you aren’t interested in explaining to your class what a gerund is, take that card out.

1. You need to use the construction “not only. . . but also” in every paragraph.

2. You must have at least 3 being verbs in each sentence.

3. You can only use a verb if the last letter before it is an “n”

4. Identify each part of speech in this sentence and use that as a template for all future sentences, filling in the part of speech for each new line.

5. Each sentence must have an appositive.

6. Revise a popular advertising slogan, using the same parts of speech but different words. Use this revised slogan as the title of your response paper. It must accurately represent the content of your paper. Example: Gillette’s slogan “The Best a Man Can Get” ~ “The Tallest a Farm Could Be” (a response paper about Chicago’s developing vertical farms). The instructor can decide if the title comes first or the paper comes first.

7. The only transition words/phrases you can use are “therefore” and “paradoxically.” You can use them as many times as you want, but they’re the only ones you can use.

8. Each sentence must begin with a gerund.

9. Every other sentence must have a colon, and it should adhere to traditional rules of colon usage.

10. Your counterarguments can only be written as dependent clauses.
11. You cannot use demonstrative pronouns

12. Each sentence in your paragraph must have exactly two prepositional phrases

13. You must use a double negative exactly twice

14. You must use onomatopoeia 8 times in your paragraph.

15. Pick your favorite grammar element and use it exactly once (no more no less) in every sentence. (I like seeing what they pick. Also, don’t tell them why they are picking in advance, or it will influence their choice)

16. You must write two versions of your composition: one in active voice, one in passive voice

17. List three adverbs that effectively convey your argument

18. Every noun must have an appositive

19. You can only write in second person

20. Revise your paragraph only using punctuation

21. Each sentence must be in a compound sentence structure

22. Start every sentence with an introductory phrase

23. You cannot use any commas (keep in mind the sentences have to be punctuated using standard rules for formal writing). For an example, see the True History of the Kelly Gang by Peter Carey.

24. Every verb must have an adverb modifying it

25. You must use parentheses in every other sentence

26. You must have 12 transition words (e.g. however, consequently, etc.) in your text

27. Choose 3 adjectives. These are the only adjectives you can use in your paper.
APPENDIX D

CATEGORY D: ADVANCED PROCEDURAL/SOURCE-BASED CONSTRAINTS

1. Compose your own writing constraint for another student

2. Homophones: replace each word with a word that sounds like the word phonetically, syllable for syllable. For extra assistance you can use a homophone generator online.

3. Your paper must be comprised solely of song lyrics. (optional: addition at instructor’s discretion: limit time period/artist of songs allowed.) (another option: addition at instructors discretion: cite each sentence in the footnotes).

4. Rewrite any text of your choosing.

5. Fibonacci: Each word (in order) has to have the number of letters matching the Fibonacci sequence: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8,

6. Palimpsest: Take a book and mark out letters or words you don’t want and leave behind what you do.

7. Switch papers with a partner and rewrite each of their sentences to be exactly seven words long.

8. Rewrite your text using only one-syllable words.

9. Cut-up a source text by sentences or words. Rearrange the pieces to make a different composition

10. Use the dictation function on your computer to record your text. Starting from the unaltered result of the diction, you can change only three things on each line.

11. Take the third sentence from your second paragraph. Count how many of each letter you use—you must use exactly those letters to write another sentence. Or each paragraph must use the same letters in kind and number.)

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88 Many of these are ‘traditional’ Oulipian constraints and procedures
89 This is intentionally vague for the various approaches it encourages.
12. Start with a page of text from a previous assignment or essay of yours. Change 6 words in each sentence, keeping the other words the same. Turn in the original and “revised” version.

13. Oulipian “prisoner’s” constraint: you must excludes all letters that rise above or below the base line (i.e., b,d,f,g,h,j,k,l,p,q,t, and y). For the record, this leaves the letters a,c,e,i,m,n,o,r,s,u,v,w,x and z. (The inspiration of this form is to imitate the ingenuity of a prisoner whose supply of paper is limited.) Note, there is a free app in the Apple store which provides the “prisoner’s keyboard,” though some think this is a type of “cheating.”

14. N+7: replace each noun with the 7th noun after its place in whichever dictionary you have handy (or a dictionary identified by your instructor). Compose a close reading of your new composition for homework. (If the instructor permits, there is an N+7 generator online.)

15. Snowball: the first sentence is one word, and then each additional sentence increases in length by exactly one word.

16. Switch papers with a partner and revise their work to remove all occurrence of the letter “m”

17. Google your last name. Click on the first link that appears. Write down the first 20 words that appear on the website (Take care not to privilege body text. Start at the very top of the page and write every singe word you see). You must use those 20 words exactly once in your composition.

18. Put your text into Wordle. Identify the 4 biggest words. Rewrite your text removing those 4 words.

19. For ten days write the first word you hear every day. Note the time and context of the word. If you forget, pick the 10th word on the 10th page of the first book you see after realizing you forgot. What are your 10 words? You must use them each exactly 5 times (no more, no less) in the writing assignment given by your instructor.

20. Semester-long class paper. I assign one notebook to the class. Each student is assigned a week to have the class notebook. You must contribute 3-4 pages of material and the only requirement is that it must engage the material that came before it.
APPENDIX E

CATEGORY E: REMEDIATION CONSTRAINTS

1. Playlist: construct a playlist for your text.

2. Food: translate your response paper into a baked good. Bake the item and bring it in to class (It doesn’t have to be sweet. It doesn’t have to be baked by you).

3. Create an act of graffiti

4. Pick three smells that best translate your text. What order would you have your audience smell them?

5. Translate your text into storyboards, complete with graphics, using this site.

6. Make a meme that conveys a key component of your argument.

7. Make your argument into a Rube Goldberg machine

8. Give your text a mascot. What does the costume and logo look like?

9. If your argument were a cheese, what type of cheese would it be? Cite at least 3 characteristics of that cheese and explain how your argument represents those characteristics. (If this is a longer assignment, have students bring in samples of their cheese to share—you can bring the crackers.)

10. Advertising campaign: identify a celebrity spokesperson, pick 1-5 colors that would comprise the campaign’s signature look (use the precise html color code. There are a number of free resources to help with this), design a logo, and write a slogan.

11. Write a set of directions for completing a task (I like to make it something that they can do in class, like braid hair, make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or draw a rabbit). Have other students follow the instructions precisely to the letter and see 1) if they can complete the instructions and 2) if the desired outcome is achieved.
12. Crossword puzzle: identify key concepts and terms for your argument. Use those as answers and write clues for each. There are a number of free crossword generators online.

13. Commercial: compose, design, cast, and shoot a 30-45 second commercial for your argument.

14. Your argument must be made in the style of a memoir (in first person).

15. Write only in slang and idioms (you can mix and match any era).

16. Create a board game based on your text, complete with a rule book and any accompanying components.

17. What film genre would your text be? Who would be the lead actors?

18. Which popular TV character would personify your argument? Identify and explain which characteristics translate your claim, evidence, and conclusion.

19. Plan a one-week vacation itinerary for your project. Where would it go? What would it do? (Don’t forget details like what kind of transportation would it take? What accommodations would it use?)

20. Plan a seven course meal and compose and design the menu accordingly

21. Create an Infographic

22. Write and perform a TED Talk.

23. Late Night Talk Show: You’re a guest and you have 4 minutes exactly to tell a charming anecdote about your topic (for extra fun, you can be the show host and interrupt them, like regular hosts do to see how they handle the interruption).

24. Write your paper in the style of Dr. Seuss book.

25. Deliver your paper’s argument like a live sporting event’s play-by-play.
APPENDIX F

CATEGORY F: “ILLEGIBLE”90 CONSTRAINTS

These are examples of already-composed conceptual constraints. These could be adapted to be constraints, but I’ve found that for even the most eager advanced-level student, they can be overwhelming to try to do. Instead, I find them useful for giving them to the students to close-read and asking them “How did you read this?” These also serve as the focal point for really generative discussions about the nature of the paratext in constraint-based writing—how does not knowing what the constraint/procedure was change the way you read the text as opposed to not knowing? Almost universally students crave the paratextual explanation. I’ve found it’s not unlike students wanting a teacher to tell them what a traditional work of ‘literature’ ‘means.’ I have always introduced this section with “The Death of the Author” and “What is an Author?” but that’s the pretty obvious route. There are certainly other texts out there that would make terrific parings.

Some examples:

1. Judith Goldman’s *dictée* - Judith Goldman records all of the words beginning with “un” (in order of appearance) in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick.* 91

2. Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day* - a complete transcription of the entire edition of the *New York Times* from Friday, September 1, 2000

90 Inspired by *Reading the Illegible* by Craig Dworkin in which he reads texts that practice “radical formalism.”

91 I used language from the paratexts of these examples in *Against Expression* for the descriptions.
3. Derek Beaulieu’s *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* – a visual map of each unique letter in the first line charted through the page occurrence on a page from the first line.

4. Sally Alatalo’s *Unforseen Alliances* – using only words derived from dime-store romance novels she made a list of 1,878 romance titles and used the titles to write lines in poems.

5. Tom Orange’s *I Saw You* – collates all the personal ads from that column during one week in November 2000 and parses them into the 5 formulaic segments that the personal ad genre has come to acquire: 1) location of encounter, 2) description of ad placer, 3) description of object of desire, 4) narrative context of the encounter, 5) an expression of hope for a future rendezvous.

6. Darren Wershler’s *Tapeworm Foundry* – see chapter 2 (p. 49) of this dissertation for an excerpt.


8. Rory Macbeth’s *The Bible (alphabetized)* – Every word of *The Bible* in alphabetical order.

9. Steve McCaffery’s *Fish Also Rise* – “A homolinguistic translation of the first page of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. McCaffery’s “Fish Also Rise” translates Joyce from English into English.”

10. Joseph Kosoth’s *Purloined* – Begun in 1966 and completed in 2000, this text is composed entirely of single pages from more than a hundred different novels of various genres to form a single work.