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### Write to Express, Not to Impress

I grew up in a multilingual background from which I learnt to speak three languages fluently: English, French, and Wolof (the native language of Senegal). However, of these three languages, I prefer to think that English is my first language because it is the one I am most fluent in, notwithstanding the fact that I speak the latter at home. Perhaps this is due to my early exposure to reading English literature. I was taught to read at an early age compared to my counterparts. Before I began attending elementary school, when I was about four years old, my mother would teach me to read some of my favorite nursery rhymes to myself, namely *Green Eggs and Ham* or other works by Dr. Seuss. I thus developed an alacrity for reading, it became a pastime that I indulged quite routinely. As I grew older, I naturally read more literature of notable caliber after I started elementary school. I remember reading novels like *Things Fall Apart* by C. Achebe or *Journey to Jo'burg* by B. Naidoo in the fifth grade on my way home from football practice. And I suppose my advancements in reading allowed me to assimilate a rather large vocabulary by the time I began writing essays in the sixth grade.

Throughout my adolescence, from the sixth grade to the eleventh grade, I was led to believe that my essay-writing skills were bolstered by a precocious vocabulary; my use of 'big words' even served me well in the IGCSEs. I was both grateful for and distinctly proud of my English language skills; I thought I was an excellent writer, I thought I was the best, I believed I could write an essay about anything. However, it was not until my first year in the International

Baccalaureate (IB) program that I realized a broad vocabulary is not the most significant criterion for good academic writing.

One thing I appreciated about the IB program was how well it prepares its students for university. Throughout the two-year course, I was constantly overwhelmed with assignments for several class subjects, most of which required a lot of writing. However, it was only with one of these subjects for which I wrote assignments solely to improve my writing skills, and that was my English language and literature class. My teacher for this class was Mr. Churchyard (we preferred to call him 'Churchy'), a young highly-educated Cambridge graduate. In his class, we were required to read a plethora of novels, poems, and extracts and to write analytical essays in response, as per the IB syllabus guidelines. For the first semester of the course, I wrote decent analytical essays on literary works, namely *If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi. However, it was my shortcomings after a particular assignment that led me to realize the limitations of my language skills.

As part of our IB English coursework, all students had to read three narrative books that emphasize the philosophy of Existentialism. We spent most of our class time in the second term reading *The Metamorphosis* by F. Kafka, *If This Is a Man* by P. Levi, and *The Stranger* by A. Camus. After having completed all three books, our assignment was to select any two of the three books and to write independent comparative essays on the two texts. I chose to compare the work of Kafka to that of Camus. We were given one month to complete the assignment before the due date, but the first draft was due in two weeks. So during my weekends, I naturally looked over the notes I made on the two books and wrote arduously, trying my best to compose the most prolific essay I could to submit as my first draft. In my essay, I decided to

explore and compare the symbolism of love and the representation of family values in both narratives. I polished my essay as well as I could, extracting the most profound symbols and ideas in the books and using rather impressive words to explain them in my essay. The goal that I set for myself was to write an excellent essay that could even surpass the academic standards expected from a university student. And I thought that the best way for me to accomplish this mission was to use complex terms to explain my interpretations of the concepts conveyed in the narratives. I was able to complete my first draft two days prior to the due date, and I decided to submit it early in order to receive immediate feedback from Churchy.

As I watched Churchy examine my essay, I noticed that his facial expressions were no different than they were when he read my previous essays. Hence, I expected to receive a positive response, as usual. However, when he returned my assignment, I was shocked by the flurry of red that was inked all over my paper. Churchy and I then sat to discuss why my work did not fully satisfy the requirements of the assignment. He first said to me, "Ousmane, I feel that you have emphasized some excellent and very original ideas in this essay, but your delivery is too flamboyant". The word that struck me here was "flamboyant". I definitely knew what it meant, but I was stricken because none of my previous teachers have ever used it to describe the content of my writing. Churchy then elaborated, "you need to realize that often when you write, you seem to be writing to yourself. You and I may fully understand the message in your writing, but to an ordinary reader, the language you incorporate may seem esoteric because you use words that are rarely heard in everyday language. In academic writing, you must write to express and not to impress". He continued to say that when I write, I need to keep the audience in mind. I learned that I must try to write using a generic standard of diction to allow any reader