10. SKELETON FEEDBACK
AND DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE

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In literature classes we tend to describe what is going on in a story, poem, or novel, rather than judge it or find mistakes. Inherent in such an approach is respect for the text as a way to see the text better—allowing the text to speak on its own. You will benefit from asking for the same kind of respect for your writing, and from showing that kind of respect to the writing of others. We suggest here two ways for describing a text.

Skeleton Feedback

A good way to analyze the reasoning and the structure in almost any essay is to get readers to answer the following questions:

- What do you see as the main point/claim/thesis of the whole paper?
- What are the main reasons or subsidiary points? It's fine to list them as they come—in any order.
- Taking each reason in turn, what support or evidence or examples are given for it—or could be given?
- What assumptions does the paper seem to make about the topic or issue?
- That is, what does the essay take for granted?
- What assumptions does the paper seem to make about the audience? That is, who or what kinds of readers does the writer seem to be talking to (and how are they most likely to react to the ideas in the paper)? How does the writer seem to treat the readers, for example, as enemies? friends? children? That is, what is the writer's stance toward the audience?
- Finally, what suggestions do you have? About the order or organization?
- About things to add or drop or change?

It probably makes the most sense for readers to answer these questions in writing and at leisure—with the text in hand. However, you could get this kind of feedback orally if you have a group that will cooperate in working out shared answers to the questions.

Descriptive Outline

This procedure (developed by Kenneth Bruffee) involves a sustained process of analyzing the meaning and function of discourse. You can't really do a descriptive outline unless you have the text in hand and take time: this is a kind of feedback that needs to be written.

The procedure is to write a says sentence and a does sentence for each paragraph or section, and then for the whole essay. A says sentence summarizes the meaning or message. A does sentence describes the function—what the paragraph or piece is trying to do or accomplish with readers (for example, "This paragraph introduces the topic of the essay by means of a humorous anecdote" or "This paragraph brings up an objection that some readers might feel, and then tries to answer that objection").

The key to writing does sentences is to keep them different from the says sentences—keep them from even mentioning the content of the paragraph. Thus, you shouldn't be able to tell from a does sentence whether the paragraph is talking about cars or ice cream. Here is a does sentence that slides into being a says sentence: "This paragraph gives an example of how women's liberation has affected men more than it has women." To make it a real does sentence, remove any mention of the ideas or content and talk only about function: "This paragraph gives an example" would do. Or perhaps better, "This paragraph gives an example designed to surprise the reader."

The power in both skeleton feedback and descriptive outlines comes from the distance and detachment they provide. Thus, they are useful for giving yourself feedback—particularly when you feel all tangled or caught up in your piece from having worked long and closely on it.
"THE GREEK DECISION" BY JEREMY BORAKS

Fraternities supply the social life for many students in the United States. For more than a century they have been home to numerous amounts of bustling college men. Over the years many people have looked at fraternity people as a real nuisance. Many people who have been in the fraternity whether or not to join. When joining a house you must make a concerted effort to examine the fraternity's system. When making the decision whether to get involved or not, please consider the positives as well as the negatives. Keeping an open mind and listening may give you a better sense of what the Greek area is actually about.

Fraternities have gotten a bad rap over the many years of their existence. In reality, a fraternity does many things which they don't get any credit for. While I was a brother at the Pike chapter in Colorado, the brotherhood worked with the Special Olympics on an annual basis. We would work with mentally handicapped people at a local ski resort, helping them race through gates on the mountain. The feeling you get when helping a person with a handicap is like climbing to the peak of Mount Everest without a harness on. The look on these beautiful human beings' faces when they finished the ski race was second to none. Being involved in the fraternity system has allowed me to get involved in events such as working with these people.

While pledging Pike two years ago, I was unsure if I really wanted to be associated with the system. I thought that if I joined I would be giving up on finding friends that were diverse. What I found out was that a fraternity has people from all walks of life. There were people from the east, west, north, and south, and all were somewhat different in their individual way. There were people who believed in God and others who felt that God was a figment of society's imagination. There are many other things that made each person unique in his own little way. This was the deciding factor that pushed me to the house because I could have my own identity and I could still get involved.

Being active in the fraternity has allowed me to gain some very important knowledge about decision making. I am the assistant treasurer and in charge of the taxes for the Theta Mu chapter and its employees. This will give me something to make the recruiter want to hire me when I am applying for a job. The recruiter will think that I am the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae and will hire me over another less qualified individual. There are many great opportunities to get ahead in the future by actively working for the house, today. Working for the house will reap immediate rewards because results will be seen as soon as the work is completed. Chipping in to get a goal accomplished will help you in group decision making in the future.

Since moving to the University of Massachusetts I have been involved in sports through the fraternity. This has allowed me to get close to some guys that I may have never come in contact with, otherwise. When playing in a tight game, my brothers and I had to work as a team to win. They selected me to shoot the final shot to win the game. My heart went into my throat, but I wasn't going to let my team down. When the shot went in, the only thing I could think of was what if I missed and the other team was victorious. When the shot finally swished through the nylon net I let out a shriek in victory as my teammates embraced me, giving me the feeling that I fit in. These types of stories remind me about how positive a fraternity setting can be.

The negatives that are associated with a fraternity are very real and must be factored in when choosing whether or not to join. When joining a house you must now be responsible for the actions of all the members. A member of my house was arrested for vandalism a few years ago leaving the reputation that our whole house was a bunch of punks and anytime we mentioned that we were members, people wanted to slate us with a silver sword. The members must work very hard to regain the confidence in the community due to the actions of just one member.

Fraternities can be very diverse in the make up of a single house, but in joining a house you are cutting up the university population and entering into only one piece of the pie. Joining Pike opened up many doors for me, but I lost a very important relationship due to my association with the Greek system. My friend felt that I was neglecting our year long friendship for a bunch of superficial friendships that would only be limited to partying. You must sacrifice something in order to gain something else if that something else is more important to you. I'm not saying that I am glad about losing this friend, but it is a choice I had to make.

The relationships formed in the fraternity are not always peaches and cream like some outsiders perceive. Of course, you join a fraternity because you like the brotherhood, but there are always certain individuals who you would like to see take an eternal trip to the small, bone chilling planet of Pluto. When I was a pledge at the house at the University of Colorado there was a brother who was as big as a large oil tanker and as mean as a cobra. He would always go out of his way to make me look like a bumbling idiot. At parties he would call me over to where he was standing and verbally abuse me in front of his overweight girlfriend. She would laugh and all I wanted to do was sock her in her distorted face. This guy is someone that I still dislike today and if this was the individual I met first while pledging I might have decided to remain an independent. These annoyances that aren't pleasant may ruin it for their fraternity and may ruin it for me, the pledge.

When making a decision whether to join the Greek system or remain independent you must weigh the positives and negatives. Once you have looked carefully at both sides of the fence, then you should make an educated decision. This decision will effect your life until the day you die.
Descriptive Outline

One Reader:

First Paragraph
- Says: that many people view fraternities negatively and the student has to think about what he has to say.
- Does: asks people to consider changing their minds about their topic.

Second Paragraph
- Says: that fraternities work with handicapped people.
- Does: appeals to readers' social conscience.

Third Paragraph
- Says: fraternities are made up of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Does: counters one of the most prevalent arguments against his subject.

Fourth Paragraph
- Says: discusses how a fraternity allowed him to have the sort of experience which would help him in his job market.
- Does: gives a bread-and-butter sort of reason for readers to see his subject favorably.

Fifth Paragraph
- Says: through participating in fraternity sports teams, the author feels he fit in.
- Does: gives another positive aspect of his topic.

Sixth Paragraph
- Says: how being a member of a fraternity can sometimes cause others to connect you with an undesirable member.
- Does: shows a negative side of his decision (although the author doesn't think this is necessarily a negative).

Seventh Paragraph
- Says: that deciding to join a fraternity caused him to lose a good friend.
- Does: gives another negative side of his decision.

Eighth Paragraph
- Says: he has to associate sometimes with members he doesn't like.
- Does: gives another negative side of his decision.

Ninth Paragraph
- Says: that anyone deciding whether or not to join a fraternity should look at all sides because this is an important decision.
- Does: ends with a conclusion that seems more open minded or less partisan than much of the essay.

Another Reader:

For the whole essay
- Says: I feel a conflict of messages: fraternities are good; the problems are very serious.
- Does: I feel a conflict of values: trying to persuade us to agree with you; telling us to make up our own mind.
- Says, first paragraph: Keep an open mind about deciding whether to join a fraternity.
- Does, first paragraph: Establishes the topic in an extremely general manner.
- Says, second paragraph: Fraternities engage in productive activities, for example, the Special Olympics.
- Does, second paragraph: Attempts to surprise reader and supply insight into the general topic.
- Says, third paragraph: The final factor that made me want to join the fraternity was diversity.
- Does, third paragraph: Supplies further insight into the topic.
- Says, fourth paragraph: The skills I have gained in decision making will help me in the job-hunting process.
- Does, fourth paragraph: Gives the reader an idea of my role in the event.
- Says, fifth paragraph: I won a basketball game for my team.
- Does, fifth paragraph: Describes feelings of camaraderie. Implies that these feelings apply to the overall message.
- Says, sixth paragraph: Everyone is responsible for each other.
- Does, sixth paragraph: Addresses the negative side of the topic and explains it.
- Says, seventh paragraph: I had to sacrifice a friendship for my fraternity.
- Does, seventh paragraph: Continues the work of paragraph six; reveals some private aspects of my own character.
- Says, eighth paragraph: Some people in the fraternity are antagonistic.
- Does, eighth paragraph: Describes a confrontation; continues to address negative aspects.
- Says, ninth paragraph: Be careful when you decide whether or not to enter a fraternity.
- Does, ninth paragraph: Gives the reader a warning.
"The Greek Decision"

Skeleton Feedback

One Reader:

Starts with a general statement about fraternities and the recognition that many don't approve of them. He presents one argument with an example, then a second argument with some back-up reasoning, then another argument with an example, then something about the fraternity and sports. Then he moves to negatives: gives one and an example, another and an example, and a third and an example. Closes with a balanced statement about the decision to join.

Another Reader:

Main Claim

Although there are some drawbacks involved, fraternity life is a valuable asset for college students.

Reasons and Support

- Fraternity members become involved in community and national services and events. (Support: Special Olympics anecdote.)
- Fraternity members get involved with others who come from different cultures or environments. (Support: Description of diversity.)
- Members can learn about decision-making. (Support: I am assistant treasurer; in charge of taxes.)
- Members are responsible for each other; they're a team. (Support: Basketball anecdote; after-effects of vandalism.)
- Someone who wants to join a fraternity has to be ready to make sacrifices or compromises. (Support: I lost touch with my friend.)
- There can be antagonism between some fraternity brothers. (Support: Hostile fraternity brother.)

Assumptions

- It is good to be part of a group or brotherhood.
- Diversity creates a productive atmosphere.

Readers and Audience

He could be talking to high school seniors, or prospective students; however, he is really only speaking to those who are already interested in joining a fraternity. No one who really doesn't want to join one will want to read about the negative aspects of becoming a fraternity brother.

People who are already fraternity members will appreciate what he says about nearly everything. Those who find fraternities aversive will try to disagree with what he's saying, except for the parts where he admits to negative aspects.

He treats the reader nearly as an equal, but there is a feeling that he's writing for people who are slightly younger than him, with less of an idea of what they want to do in college.

A Third Reader

Main Claim

Fraternities are a good thing.

Main Points (as they occur) and Support, Evidence, Examples

- Fraternities are important for many students. You give no support at this point.
- They are often criticized. No reasons at this point—but later on, good examples.
- Fraternities do good things that often aren't recognized. You support this with an interesting personal example. But the logic is tricky here. Guys don't have to be in a fraternity to do this kind of volunteer work. However you could have told us that fraternities get the kinds of guys doing volunteer work who wouldn't normally do it.
- Fraternities have all sorts of people in them—not just a narrow range. No support.
- I learned about decision making and got valuable practice as assistant treasurer. Supported by interesting personal example. But I wonder whether everyone gets this kind of experience. Seems like you could have talked about everyone having to take part in self-governance (if that's true)—and how few people get much experience at that.
- Being in a fraternity helps me be close to fellow members—especially in sports. Supported by interesting personal example. Illustrates and convinces me of the point.
- But as a member I am held responsible for the actions of fellow members. A vivid example. Illustrates and convinces me of the point.
- Fraternities cut people off from some parts of the university population. Supported by interesting personal example. Illustrates and convinces me of the point.
- Fraternities make you associate with some people you don't like. Supported by interesting personal example. And yet the example backfires because it gives the picture of you wanting to punch out a girl just because she is the friend of someone you don't like and laughed at you and you find her unattractive. Makes you sound like a "fraternity punk."
- People better think carefully about whether to join a fraternity. This is said very clearly, and it seems a good conclusion given the strongly balanced points you were making. For some reason, I missed it on my first readings and assumed you were more gung-ho at the end than in fact you are. Was this just my bad reading or is there something about the way you make this non-gung-ho point?

Assumptions

- We need to be individuals; but we need to fit in.
- If we just "look at both sides of the issue" we have done enough: we don't have to figure out how they relate to each other.

Our only choice is joining or not joining. You don't consider the possibility of "fraternal" groups or clubs other than fraternities or colleges without fraternities.

Suggestions

I didn't realize till I read the skeleton feedback that your opening main statement (fraternities are good) is different from the closing one (you have to make up your own mind). Now I'm not sure where you really stand. I feel you have to decide which is your main point. I'd opt more for the tone of the ending one—and make the whole thing more questioning, less gung-ho. Or work through the conflict more.