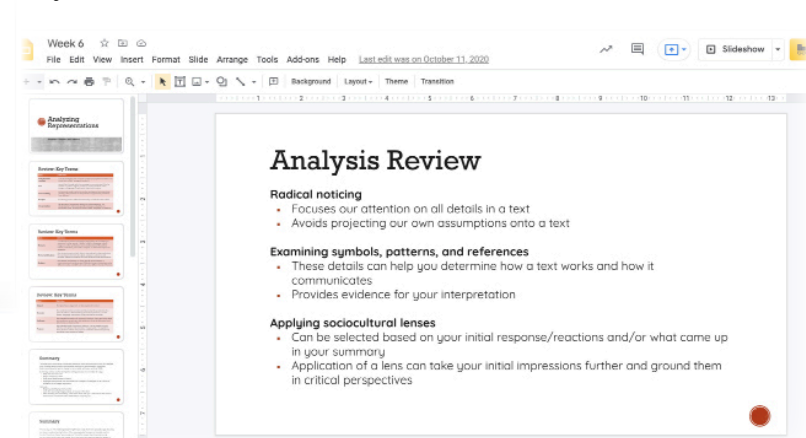
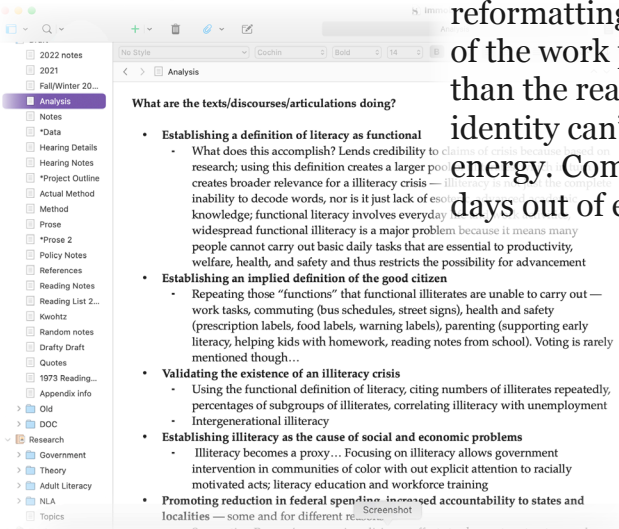
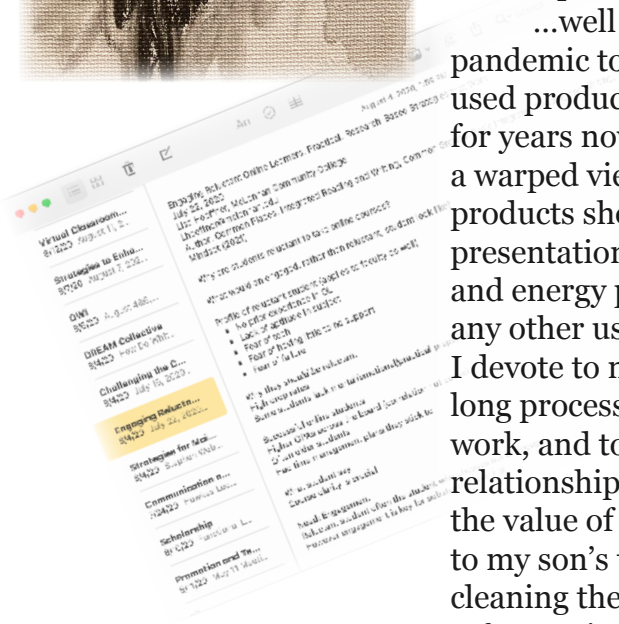
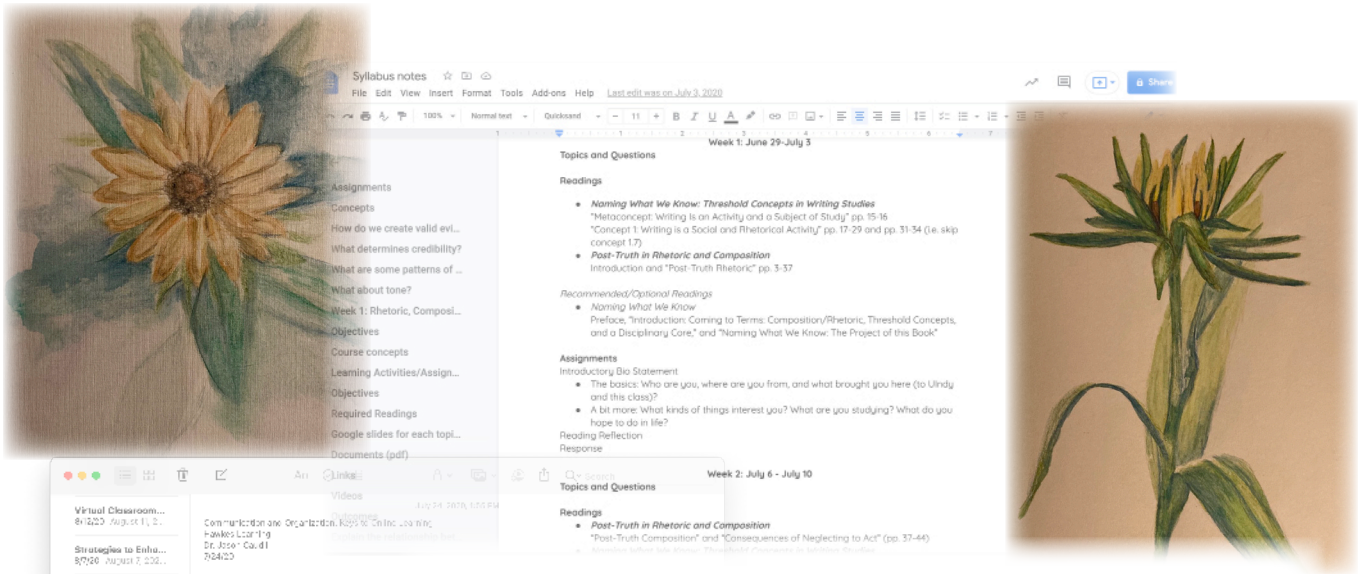




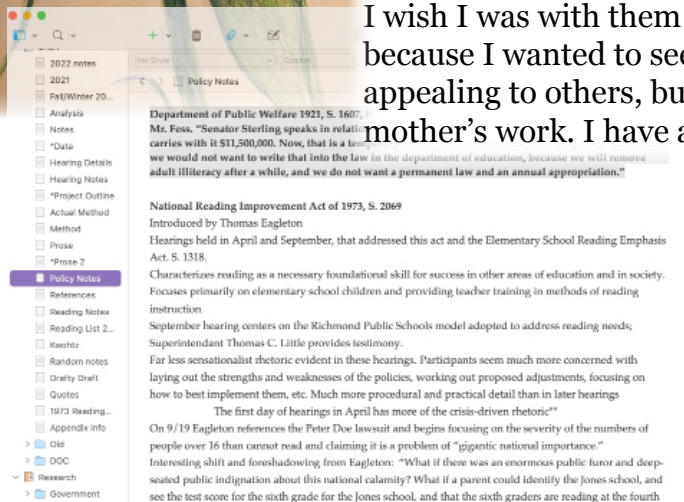
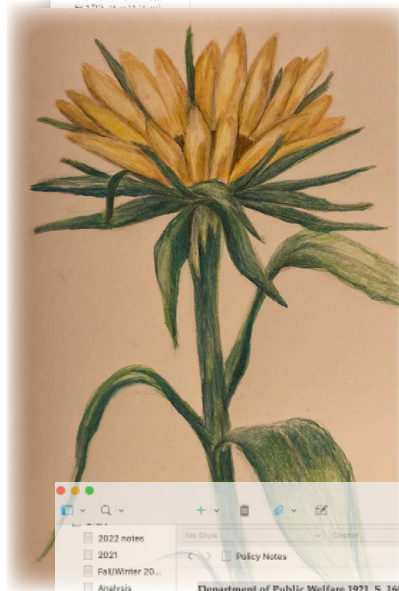
Writing time. Frustrated again about how little professional progress I've made, how little I've published, how much more I need to learn about political history and political discourse, how I just haven't put myself out there. I'm not going to get anywhere if I'm not sharing my writing. I resist writing because I'm afraid of oversimplifying, composing an incomplete picture, drawing premature conclusions. I know I need to shift this perspective and just see writing as necessarily incomplete but still necessary. I need to communicate, and this is the most familiar means of doing so. It's just difficult to figure out what and how to write without a clear sense of exactly where the product will live and who will read it. Yet when I select a journal I feel like I'm wasting time and energy trying to fit into a context that will likely just reject me. Oh well. I might as well just do it since it's not like my time and energy are being used all that productively otherwise...

...well I know that's absolute crap. Even if it's taken a pandemic to realize it. My time and energy are most definitely being used productively, and I've been burning the candle at both ends for years now. I've just succumbed (more than I'd like to admit) to a warped view of productivity — that it should be visible, that my products should be books, academic journal articles, grants, and presentations, that this should be my only priority, that using time and energy productively means serving my profession and that any other use of time and energy is wasteful, including that which I devote to my home, my child, my family, my pets, myself. It's a long process to (re)prioritize, to unlearn/relearn the meaning of work, and to value spending time and energy on my and others' relationships, health, and emotional well-being. I'm learning to see the value of spending half my day reading and writing messages to my son's teachers, doing laundry, scheduling appointments, cleaning the kitchen, painting the basement, emailing students, reformatting lesson slides, revising course policies, and so on — all of the work presumed to be personal or busywork, less important than the real work of research and publishing. My professional identity can't be separate from all of the ways I use my time and energy. Compartmentalizing has only made me try to create two days out of every one.

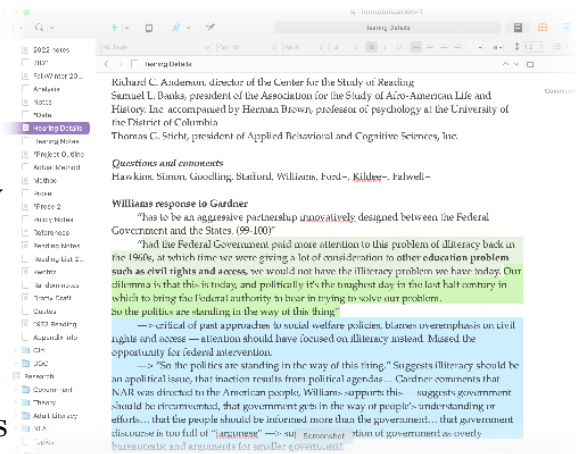




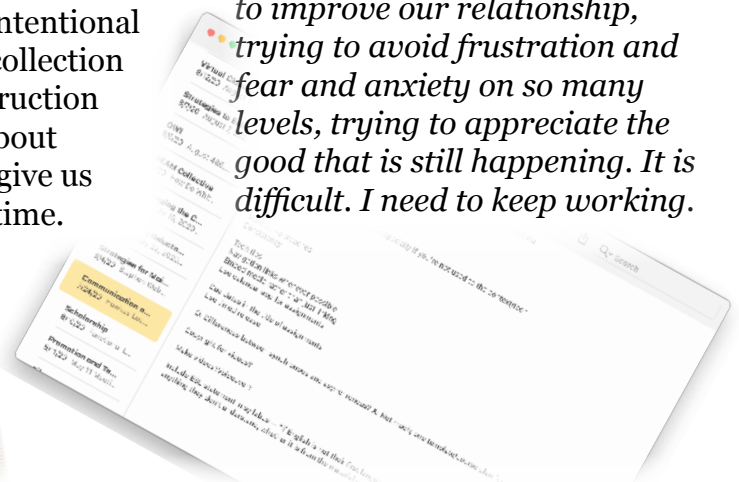
Writing time. Dug up my backyard and planted a garden, started some plants from seed in my kitchen, got some other starter plants from a colleague who does urban farming and writes poetry. I love flowers. I wanted to make the backyard look nice, to do something with my hands and body, to make something beautiful. I wanted a yard people would want to hang out in. That didn't really happen. But the process of it all was...needed. It was a lot of work for maybe little visible payoff, and I'm not even sure any of the flowers will survive and return next year. But I am glad I did it. Seeing things grow and knowing I had a hand in that growth. Digging. Pulling weed after weed after weed. It brought a calm focus. I liked the kind of tired my body felt. I like thinking while I worked. Remembering my mom's garden. That vague and fuzzy sort of just there in the background kind of remembering. Being in our yard, looking at all the flowers, picking cucumbers or green beans or tomatoes, seeing her kneeling in the dirt, trowel in hand. And then all of the other family memories floating up not quite at the center of my attention but still coloring my work. There's always a wistfulness when I think of my family. I wish I was with them more. Especially now. I gardened because I wanted to see if I could make something beautiful and appealing to others, but also comforting and reminiscent of my mother's work. I have a lot more to learn.



Writing time. It's difficult to keep up. So much keeps happening to shift my perspective on the past and to shape the lens I apply to the documents and events I'm examining. It seems like I'm spending so much more time thinking about how to frame my analysis and how to justify my work than I am actually analyzing anything. Maybe I should say some things about doing historical work, if that is indeed what I'm doing? I'm still overwhelmed by the impulse to articulate some lesson from history or to trace some path to the present, to say "This is how we got here. This is why things are the way they are. Here's where things went wrong." Even though my writing about the past is a bit more involved in that I'm reporting on conversations that were happening in Congressional committees, placing them within a political context, and suggesting different influences on those conversations, it seems that I always end up implying that something caused something else and voilá, here we are. What else is there? Why else do we examine events of the past if not to learn something that can shape our present and future? I think that's a fine rationale but maybe not sufficient. We can never say someone did something 50 years ago with the intention of producing our current reality. Their intentions might have involved a concern with the future but that future remained unknown and connected to their specific context. So historical study has less to do with that kind of intentional cause and effect and more to do with viewing a collection of situated activities that contribute to the construction of an evolving reality. I want to say something about reexamination, about how present perspectives give us insight into the past we could never have at the time.



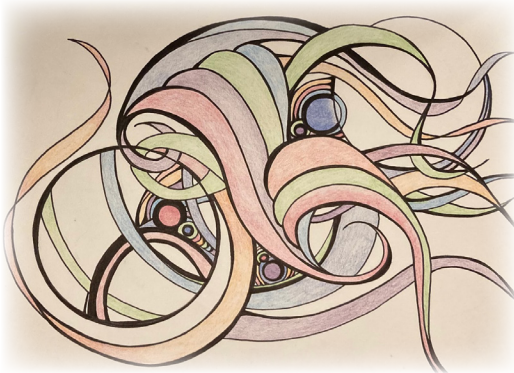
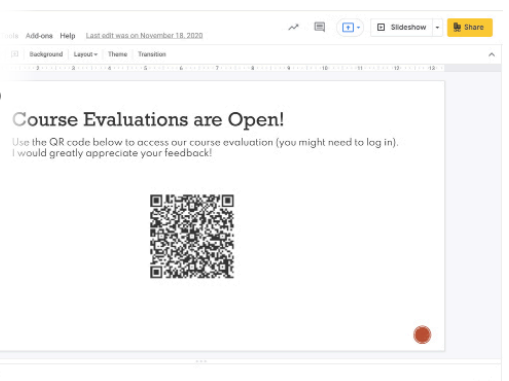
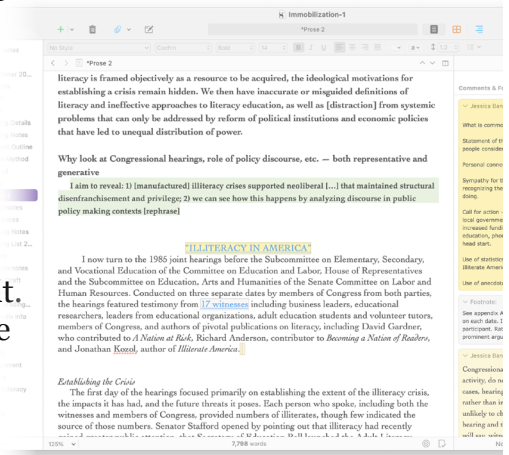
I need to explain all of this in more detail, of course, but I am listening to my son fight to open a bag of carrots and demand that I be done writing because we are home, quarantined, doing our part to prevent the crisis from getting worse, knowing it will get much worse, not knowing when it will get better, struggling with spending so much time together, trying to improve our relationship, trying to avoid frustration and fear and anxiety on so many levels, trying to appreciate the good that is still happening. It is difficult. I need to keep working.



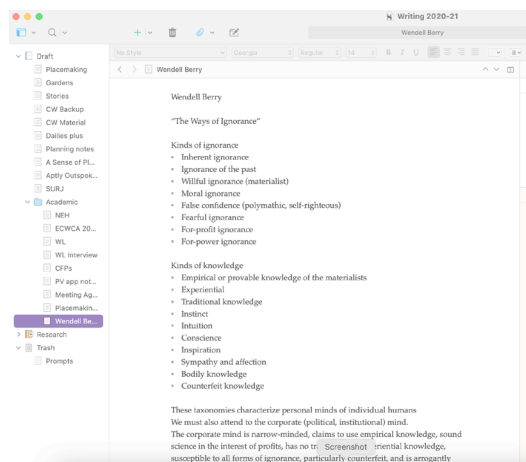
Continue trying to work on this ill-defined project to illuminate policy discourse that was part of the (manufactured) illiteracy crisis of the 1980s and the resulting federal laws, and I am genuinely interested in what was going on at the time, how the social, economic, and political climate can be evidenced by this discourse, how the discourse was made possible by and contributed to different agendas, some noble and some not, some of them concerned with empowering historically disenfranchised groups and reforming deeply entrenched oppressive systems but most of them concerned with maintaining such systems or pursuing policies that would ensure the continued success of a wealthy white elite. I feel this work matters because it speaks to our current context.

And yet as I sit here trying to figure out what historical document to spend my time analyzing, I'm overcome anxiety about what the f*** is going on right now

Writing time. Right now I'm reminded that work takes an especially heavy physical toll on me. I am anxious. I'm feeling it in my body in ways I haven't for a very long time. I know my current anxiety comes from spending more time and energy over the last few days dredging up and revisiting the *thingsthathavehappened*. I've been re-reading what I wrote nearly four years ago. I've been trying to do something with it, produce some publishable creative work out of emotional trauma I'm stilling wrapping my head around. It involves work from all parts of me, and now I'm unsettled because of it. But it's not just that. It's all of the other things as well. We are still dealing with a pandemic. I have too many work projects and loose ends to keep track of. My kid is struggling with a fixation that really is just a manifestation of other emotional struggles I can't seem to access. I have big things I want to do but they remain vague abstractions that I can't seem to actualize. I just finished an exceptionally challenging and frustrating semester of virtual everything and don't feel like I have a sense of closure. My next semester courses have yet to be planned. My dad has cancer.



Cancer. Caught later than it might have been if a global pandemic hadn't pushed back doctors' visits. I'm not even sure how or what I'm feeling about it. Nothing good. Nothing dramatic either. Which likely signals some form of shock. I don't feel like this should change anything big picture. Our relationship and interactions should be just as solid and full of love in the absence of disease. I don't want the knowledge of potentially impending death to be a catalyst for increased attention. I should be paying attention anyway. But maybe this should be a wake up call of sorts. A reminder of how much I should appreciate my family. I think I always have appreciated them, though. I don't know. Mostly I just feel like there's so much more to talk about. I want to hear more stories and I want to tell more stories. I wish my son could spend more time with him. I want him to have more stories too.



Writing time. Today I'm thinking about...How you learn about death...

From your sister, who tells you of a childhood friend's death over a decade after he died. She listens to you read the letter the eight-year-old wrote after moving to Washington. *I miss you. I miss playing with you. Love, Donald.* You wonder aloud why he never wrote again. She says Donald never made it to Washington. He died in a lake in Oregon. You put the letter back in the box of keepsakes.

From your classmate, who tells you of another classmate's suicide. You stare in disbelief. You had just seen her two days before to work on your group project. As though such recency could make death impossible. You finish the project.

From your student, who stands in the hall outside of class tearful and shaking and tells you her sister died yesterday. She worries about her final project, she can't give her presentation. You hug her, tell her to be with her family. You return to class and continue with the lesson.

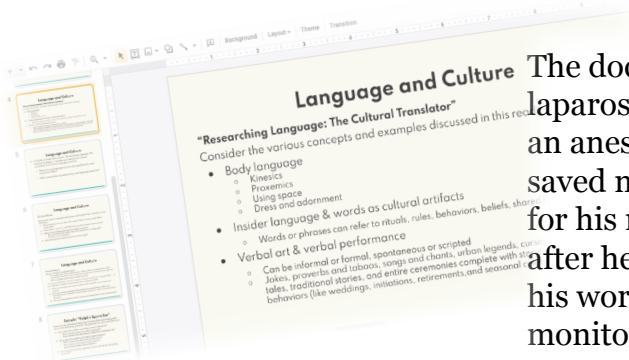
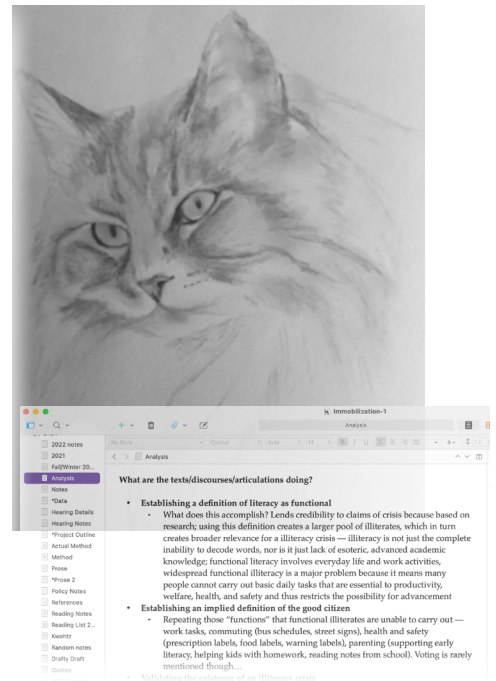
From your doctor, who tells you the ultrasound showed irregularities and the amniocentesis confirmed a fatal genetic disorder and heart defect. You had never heard a doctor say anything with the level of certainty he has when he says the fetus will die. You carry it for another week.

From your uncle, who tells you he requested his ashes be divided up and distributed to all his nieces and nephews. You keep the tiny urn in its tiny box in a velvet bag in a bigger box in your closet.

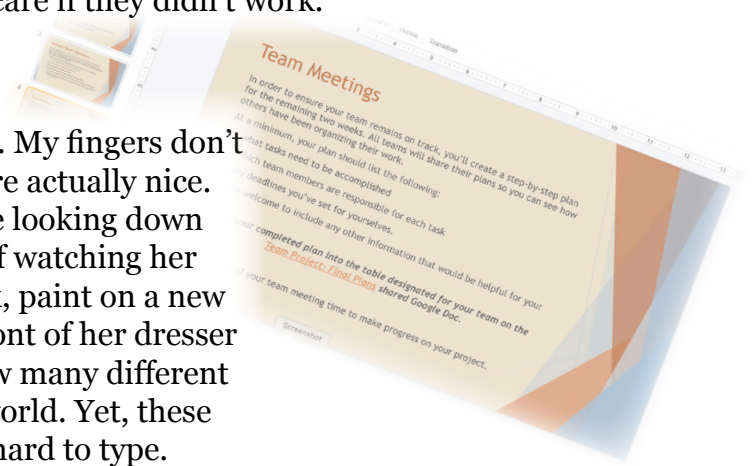
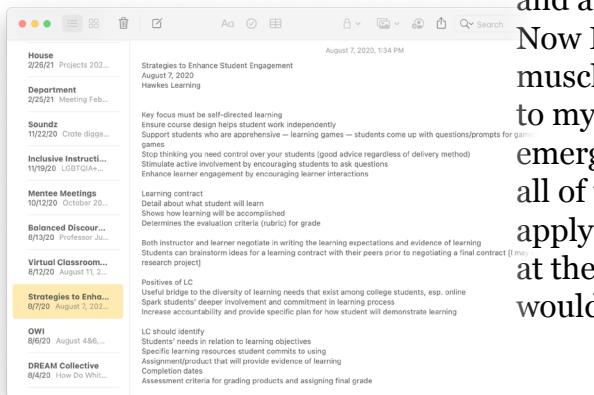
From your mother, who tells you grandma died and cradles you on her lap while you cry. She tells you about others after you've outgrown her lap. Great uncle, cousin, aunt, aunt, cat, uncle, grandfather, brother-in-law, aunt, uncle. You tense up when the phone rings, brace yourself for the next one.

From your father, who tells you *it's all existential, man*. He talks about perspective, the limits of our control, and the skull he's kept on his desk for the past ten years, heeding St. Benedict's advice to keep death daily before our eyes. He has six more chemo treatments. You try to stop thoughts that start sounding like a eulogy. You call him more often, ask more questions. You listen to stories. You wait.

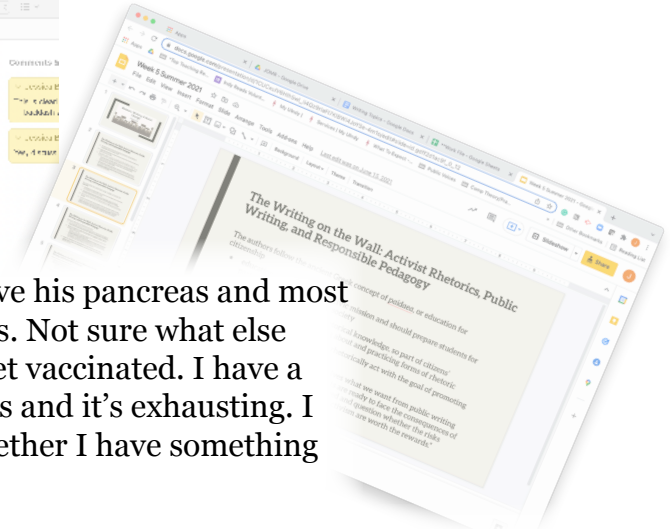
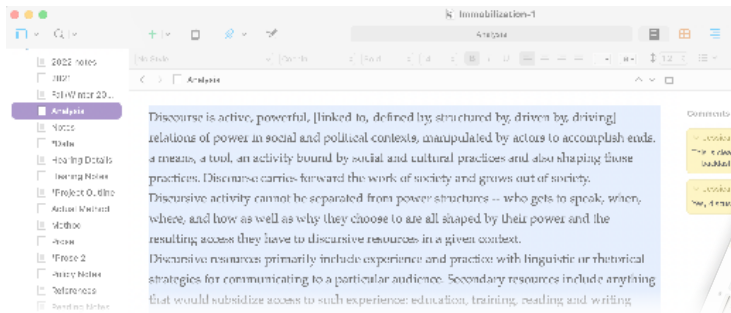
Writing time. I don't know if I can type with fake nails on. My mother has always done it with ease, though her nails are real. Every week, she'd spend an evening carefully manicuring them. With these new nails on, my hand now reminds me of hers (I only managed to do one hand so far because I couldn't decide if I wanted to keep them). It's strange seeing normal looking nails on my hand. Nice nails. The kind I've always envied. My real nails are wide, flat, misshapen. They have depressions near their edges. I honestly don't understand how they are they way they are and I have never seen nails like them on anyone. Not that I inspect. And I doubt anyone notices how odd mine are. But my nails are one of many of my physical features that just seem...off. Like my knees, my ears, my ribcage, my chest bone, my birthmark. None of these things is really overtly odd or terribly obvious. But they're so... off. Not like other human bodies.



The doctor who sliced my iliac artery during a routine laparoscopic procedure told me my body was abnormal. In an anesthesia haze after the emergency vascular repair that saved me from bleeding out, I tried listening as he accounted for his mistake (not once calling it a mistake). But I shut down after hearing "you see, in a normal human body..." and all his words became just more noise blending in with the heart monitor, din of voices, and machine hum. I knew he was just saying my body was to blame and while consciously defensive and angry about this, I subconsciously believed he was right. Now I can add lots of scarring and herniated abdominal muscles and a prolapsed bladder repair and a hysterectomy to my list of body oddities, all of them fallout from that emergency surgery that fixed his mistake and kept me alive, all of them not terribly obvious but just...off...not normal. So I apply fake nails that I saw in a discount basket on the counter at the thrift store, figuring they were cheap enough that I wouldn't care if they didn't work.

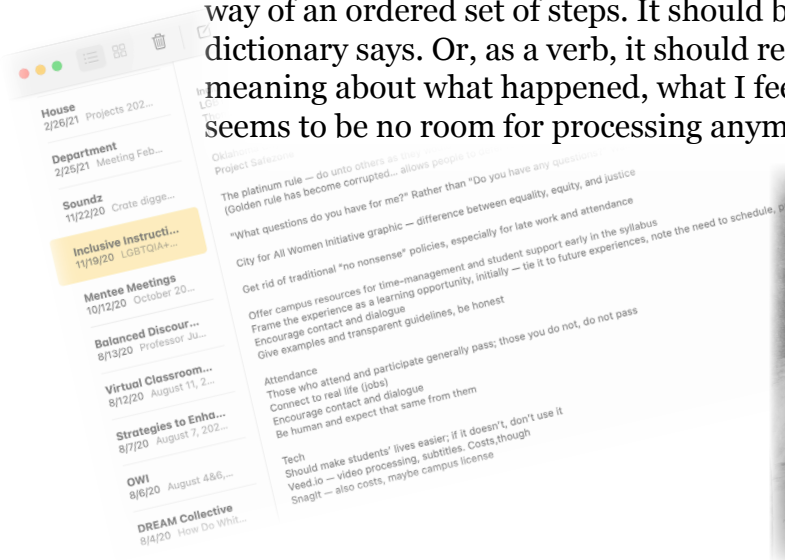


But they did work. And my nails look normal. My fingers don't (the knuckles are still too big) but the nails are actually nice. And I'm not sure how to feel about that. I like looking down and being reminded of my mother's hands, of watching her remove the old polish, file, push cuticles back, paint on a new color. I like remembering how I'd stand in front of her dresser and marvel at all the polishes, wondering how many different colors of pink and red there could be in the world. Yet, these perfect nails are not mine. And they make it hard to type.



Writing time. My dad heads to surgery to remove his pancreas and most estimates say he'll get at most another five years. Not sure what else to say. My kid is almost 12, not old enough to get vaccinated. I have a lot to do for work and home. I feel a lot of things and it's exhausting. I keep writing because I need to keep writing whether I have something interesting to say or not. I'm processing.

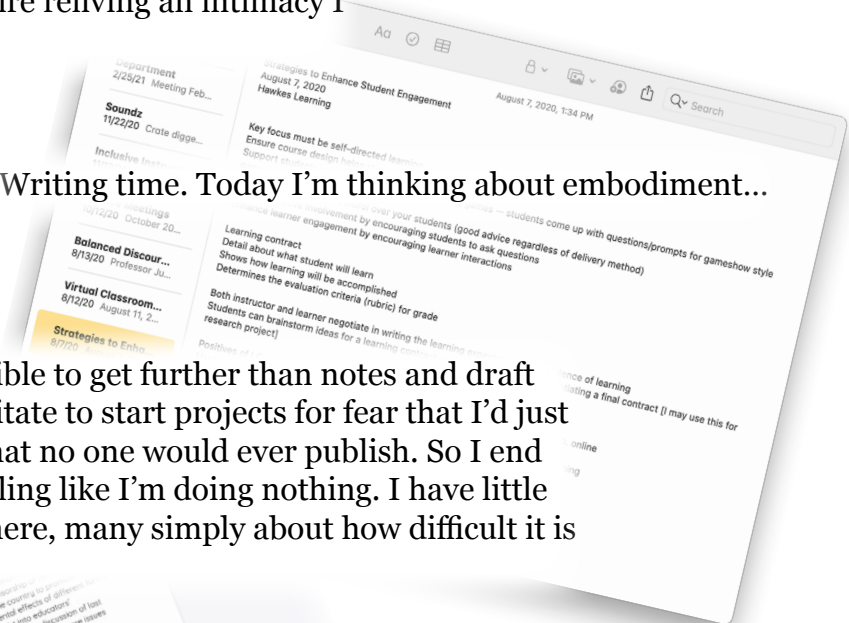
Processing. God I've been using that word a lot lately. *I'm still processing.* I say it through tears. I say it in monotone. I say it while rolling my eyes. *I need to process.* It seems like an excuse and I don't think I even know how to process. I have unfinished emotional work to do. I have feelings I haven't made sense of. I don't know their exact source. Or I do know and don't want to think about it. They are mixed feelings, not neatly divided into good and bad, happy and sad. They are combinations of layered emotions, laminated and hard pressed under the years. They circulate in me as images and physical sensations. They are memories of feelings bound up with present experiences of feelings and I can't figure out what shapes what. Is this the process? Trying to remember what I felt at a time, realizing I can only ever reshape past feelings into new feelings that aren't brand new but simply reinterpretations of old feelings? *Processing.* Remembering, replaying, seeing and sensing and feeling old experiences of people, places, and things, situations and conversations. And why do I need to process? Because I don't understand something? Because I don't know what decisions to make or what I should be feeling? Because I feel like I'm overlooking something or that I'm just not getting it or that I'm naive? Anyway. Now I'm just tired again. And don't feel much like the process got me anywhere. A process should lead somewhere by way of an ordered set of steps. It should be forward movement. That's what the dictionary says. Or, as a verb, it should refine, clarify, distill. It should create clear meaning about what happened, what I feel and why. That barely happens. There seems to be no room for processing anymore.



Writing time. Right now I'm thinking about... how the things I should write about require reliving an intimacy I would much rather forget...

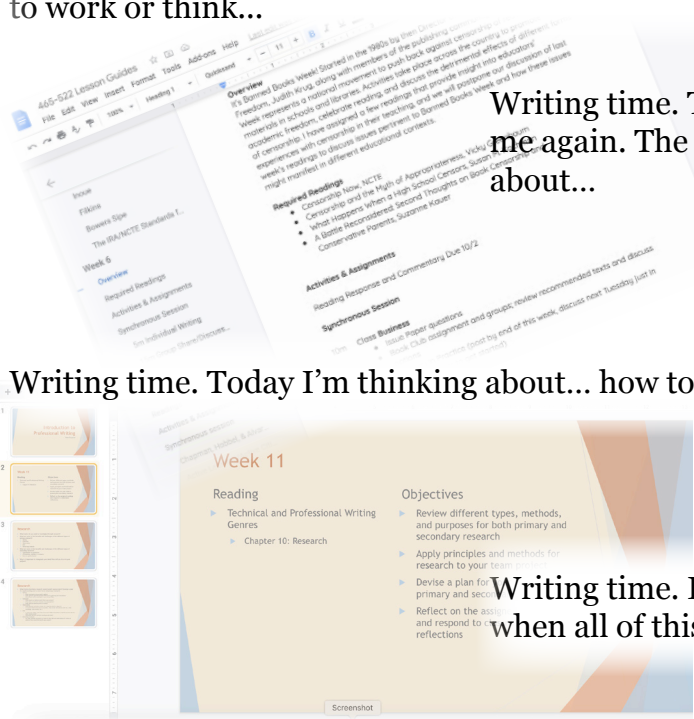


Writing time. Today I'm thinking about embodiment...



Writing time. It's just so impossible to get further than notes and draft for any project I start. And I hesitate to start projects for fear that I'd just be wasting time on something that no one would ever publish. So I end up doing nothing. Or at least feeling like I'm doing nothing. I have little vignettes, a paragraph here or there, many simply about how difficult it is to work or think...

Writing time. Time for a break. It's starting to get to me again. The important things feel too close to write about...



Writing time. Today I'm thinking about... how to talk to my child...

Writing time. It's really hard to concentrate on work when all of this is on my mind...



I don't know what is good or helpful or safe to write anymore. This is just so hard. Always. All the time. Nearly all of my energy spent on staying level, remaining calm, reassuring, standing firm, reliable, never wavering, often failing and breaking for a moment or two or three, saying the wrong thing, then spending even more energy maintaining calm during the next round. And, after all this, providing validation, healing, guidance. I well up, I teeter just on the edge of losing it. Then steel myself. Try not to wonder what this is doing to me. I used to break down more in private, when time and space allowed. Now I stare. Do more work. Listen to other people talk. Clean. Stay busy. Anyway. Onward.