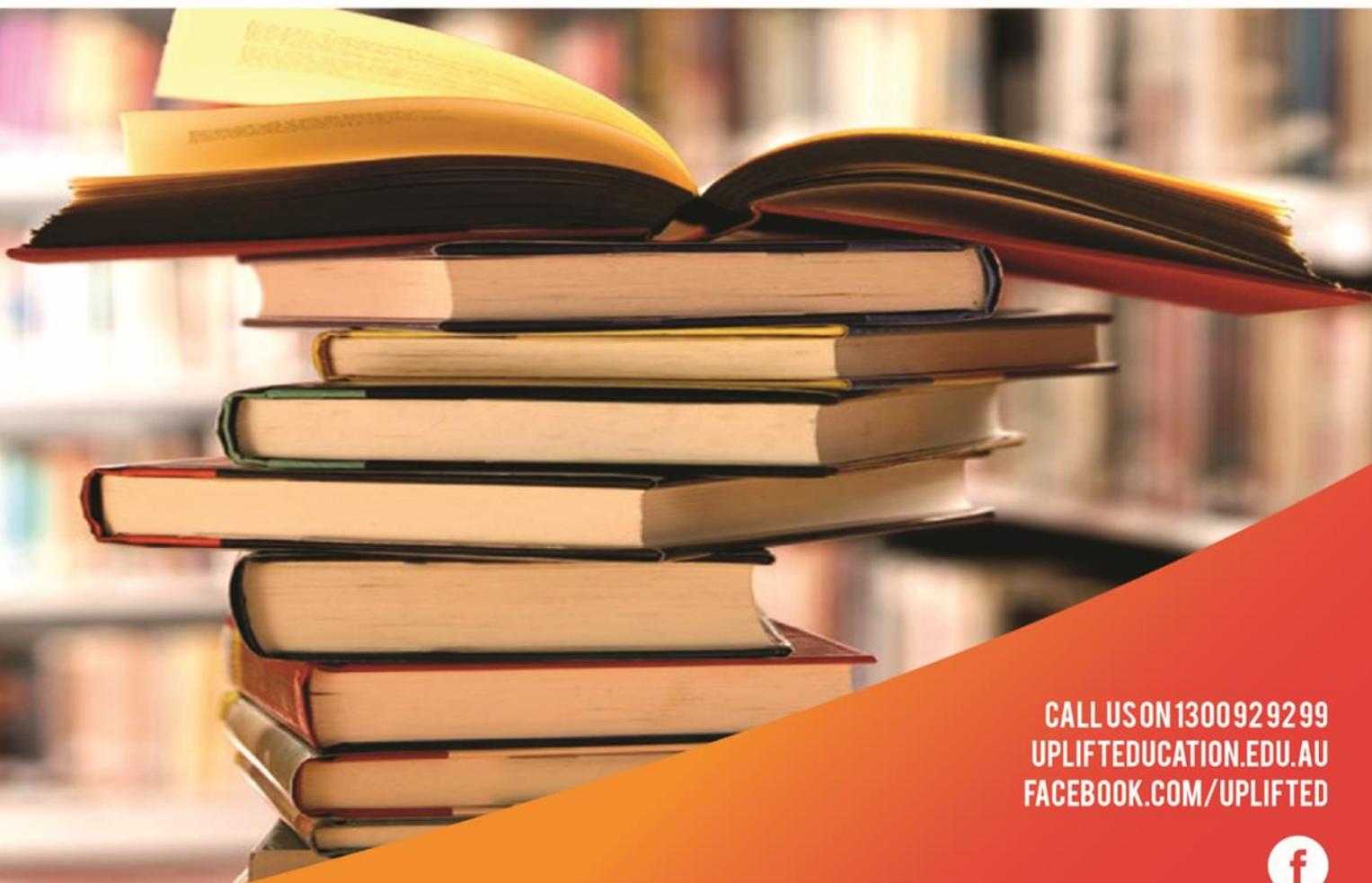




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THIS IS WATER



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***This is Water*, by David Foster Wallace**

When students struggle to articulate their thoughts about discovery or find discovery themes within texts, a useful antidote is to try and isolate the ‘tense’ of discovery. Are we in the past, present or future tense of discovery? Does this text, or do my ideas, concern what happens before discovery leading up to it? Are they about discovery itself and what it *is*? Or are they about the consequences and impacts of discovery, what happens afterwards?

This is a good way to approach Wallace’s essay and subdivide it in your own head. He oscillates between talking about discoveries he has made (“**I have come gradually to understand...**”), how his audience can make their own (“**The only thing that’s capital-T true is that you get to *decide* how you’re going to try to see it**”) and what the consequences are (“**That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness**”). If you keep in mind the ‘tense’ of discovery you’ll find it easier not only to grasp Wallace’s own discovery themes but maybe consolidate your own, too.

Context

The major contextual point of this essay is that it is adapted from a commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College. His audience and purpose is suited to college-age students who are at a particular crossroads in their life filled with decision anxiety and existential questions (“what am I doing with my life? Oh my God everyone has jobs and plans and direction and I’m sitting in my underwear browsing cracked.com” – don’t worry, you’ll find out soon).

The second point is that Wallace struggled with depression his entire adult life and eventually committed suicide three years after giving this speech. Of course the suicide is so far disconnected from this speech (and is owing to other factors like a change in his medication) so as to not need mentioning in any English essay, but his depression does give an important insight why Wallace is so concerned in this speech about the way we think and the mentality we approach life with.

Analysis

The biggest danger about expository texts like this is not analysing it as an English text but rather as an argument. You have to remember – you’re not writing an essay about discovery, you’re writing an essay about how discovery is represented within texts and how our understanding of the notion of discovery is formed by these representations. You’re not here to agree or disagree with Wallace.

One of Wallace’s most important rhetorical devices is the second-person ‘you’ he employs. Of course this is owed in part to its origin as a speech, but it nonetheless has particular importance for

discussing discovery. The second paragraph starts **“If at this moment, you’re worried...”** and this represents Wallace’s intention to guide his audience to discoveries of their own. He constantly reaffirms **“I am not the wise old fish”** and asks **“don’t dismiss it as some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon”**. He does not wish to impose or lecture, but rather appear open, conciliatory and compromising. This is the reason behind not only the second-person ‘you’ but also the humorous anecdotes, pop-culture allusions and colloquial tone. Inclusive pronouns such as ‘us’ and ‘we’ further this, too.

Wallace overall wants his audience to feel included and a part of the conversation – that these are not just his experience and his own insights, but that they are experiences and insights you can generalise across a population. This means Wallace’s discoveries are not only potentially their discoveries but also ours. By making his language accessible and conversational he makes discoveries possible on a number of levels.

1. External factors are obvious factors in discoveries. But how important are internal ones? Do we need an open mind to make discoveries? Or when discoveries spontaneously appear to us do we need an open mind to appreciate them fully?
2. Here is a published, critically acclaimed writer talking to a group of snot-nosed, inexperienced college students. But he’s speaking to them as equals, speaking to them and recognising they go through the same questions and doubts and anxieties. Do you think Wallace’s speech would have the same transformative power were it delivered like a lecture or a sermon? From this, what do you learn about the processes of discovery?

Wallace creates a contrast in his speech between the motifs of ‘hard-wired’ or ‘default-setting’ with ‘choice’ or ‘decision’. Look out for his frequent uses of these words as they form the core of his own discovery: we don’t *have* to think a certain way, but rather we can *choose*. Once again he packages these ideas in easily accessible ways, this particular one he explains with the cliché **“the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master”**. But the contrast is the major part of his thesis.

“Thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic ... this way is my default setting. It’s ... automatic, unconscious” but he then attaches to this ‘easy’ mentality (that he’s the centre of the universe) the unpleasant experiences of a long day at work followed by grocery shopping. This grocery shopping experience itself is narrated to be as unpleasant as possible. Take this for example:

By way of example, let's say it's an average day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging job, and you work hard for nine or ten hours, and at the end of the day you're tired, and you're stressed out, and all you want is to go home and have a

good supper and maybe unwind for a couple of hours and then hit the rack early because you have to get up the next day and do it all again.¹

Notice how long that one sentence is, notice the listing that makes it seem mindless and repetitive, and notice the polysyndeton (repeated use of ‘and’) which elongates the length of the sentence to make it more labourious. Prior to his discovery that **“Learning how to think” really means learning how to exercise some control**”, this was his experience.

But according to Wallace we can reinterpret this **“petty, frustrating crap”**. Notice when he starts talking about the different ways of interpreting the SUV or grocery story scenarios how he frames them. Polysyndeton reappears but instead of ‘and’ he repeats the conjunction ‘or’ instead, highlighting the motif of choice and decision-making that stands in contrast to the ‘automatic default’ setting of before. This turns the ‘petty, frustrating crap’ into something **“not only meaningful but sacred”**, metaphorically described as **“on fire with the same force that lit the stars – compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things”**. Wallace’s thesis rests upon this contrast, and the contrast comes from the two competing motifs about how we can either tether and control our brain or how we can let it loose and let it consume us.

1. Discoveries can be ‘far-reaching and transformative’. To what extent does Wallace’s language reflect this with respect to his own experience before and after the discovery?
2. Do discoveries always have positive effects such as those that Wallace explores? Can discoveries be unwanted and thus have negative consequences?
3. Generally in texts exploring discovery, discovery is the catalyst for change. However in this text change seems to be the catalyst for discovery. Which comes first?

The last point to mention is about the rhetoric Wallace uses and how we can analyse discovery from the perspective of language. This text is based around a speech and so naturally it is intended to be persuasive even if it explicitly disavows any intention to **“giv[e] you moral advice, or ... [say] you’re “supposed to” think this way”**. The broader question though is how much of our discoveries are influenced by the way they’re presented to us.

Despite not intending to lecture, Wallace still rests on some declaratives when they support his bottom line. For example, **“It will actually be within your power...”** is a declarative, a fairly strong one as the ‘will’ is intensified by ‘actually’. However it appears inspirational and empowering rather

¹ This is nowhere near the best example from the text. The paragraph that came from is only three sentences long and the final sentence is 220 words long. I didn’t pick it for space constraints, but it features all the same hallmarks: polysyndeton, listing and a whole bunch of symbols and allusions to things that make you think of the monotony and drudgery of everyday life.

than dictatorial or controlling. Note also the repetition of “**you get to decide**” a few paragraphs before the end which is in the same structure.

1. How vulnerable is our sense of discovery to rhetorical strategies like this? Can discoveries be influenced by those around us intentionally, and if they can be influenced can they be manipulated? Discoveries seem to connote this sense of purity, of finding truth where there was none either. But as we’re seeing, discoveries can also be surreptitiously implanted. To what extent is discovery a natural process and to what extent is it artificial?
2. And to add to the above, what role does language play? More than language – what role do we play? How can a discovery depending on who views it, the context it appears, our mood at the time and the way it’s sold to us. Foster sells his discovery in this piece as a way to cope with the banality of everyday life, but how would we react differently if he tried to sell us the exact same insight as the ‘correct and productive way to think and anything else is wrong’?