

## Our Letters of Resistance

**Abstract:** In the Fall of 2021, graduate teaching associates in the First-Year Writing Program at Cal State LA adopted the “Resistance Multimedia Position Statement” as a common assignment for their ENGL 1005A courses. Through this project, students were invited to explore their personal relationship to rhetorics of resistance. Documenting their teaching and learning experiences through a series of letters, two teaching associates offer insights into their pedagogical development as early-career educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. A showcase of student work demonstrates the mixed media techniques their first-year students employed to position themselves in public statements on resistance crafted for virtual environments.

### Teaching the Resistance Multimedia Project in Our ENGL 1005A Course

Leiza Castillo and Rory Olivarez

“A writer’s life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity.”  
—Toni Morrison

What does it mean to write through chaos and trauma? How do we begin to use writing to resist forces seemingly out of our control? As burgeoning professors during a momentous pandemic, we have grappled with how writing forges a path to meaning in a world experiencing incredible upheavals. At Cal State LA, students who enrolled in ENGL 1005A: College Writing I during the Fall 2021 semester explored, through writing, how to navigate various forces in their lives and explicitly map out paths of resistance. This exploration culminated in an activity titled “A Multimedia Resistance Statement,” which involved the production of an argumentative essay and shareable composition on students’ personal relationship to resistance. This assignment was designed to help students engage in course learning outcomes related to the writing process, synthesis and integration of sources, and writing conventions. Using writing and research from previously submitted assignments, including a personal narrative, advocacy letter, and reading analysis of Thi Bui’s graphic novel, *The Best We Could Do*, students responded to the prompt: “What does resistance mean to you?”

The project is a scaffolded assignment allowing for multiple drafts that, in our classes, resulted in topics including Asian American hate crimes, exposure to gang and drug communities, and reflections on mental health as a college student enduring a pandemic. Through this assignment, students were able to explore how they relate to forces often beyond their control and to recognize how they have resisted and continue to resist these forces. Students shared the multimedia compositions they created in class, which took the form of videos, artwork, memes, and gifs. These presentations gave students the opportunity to expand on how their image represented their personal definition of resistance, allowing for an in-depth look at how resistance functions in their lives and communities. Additionally, the students could submit their memes, gifs, or Tiktoks to the CSULA University Library for collection in an online archive of images and ideas about resistance.

As instructors working through the assignment, we wrote letters to one another documenting our struggles and successes. We present these letters below as a preface to the student work produced from this project. In her letters to Rory, Leiza, whose Master’s thesis draws from narrative therapy practices, reflects on the submissions she received that activate change through

the processes of writing about the narratives that influence students' lives. Rory, in her first year as graduate teaching associate, writes to Leiza on the challenges of teaching online and the ways resistance manifested on the Zoom screen. Teaching through the isolation and alienation of COVID, we found dialoguing through letters a method that uncovered not just the joy of writing but also, in the words of Toni Morrison, "its necessity."

#### *Letter from Rory to Leiza*

Hi Leiza, I love that we can dialogue about this assignment from our different perspectives, mine as a first-semester instructor teaching remotely and yours as a second-year instructor teaching in person. I found the idea of resistance to be apropos, considering its role in remote instruction. For example, first-semester college students can resist speaking up during class, especially when remote, where they can turn off their screens and mute themselves, amplifying the issue. One aid I found was assignment scaffolding which allows for multiple drafts, including peer and instructor feedback. I found this successful in overcoming resistance since it encouraged various types of input and provided a clear working format for each of the three papers. As a result, it allowed for growth throughout the semester, especially as they got the hang of the process.

In terms of the composition portion of the assignment, many students had difficulty putting resistance into words, so having the multimedia component allowed for more diverse avenues of expression. For example, some of the first drafts defined resistance negatively, so I pushed students to try and relate to its affirmative action. In one case, this led to a student's initial draft citing "What resistance means to me is the ability to not be affected by something or someone," to a more concise and active final draft stating, "What resistance means to me is the ability to withstand the force or effect of an action."

In a similar way, the multimedia element, which we have been fortunate enough to share here, allowed for an additional outlet of expression when tackling such a complex topic. I was impressed by the variety of submissions from drawings, personal videos, and original memes. Combining the written word with visual representations exposed the duplicitous nature of resistance, depicting it through its action and reaction. I wonder how your experience was with this portion of the project?

#### *Letter from Leiza to Rory*

Hi Rory. I hope all is well. I appreciate your discussion regarding the differences between online versus in-person settings. Though I did not have to contend with black screens, I did sometimes have to face blank stares or endure ticking silences that professors and students alike dread. This year was my first teaching in person. In addition to dwelling on teaching pedagogy, I was also anxious about our class's unusual circumstances. I worried throughout the semester about exposure to COVID-19, the mask mandate, and whether the administration would revert to remote instruction if COVID-19 cases surged. But the students in my class were an enthusiastic and gracious bunch. Given the choice between two in-person meetings weekly or a hybrid of in-person and virtual, the majority voted for a fully in-person class. So, we tumbled, stumbled, and rumbled along for 15 weeks, speaking louder than we probably had to speak to overcome the muffles of our masks.

Like you, I relied on scaffolding assignments to ensure students understood the main principle we taught in 1005A—writing is a process. Creating space in the course schedule for

multiple drafts, peer review, and one-on-one conferences provided chances for students to tinker and advance their writing knowledge. In addition, we discussed writing strategies from our *Understanding Rhetoric* textbook—a graphic guide that students enjoyed immensely—and applied them to their writing projects.

One main strategy we discussed over the semester, and developed a love-hate relationship with, was synthesis. A student in the class who loved the strategy described it as “combining ideas to come up with a theory.” Many students frustrated with synthesis found its conciseness difficult. How does one begin to combine various and sometimes contradictory information into one sentence?

To help brainstorm ideas about resistance and practice synthesizing information, I led a discussion on resistance using a bubble map on the classroom board. The center contained the question “What is resistance?” and each student was asked to write their answer in the surrounding bubbles. Then, in small groups, they had to choose three answers from any of their peers and compose a unified one-sentence theory defining resistance leading to a more refined and concise bubble map. My contribution to the bubble map was “resistance to oppressive systems,” and it was a bit of a surprise to hear students identify “oppressive systems” in their communities as families, friends, and neighbors. Students grappled with the stories they’ve been told about themselves by family, friends, and the world. I personally, was too narrowly focused on imposing structures and monumental histories of racism, gender bias, and prejudice until students reminded me that systems of oppression are based on stories we tell ourselves and stories others tell about us. One student shared they did not always feel they belonged in their family or to their friends. Another expressed feeling boxed in by others’ perception of their personality. One other student described how the act of self-love was his resistance to a sometimes hateful world. Some even resisted schooling—not to the idea of learning anything new but to the busy work that served little purpose in their lives.

*There was a rawness in the air. Sometimes that ticking silence erupts.*

Synthesis through stories proved key to my teaching of the multimedia aspect of the project. The meme, gif, or TikTok video functioned as a synthesized, or in other words, a unified visual story, of what resistance meant to them. Students who submitted to the “I Resist” Composite Archive drew from and synthesized differing sources—their favorite memes, their definitions of resistance, and their personal experiences—to develop a piece of media that fused their meaning of resistance. One student who submitted was inspired by the resistance shown by the formerly enslaved races of *DragonBall Z*. Another examined her friendships and developed a TikTok that mocked and resisted toxic relationships. A student used his meme to resist the inescapable holiday dread faced by retail workers by invoking Mariah Carey’s catchy tune “All I Want for Christmas is You.” And one student humbly reminded me to always be transparent with students about assignments when she submitted her meme resisting professors who randomly assign 8-page research papers. I’m curious about what strategies were instrumental to you teaching the multimedia piece, Rory. What writing or reading strategies did students realize could also be used to create their meme, gif, or TikTok? And what did students realize they were resisting in their lives and what did they say resistance ultimately meant to them?

### *Letter from Rory to Leiza*

Hi Leiza, your feedback got me thinking we are barely scratching the surface of this project, but it has been great sharing our experiences. The greatest struggle for my students in the multimedia portion was understanding what was meant by an original composition. Many initially pulled preexisting memes or gifs rather than creating original visuals. After clarifying the instructions, I received more uniquely creative gifs. One of the more unique submissions was a short video of the student verbalizing his definition of resistance. I found their struggle common and one you elucidated in your letter as synthesis. Like you, I found that as students began to understand the higher-level function of synthesizing information it resulted in more original analysis. Overall, I found the assignment one that the students were excited to engage in, evidenced by their energetic presentations followed by an active class dialogue.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Writing is necessary for all. In our classes, we have pursued this ethos by honoring our students' diverse experiences in their stories of resistance. Through our dialogue, we learned the difficult aspects of teaching during a pandemic, whether online or in-person, and the value of scaffolding assignments to allow students to learn about the process of writing. We have used a writing strategy—synthesis—to build connections where there might not have been before writing. The multimedia aspect of our assignment demonstrated how synthesis could be used in other media and provided another avenue for students to express their resistance strategies. We have found that teaching writing is not only an important necessity but an incredible privilege to be able to share with our students.

## **Resistance Multimedia Projects: A Showcase of Student Work**

Armond Davis

Resistance to me is having the ability to overcome something, and I think that a lot of us have that nowadays. I think that we all overcame resistance in these past few years of life. So always remain humble and don't forget to always be resistant. *See video file.*

Brianna Lupian

My TikTok is describing a friendship. It's trying to say that your best friend shouldn't have other friends other than you. Or she shouldn't be doing sneaky things behind your back. It is showing resistance because it's making a joke of being in a toxic friendship, asserting that you can have other friends, not just one. What I am resisting in my life that is applicable to my meme is the norm of best friends experiencing jealousy when they have other friends. By breaking this norm, I am resisting the territorial feeling that I may express when I'm very close to a specific friend. In other words, I am expressing how I'm resisting that feeling of just wanting your best friend to have you and only you as a friend, accepting the fact that best friends shouldn't just have one another but should be able to branch out and have other friends too. *See video file.*

Emmely Navarette



Looking back at my autobiographical narrative, I realized that I have used resistance during the first weeks here at Cal State LA. I mentioned in my piece that I had a hard time getting comfortable with this school and “it was hard to meet new people.” I resisted the temptation to continue feeling this way and proceeded by taking it day by day and getting myself more involved in student life.

Kevyn Rivera



My meme is describing someone screaming internally but physically trying to keep their composure. The meme is based on the popular TV show SpongeBob SquarePants and has two images put together into one to make it seem like he is calm but screaming on the inside. In the meme, most retail workers suffer by listening on loop to Mariah Carey’s song, “All I Want for Christmas Is You” until the holidays, more specifically Christmas, is over. It is unpleasant to listen to the same song all day, and that is why the meme is describing the worker pretending to be calm but screaming internally. My way of resisting is not just acting against something, but also

cooperating for the better good. Screaming on the inside to let out the pain is a way of resisting because you are doing what you can to cope with the unpleasantness of the situation.

Kaelin Smith



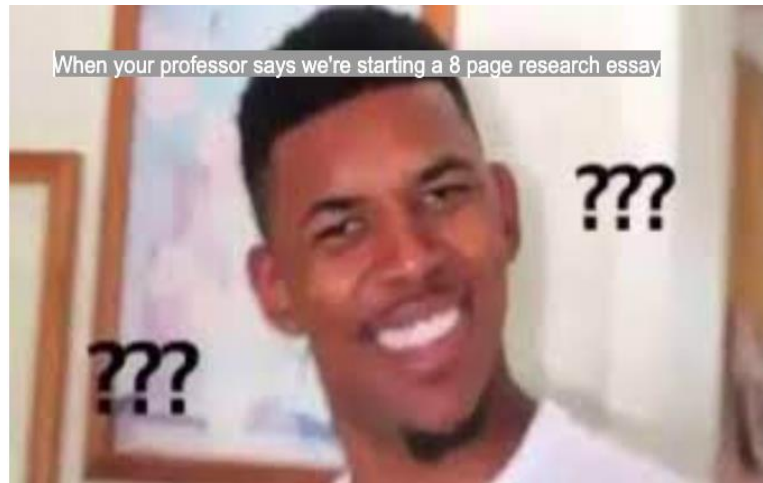
My meme shows what resistance is to me because to me when I hear the word “resistance,” I think a battle for freedom or the fight against some type of oppression. My meme is about a show called *Dragon Ball Z*; the meme is about the main character’s father, Bardock. Bardock died fighting against an evil emperor who basically enslaved his whole race. These people are known as Saiyans, but before they were enslaved the Saiyans were conquerors for hire. People would hire them to go and kill everything on a planet and then sell the planet. When they were enslaved, they still had to do the same thing but to build an universal empire, but they weren’t paid to do it; it was just do it or die. The emperor eventually killed all the Saiyan, but before he did, Bardock made a stand and fought. That’s why I think my meme is a great example of what resistance is to me.

Jasmine Torres Godinez



A biography is usually known as a significant writing of a person's life events, all the highlighted moments, and all the bad events too. I feel as if I resisted writing about myself and all the special moments in my life that led up to me attending CSULA.

Sherlley Yaquian



My meme is part of a video that became a meme of this guy who is confused and caught off guard. My meme is showing resistance to having to write an eight-page research paper that my professor just assigned. I feel like this meme is relatable for college students and would be found in the "school humor" category of memes. This meme relates to my life a lot because as a college student I have professors assign 5-8 page essays, which is always stressful to hear but you know you will have to get it done. Resistance to me is when you are not willing to do something or are waiting until the last minute to do something; in this case, I feel like that's what my meme is representing.