

## a *grassroots* article that is a spiral

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In this article, bougie (he/they) conducts a writing experiment in which he attempts to embrace their tendency to spiral when writing. They posit that spiraling writing is one example of a slightly off-key approach to (free)writing, a brainstorming exercise that might prove useful for writers who feel lost in the messiness of their own thoughts when they try to compose something.

I start my first draft of this article by composing out loud: I talk, and the Google Docs voice typing software writes for me. It drops in a period every time I take a breath, but that's something I can edit out later. I'm doing things this way, I tell my laptop, "Because I want to go to sleep. But I need to finish this article, and to do that I need to write anything at all before I go to sleep so I'll have something to work with tomorrow." My idea for this essay comes from Thursday night procrastination panic more than any official brainstorming session: this essay itself is its own brainstorming session, or the first draft of it was, anyway. It's not the kind of writing process I teach my students. I'm thinking that maybe I'll structure this article as a spiral. The first paragraph of the introduction to my Master's thesis was kind of structured in a similar way: I just kept talking and then letting this paragraph go on and on for several pages; I wrote about ADHD (recorded as "80HD" by Google Docs) and about rants that go on for a long time. And writing clearly. Queerly. Experimenting by really just letting myself go (whatever that phrase means) wherever my mind went. Rather than trying to make the jump from one paragraph to the next as if they were stepping stones, I imagined that the trajectory of my introduction was a different kind of movement.

Instead of forward, downward, I'm thinking that it would be interesting to format or structure *this* article like that, to just leap down the rabbit hole that is this first paragraph, list on hand of the things I want to talk about. And then just see where I end up if I just keep going and circling around. And I said rabbit hole—so I'm just thinking of Alice falling into Wonderland and how long that fall was. Lewis Carroll could have used two words to tell us about it in the original book, first published in 1865. (She fell.) Instead of dropping in one fast rush, Alice does so for several pages: “[e]ither the well was very deep,” Carroll writes, “or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next” (3). When I look back at that first chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, actually, Carroll's narration itself feels a bit like a spiral. As one winding paragraph recounting Alice's fall goes:

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? “I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?” [Alice] said aloud. “I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—” (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the schoolroom, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) “—yes, that's about the right distance—but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?” (Alice had no idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but thought they were nice grand words to say.) (4–5)

Like me, Carroll can't resist adding things in parentheses, relegating them into asides because he knows they're extra, in older and more contemporary senses of the word; parentheses are sidetracking the plot of the novel rather than moving readers towards what will happen next; they linger in description and idle meditation like an overextended sentence. Alice spends so much time falling that she makes several attempts to amuse herself as she drops, noticing different things, talking to herself, dozing off, beginning to dream. What would happen if Carroll just kept going with his parenthetical asides? Most of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a sidetrack itself, a dream that its main character wanders around in before waking up to do something else more grounded in “the real world.” In the excerpt above, we get sidetracks running off that larger sidetrack, a mix of parentheses and Alice herself, even, talking in asides the narrator feels the need to interrupt with hyphens. (At least one of them needs to keep moving towards an end.) Maybe the narrator or Alice or both of them have ADHD (or maybe it's just me). I'm typing now, for the record, instead of dictating these words aloud. I never would've gotten onto thinking about Alice if I'd started out typing this document by hand, though, rather than rambling out loud alone in my

apartment, talking to my computer at ten at night on a Thursday and hoping to avoid disturbing my neighbors. I should close the window, maybe. I just love the thought of following this paragraph down, down, down: instead of concisely considering some of the ideas I've shared above and then moving on, I'm getting deeper and deeper into things, planning to weave other topics from my to-do list in as they become relevant (or as I see points in this spiral where they'd pop in nicely). (That's how I envision this essay, anyway.) Not just one long paragraph, but a few long sentences, as well. I meant for this to be an article about messiness and how it can be both a good thing and a bad thing when it comes to writing, or both a helpful thing and an unhelpful thing, but I wonder if that's what I want to focus on, or if I just want to talk about spiraling and about allowing one's self to do so. What if this article is a spiral about spirals? I was just thinking, anyway, about how I didn't really know where to go with the messiness thing, how to start or what I really wanted to say—so maybe spirals are where it's at. I'll talk about spirals by spiraling. I haven't thought much before about spiraling and writing, about spiraling maybe being a good thing: when I use that word, I'm usually talking about my mental health. If I tell a friend that I'm "spiraling," just the one word, what I mean is that I'm spiraling downwards, inwards, towards a direction in which I don't want to go. I mean that I'm sitting in class and I want to pay attention to what my peers or instructor are saying, but I'm caught up in my own thoughts and worries too much to stick to doing that, pulled around and around a circle that makes me think of hurricanes and tornadoes. I feel unable to eject myself from that trajectory, more and more unable to think about or perceive the world around me, people talking and moving and driving and walking away and towards me and in all other directions. I'm imagining spiraling with this article, though, as less of an anxious thing: I enter this storm giving it my consent, actually hoping that it will whip me around and pull me deeper and deeper towards a center. I want to use that energy to keep myself writing, to reach an ending, any ending, a word count or a conclusion or something that sounds very nice and very final. It's been a long week/month/first semester in which I'm slowly crawling—spiraling?—towards my PhD in English, and I'm tired and tempted to sleep, but a spiral has a shape to it that I can picture myself writing in, a movement that pulls me along. The five-paragraph essay, in comparison, seems all starts and stops, moving from one big idea to the next, trying to spiral just a little in the second half of every paragraph before transitioning smoothly into another. Like diving, those paragraphs are an art form about surrendering yourself to just think some shit for a bit and toss out a critical thought or another—something that isn't a summary or a quote—then coming back up from that dive, surfacing to catch a breath before the next dive. Writing that way is maybe more organized—although a spiral has

its own structure and organization, I think—but I don't think essay structures that use paragraphs the way I've learned to use them have the kind of raw, tugging energy that a spiral does. I might write a few paragraphs of a paper and then get stuck, have no idea where to go next, and I could keep writing from there, but what I write next might not have anything to do with the previous things I've written, or it might not support my initial thesis or be about the same topic at all. So I wait, in this situation, until I can think of something to say that does fit the five-paragraph essay structure: something that I can transition into smoothly from my last good thought, something on the same topic that I started with when I began to write. If my initial goal, topic, structure in mind, is a spiral, though, I have much less of an excuse to get or feel stuck; I only need to write whatever occurs to me next, and that thing *shouldn't* be what I was talking about at the beginning of my spiral. This isn't stream-of-consciousness writing: I'm not writing whatever comes to mind here; I'm still pausing to consider what to write next and tossing out ideas left and right, things that don't feel relevant or interesting or don't go in the direction I want to go with this spiral. I don't know at all where this article will end, or when, or what it will look like once I begin revising it—I don't know if this draft will be usable at all—but I'm not just writing down anything at all, either. I'm sticking to some goal or another, to writing what I want to write in this article and to the conventions I know I need to adhere to or at least stay near to. I can experiment like this in an article written for *Grassroots*, maybe, but I can't just start rambling about my favorite show (it's *Critical Role*, anyway). I need to keep audience in mind, original intentions: this is something for readers of *Grassroots* and not Twitter; I can't use too much jargon from my specific branch of English studies. There needs to be something here that other writers and writing researchers could find helpful or interesting or thought-provoking. I'm trying to steer my spiral, I suppose, through all those loops, wickets, constraints, whatever. The spiral provides a bit of its own energy after I feed an initial little bit of energy into it: a first sentence, a few 500-word stretches, now a first 1500-words. The spiral makes its own momentum, taking that initial push I gave and speeding up in the same way, maybe, that an object dropped off a tall building will fall faster and faster. An object in motion stays in motion, or something like that. I remember learning in high school physics that when we turn a curve when driving a car, some energy goes into that turn, some force, so we slow down a little, need to speed up again to get back to the speed we had entering that curve. I've noticed it while driving. In the same way, I think, I need to expend a little extra energy beyond that initial offering to steer the spiral I'm constructing here, to reject possible directions it might take, to try to write for a specific audience (to try to steer towards some kind of helpful, smart-sounding end despite my not knowing what that end will be as I write). There

are already things that I'd like to go back and change with this current draft as I write this all out for the first time; I'm expending energy, maybe, in not allowing myself to go back and revise things. That'd be exiting, the spiral, I think—and the thought of coming back to this frontier between words and no words, this half-written page I keep adding to as I type, makes me nervous. If I go back and revise, I'll have lost my momentum, and the spiral will have lost its shape; it would loop back into itself, if I did that, go back up (or wherever it came from), and, although I'm not sure I can say why at this moment, it feels like that'd be disturbing this whole structure that I'm building. I suppose I'm committing myself here to heading further down this spiral because I'm wondering if it could be a helpful process for some writers, an activity to try, or even just a different way of imagining the sessions where we sit down to write (if we sit while doing it at all). If we don't write in spirals, how do we write? How do we draft versus revise? It feels like the most obvious use of a spiral like this would be coming up with new ideas, brainstorming in a shape that's literally that of a storm. This exercise isn't unlike the practice of freewriting, just writing whatever comes to mind in an effort to get one's thoughts going, to get used to writing things down, to face one's fear of the blank page by just writing something, anything at all. I'd argue, though, that my spiral here isn't free: I hope it will head in one particular direction, that it will stay on this broad topic of spiraling as a way of writing, just digging deeper into it rather than hopping from idea to idea (each idea with a paragraph of its own, paragraphs like islands that I could hop to and from, or attempt to, anyway). There's such a thing as focused freewriting, which tries to linger more on a single topic, but even that term doesn't feel like it entirely covers what I'm trying to do with this article. I'm thinking of this document not as a means to some other end—as brainstorming—but as an end in and of itself. I'm trying to make something I could actually show to others, to work into a final product via revision. I'm not just spiraling for my own sake or to think of something to write; I'm spiraling with the thought that this way of structuring an essay—or just a series of ideas—could be an interesting way to present all these thoughts to readers, or to attempt to, anyway. The image that comes to mind for me here is a spinning pottery wheel, the kind that spins on and on with a lump of clay in the middle. People (in movies, anyway) put their hands on that clay in order to shape it, and the clay just keeps spinning; steady pressure on it in combination with that motion forms what end up becoming even grooves, a vase or bowl or cup whose base is always a perfect circle. Am I forming a vase by writing in this spiral? Is all of this spinning? Am I putting a steady hand to a spinning object, to the 2,300 words I've written thus far? Is the base of this essay a perfect circle? I'm not sure that it is—it feels very possible that I could veer off track in a manner that rendered this piece unhelpful or unintelligible,

something that didn't or doesn't stick enough to the conventions a *Grassroots* article might or must. Maybe the metaphor just doesn't stretch that far. Or maybe I'm trying to build something more specific than just *something* out of clay. I could make something/anything circular using a pottery wheel, but I can't do just anything to my clay if I want to make something that I can drink out of later. I can't bring the top of a bowl to a point, it wouldn't be usable (not as a bowl, anyway.) And I'm hoping that this piece, if it's not too oddly shaped, could prove usable or useful in some way or another. If it can't be used for one purpose, then maybe it can suit another. My eyes are red from staring at my laptop screen so long while writing this, from me being in class for three hours before this and doing five hours of work in my campus office before that. Maybe spirals aren't the best for one's health; they don't allow for too many breaks, if any at all, not if I want to keep the momentum I have going. My eyes are a bit itchy, and I'm at the point where I've fallen deep enough down my well, possibly, that I'm struggling now to remember how this article started, to try to think about how to land this plane. What does this whole mess have to do with writing, writing research, students, pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, genre? Genre has come up a few times so far: I've mentioned my attempts to steer this spiral through at least some of the genre conventions of a *Grassroots* article. I've been trying to find a balance between this experiment that I'm conducting and the conventions I've decided are most important to stick with. I'm also rethinking my identity as a writer and writing researcher a bit here: I initially intended to write this piece about accepting my own messiness at times, but I'm finding a new way to think about the ways I can write an essay, instead. I've never written in a spiral quite like this one, not intentionally as I am now, and I'm thinking of my writing somewhat differently now. What new possibilities does the practice of spiraling open for me? What possibilities could it hold for others? Would it be interesting or relevant to touch on mental health again here? I just like, I suppose, that in this essay I've begun building I get to embrace spiraling rather than keep trying not to do it. I'm still limiting myself, not writing just anything, but the writing comes easier. Maybe it's flowing (whatever that word means). I tried something similar last week when giving a presentation in a class I'm taking this semester: I put everything I wanted to share on one slide and told my peers and instructor that I was experimenting by purposely making my presentation an ADHD ramble, just a few minutes of me raving about things that really got me. I ended up finishing my ramble with a few thoughts I hadn't planned on offering at all—I'd never put them into words before. Rather than trying to work against my ADHD (my desire to ramble rather than speak in concise bullet points), I tried just seeing what would happen if I just let myself head in the direction I wanted to at the speed and with the vehicle I wanted to use (dancing, maybe,

instead of walking in straight lines from point to point). My goal with that presentation wasn't sharing arguments or textbook information, anyway: I wasn't trying to put facts in my listeners' heads so much as offer a few ideas mostly related to the topic I was discussing, so rambling worked OK there, although it might not have in a different context. In other words: spirals and rambles can be very generative, can produce interesting thoughts or results, I think, but they're not going to be the ideal form for every form, genre, or context of writing or speaking or otherwise communicating with others. Perhaps it's possible, though, to spiral just a little on occasion, for writers to ask themselves when a spiral might aid them in achieving whatever goal they've set out to meet on a given day. I think here of one of my old professors, who, after talking to me for a few semesters and teaching a class that I took and wrote things for, suggested I plan ahead to do unplanned things in my Master's thesis. As she observed, I was always changing what I wanted to write about, so it could maybe be helpful to purposely plan to have parts of my thesis or thesis writing be more creative, less sketched out ahead of time. As it happened, I ended up writing my thesis in an entirely different field on English studies from the one I'd originally planned on working in. I don't know that I was even able to allow myself just *some* space for unplanned creativity: instead, I just kept changing what my thesis would be about and wrote most of it in the couple days before it absolutely needed to be finished. My finished product ended up being, in part, chapters made up of fragments, a structure that I rationalized by arguing that such a form suited the fact that the topic of my thesis was queer composition and queering composition. (It only made sense that my writing, then, would take on a few weird shapes.) In reality, I wasn't (and still am not) sure if I made my thesis a collection of fragments because it got my ideas across best to readers or because it was the only kind of collecting of thoughts that felt possible for me with limited amounts of time and energy available to me. I wouldn't change my thesis now, though; I'm not even able to picture it with a more conventional structure now. What points would I make into headings and sections? By writing in fragments, maybe what I was offering my few readers were ideas that *weren't* smoothly connected. I left space in between fragments instead, space that left room for my audience to make their own connections between them, to allow for any number of connections between them (an idea that I like, actually, now that I think of it). Could I make all the points I've made in this piece in a five-paragraph essay, with headers or sections or topic sentences? Could I make this essay's argument in the same way? I wouldn't be able to model what I was discussing, I suppose: I'd be talking about this idea of spiraling, but readers wouldn't get an example of what that spiraling could look like. I could *describe* a spiral like this, include excerpts from it, but readers still wouldn't be reading a spiral of the kind I'm describing here in its



entirety; their information would be second- instead of firsthand. As I begin spinning towards what feels instinctually like an ending, I need to wonder: how do I end a spiral? How do I close *this* spiral? Do I conclude in the traditional manner, restating major points I've made or considering where this conversation I've been having with myself might turn next? What I've tried to do with this piece is try something out for the first time while at the same time discussing that very experiment, modeling for readers how they, too, might experiment with spirals. Maybe I'm not just talking about spirals here: perhaps spirals are *my* thing, a way of moving from word count to higher word count that works well for and feels enjoyable for me specifically. Readers might ask themselves, then, how they feel inclined to write. What shapes do they find themselves falling into as they draft, and which ones give them the momentum to keep going? At what points do they stop themselves, try to force their work into a different shape? For whom are they doing that reshaping? Is there an ideal balance to be found between the structures they fall into and the ones they're trying to build as they write? What do they need to do, or what questions do they need to ask themselves in order to maintain that balance (if they even reach it, or if it's even possible in the first place)? What shapes of writing prove more successful in the long run at getting writers closer to whatever their goals in writing were or are? How might they shape their writing processes, and maybe from there their writing products (and perhaps, in the process, themselves)?

## Works Cited

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