

Editor's Note

“Red Light Green Light” author Cassandra Clawson compares her experience with writing to that of a person “maneuvering through traffic.” She uses an extended metaphor of streetlights to help illustrate her progression as a writer. As you read, pay attention to how this metaphor functions. How does she define red lights? Green? Yellow? How does the metaphor add structure and focus to the essay? The author also uses rhetorical questions to help illustrate her points. How does this approach affect her audience? Do the questions serve to engage the reader? In her conclusion, Clawson discusses her future as a writer. How does the introduction of a new idea affect the essay’s overall focus and purpose?

Red Light Green Light

Cassandra Clawson

Writing is a come and go sort of thing. Sometimes it is easy and simple; other times you have to wait for the words to come. In my experience, writing is like maneuvering through traffic: You are moving along just fine and writing is easy and flowing, then up ahead there is a yellow light, a challenging situation can be foreseen. You begin to slow down and eventually come to a stop; writing has come to a standstill. There is a blockage of focused ideas and you have to wait for distracting thoughts to pass before beginning again. When your turn comes, you start over by picking up speed and gradually getting back on track. You make it through, but it takes time to regain the writing fluidity. There are temporary distractions while waiting for the light to change. During these times, when writing is not necessarily required, it is helpful to change topics or mediums to give the mind time to think. My experience in writing is like driving through town, just when I think I have managed to make it through, I am slowed down and stopped . . . by a traffic light.

Starting back in the first grade, when I recall my first writing experience, my light had just turned green. We wrote a book about our lives and what we thought we might be one day. This was easy; I knew who I was and what I wanted to be. What first grader does not have all the dreams and ambitions in the world? Nothing could ever be wrong, no matter what was said, praise was given for just expressing it. This kind of writing was like just stepping on the gas, gaining speed for what is to come. I do not remember writing a whole lot throughout my elementary days, but going into middle school my light began to change to yellow.

Sometimes a red light can be anticipated, so the yellow light in between goes by unnoticed. In the eighth grade things began to change. Instead of writing whatever

we wanted, we were assigned a topic. We were still free to write as we wished but within a limit. We had the formula for a “perfect paragraph” drilled into our daily exercises. One assignment I remember vividly was a short response to our regrets in life. I did not pick just one thing I regretted but chose to write that I did not necessarily regret anything, and I wrote my paper on how I believed that things happened for a reason. I do not remember getting my paper back, just a call home from the teacher saying that I had to redo the assignment. I think that my teacher thought that I was being defiant, which was far from the case. I had never tried to disrespect a teacher; I had just gone about the assignment in a different way. This is where my light began to change. When a yellow light is ahead it is inevitable to see what is coming next: a red light.

I reached my red light as a high school freshman. It seemed that creativity and uniqueness ceased to be valued. It was very technical and structured, yet again even more limited. With everyone reading the same books and writing on the same topic, how could we be getting anywhere? These are the types of essays I remember writing because they were the ones that I dreaded the most. I suppose there are some ways to stand out, which I do not think I ever figured out, but for the most part what was written down was simply what the teacher wanted to read. I passed all four English classes in high school, yet I only read about two whole books. This is how I know we were simply writing what the teacher wanted to hear. It did not matter what we really thought of the book; they only wanted to see if we were able to take out the important ideas and connect them. Sometimes it felt like we were being held back, like there was potential to write, but something was stopping us. Like the car at the front of the line that does not notice that the light has turned green. It was like a standstill in writing, a red light.

I mentioned before that there are distractions to pursue while waiting for the light to change back to green. Although some might engage in passive activities like singing along with the radio, texting a friend, or just watching the cars drive by, writing requires more expression. At my red lights in writing I like to keep a journal. It is a way to express myself without having to impress anyone. Turning right on a red light is also an option. Taking a new direction and focusing on something else for a while makes writing easier later. At a red light one might write poetry, or lyrics; whatever the case, there are mediums of expression in these dull moments.

Just when it seems the road is going the right way there is another obstacle. This obstacle is not as predictable as the pattern of a traffic light. The car that has always been so dependable has suddenly broken down. In writing, this car is the mode of writing that has passed every other English class that has been taken. Now a new car is needed. When upgrading to a new car there are new characteristics that have

appeal and there are also the traits of the old car that just cannot be taken away. This is how editing a piece of writing is. There are some parts that need to be added and others that can be left out. In buying a new car and editing an essay this is the hardest part of the journey. The change is needed, and will be accepted eventually, but it will take time to let go of what felt right for so long and get used to a new and improved style.

Now that I have reached the next level, I feel that my light has turned green again. Although there will still be the inevitable structure I feel like there will be more opportunity for creativity and not so much restriction. Writing outside the box will be admired and not looked down upon. I am able to pick up speed and travel within my writing. I still do not always enjoy writing and there will be potholes and roadblocks along the way, but that is another obstacle on my writing journey that I will detour when I get there.

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