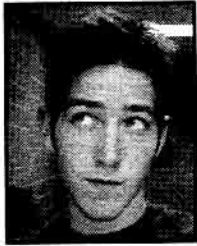


# Strange Paper-Ritual Besieges Local Student

by Chris Ladd  
MANAGING EDITOR

Never in my life have I had a normal paper-writing experience. What I have is a ritual, a ritual I try my damnest to avoid repeating, but every time an assignment over two pages pops onto my to-do list, I find my clothes catching on the same gears, dragging me into the same machinery, the same rhythm, the same old patterns.



WHERE THE  
HELL IS  
WAYNE, ME

It starts a week prior to deadline. Knowing a paper is due, I'll try to get a jump on it, I'll try to own it before it owns me. Ha. I'm lucky if I have ten minutes to scramble together a shaky foundation for my ambitiously early assignment before the gravity of the week overcomes me, and I find myself once again living from assignment to assignment, dragged down by the weight of the day-to-day.

The night before the assignment is due, I start to really try. I've been putting this off for a week now, every morning scribbling it at the bottom of the lists I make for myself on three by five index cards. "Paper," I scribble. Every night I give the scribble a tired glance, then transfer it to a new index card, onto the list I am making for tomorrow.

This continues until I attempt to transfer my "Paper" scribble onto an index card that already contains an entry titled "Hand in Paper". One index card isn't big enough to hold both of these seemingly compatible items. Not a three by five index card anyhow.

At this point, I have probably 12 or 15 hours to scratch off the "Hand in Paper" squiggle on the second index card, the index card too cramped to accommodate my original migrant scribble.

"I need distraction, otherwise I'll end up disfigured, my nose broken in the spine of one of Norton's anthologies, fallen from its studious perch some inches above when my academically obligated eyelids resisted no longer the challenges of gravity and boredom and sleepiness."

I attempt to capture the essence of the assignment; I try to find the point of it all. I pour over countless volumes to better inform myself. I read. And read. And read and read. Within 20 minutes, I am lip-synching to "Like a Prayer" in front of my mirror, using a highlighter to amplify my voice, extending the neon yellow microphone from myself, craning my head from it like Mick Jagger during instrumental sections. I dance and dramatize, stretching myself artistically thin for my many adoring fans in Wait lot who watch through the window. Clearly I have a concentration problem.

I make tea. I change into sweatpants. I type out the assignment I was given two weeks ago, word for word, and highlight source materials like a madman, transferring quotations into my word-processing program to speed the academic process later. Then I print the quotations and re-read the paper question, re-read my whole motivation for working, re-read the logic behind my toil, and I realize that my quotations are no good. They're not really convincing. They bore me. They lack spunk. I look for new quotations.

I seek out, highlight, type, print, re-read, and spell-check my new quotations, quotations so strong the paper comes out of the printer stiff and erect, like towels dried outside on the line in fall.

I type a first sentence. It is a magnificent first sentence. the "Call me

Ishmael" of expository essays. And I am tired from the sentence. I put so much energy into the one sentence, such creative power and resourcefulness that I am through. I can't go on. I decide to take a nap.

This is how I work. It is nearly impossible to write steadily for over 40 minutes without interruption. I need distraction, otherwise I'll end up disfigured, my nose broken in the spine of one of Norton's anthologies, fallen from its studious perch some inches above when my academically obligated eyelids resisted no longer the challenges of gravity and boredom and sleepiness. I turn out the lights, and put my computer to sleep. And I set my alarm, allowing myself 20 minutes, but always cheating to allow for 23 or 24. I hit the snooze button and steal another nine minutes.

And then I write. And sleep. And write. It goes on like this.

I find other things to do as well, brushing my teeth, pacing dorm hallways, and replacing the ink cartridges in my printer. Anything to avoid writing.

A few naps, and 12 sparkling molars later, it is three a.m. Three a.m. is the pivot point, the fulcrum of the last minute paper. Any further, and it will be an all-nighter. I press on, briefing myself on the first third of my paper I'd forgotten about during the last nap cycle, the cycle where I dreamed gargantuan primary sources terrorized the streets of Boston, stuffily striding through the Big Dig with a

pretentious air, unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the contemporary un-cobbled streets of modern day bean-town, their heavy first-edition pages and hardback covers reducing the Prudential Building to a disorganized pile of glass and concrete and metal.

The minute hand on my clock slams into four a.m. This is the last push. This is hour seven.

All my quotations are set in place, I-Beams of a skyscraper waiting for the drywall and insulation of my interpretation and explanation. They frame the white space in the sky of my word processor window.

It's impossible to describe, but at this moment, something happens. At four-fifteen a.m., or thereabouts, I know precisely what I want to say, know how to say it, know how my thesis fits into the body of my essay, know which quotations jog that thesis forward, and which drag it slowly down the page. I don't blink sometimes for ten minutes. If I could harness the essay-awareness that possesses me in hour seven, and use it at will, my three by five index cards would have fewer repeats and more scribbles with lines through them.

At five thirty a.m., I type the final sentence and peak my eyebrows to hold open my dry eyes while I carelessly read through my masterpiece one last time. It is then, and only then, that I draw a single line across the "Paper" scribble on the index card in my pocket, and turn in for a couple hours sleep.

Somewhere, deep within some unknown landfill, lies the story of my paper ritual: dozens of groups of eight or nine index cards, all with the barely legible scribble of "Paper", and only one crossed off. Someday, archaeologists will marvel at the pattern of my three by five index cards. By then, at least, I'll not have any more papers to rob me of precious sleep.