

Writing Self Evaluations

by Richard Alexander

The Transcript

The Evergreen transcript consists of four parts:

- 1) a cover sheet which lists all programs and contracts you took here, and provides an outline of your experience at Evergreen, followed by
- 2) a program description (or your individual contract), which states in neutral language everything that all students were required to do in that program, and which may also provide a rationale for that work;
- 3) a faculty evaluation of your work in the program, limited to one page per quarter;
- 4) your self-evaluation of your work in the program, limited to one page per quarter.

The evaluations for each program are presented together, and the programs are generally arranged in reverse order, from the most recent to the earliest. In this way the potential reader can quickly find the most recent information, and can look at the earlier work as desired.

Myths & Rumors

Myth: Self-evaluations aren't important. Don't waste your time.

Truth: Self-evaluations are the most important part of your transcript. The self-evaluation often has the only hard information on your own work. It is often the only part of your transcript which has serious content, the only portion of the transcript from which someone can actually learn what you have done at Evergreen, what you have studied, and what you have learned. The other parts of the transcript simply say what everyone in your program did (the program description), or provide faculty comment on your work (the faculty evaluation), comment that can often be misleadingly partial.

The self-evaluation is your only chance to tell your story in your way. You throw away this chance at your own risk.

Sometimes you will be risking quite a lot. After all, if an inadequate faculty evaluation is the only readable and usable part of your transcript, then you are stuck with what that inadequate evaluation says about you. If you write a shoddy evaluation yourself, you are really stuck with it, because a transcript that has been sent to anyone cannot be changed later; and there is only a limited length of time in which any changes can be made even if the transcript has never been sent out. The Registrar's Office regularly receives desperate requests to change a self-evaluation, when it is already too late to do anything about it.

Myth: No one ever reads Evergreen transcripts. Certainly NO one ever reads those self-evaluations!

Truth: Some people do read the transcripts. Some future employers and graduate schools read them all the way through, carefully. Of course, it is also true that some future employers and graduate schools will not read them, or read only the last ones, or read only the first paragraphs of the faculty evaluations.

However, you don't know right now whether the people you send your transcript will read it or not. The chances that someone you want very much to impress will indeed read it, and will read your self-evaluations all the way through, is easily in the 50/50 range. If you write sloppy or negative or self-degrading self-evaluations, they can do enormous damage to yourself, for years to come.

Myth: No one wants to know what you think of what you have done. All the important information is in the faculty evaluations.

Truth: Those people who read evaluations want to get answers to questions that are important to them. If these questions were not important, they would not bother to wade through all that paperwork.

They want to know "Who is this person? What is she really like? What are her interests? What are her accomplishments? What has she really studied? What has she actually learned? What is she capable of doing? What sort of life does she want to make for herself? How well will she be able to work here? Does she have the capacities we are looking for?"

Anyone who takes the trouble to actually read a long Evergreen narrative transcript has such questions in mind, and expects to get answers to them. After all, if you can't find answers to such questions plowing through 40 single-spaced pages of autobiographical narrative, where can you get them?

If your self-evaluation fails to answer those questions, or (consciously or inadvertently) gives negative answers to them, then you have ruined your chances with such a reader. You have ruined them, perhaps, even if the faculty evaluations are positive. But the plain fact is time after time it is only the student self-evaluations that supply any serious answers to those questions.

Why? Because only the student really knows the answers to those questions. Most faculty don't have the information, and/or if they have it, don't care to put it into their evaluations. Faculty can only show the behavior you showed them, and thus they simply cannot know what was actually most important to you, or how this experience changed something you thought two years ago, or how it will affect your future.

Even more important, your faculty cannot know your progress through Evergreen, cannot know where you started, all the changes you went through, or where you have ended. Only you know such things. Only you can construct the running commentary on your progress that the set of self-evaluations in fact is.

You should not fool yourself: whether you plan them as a running commentary or not, your self-evaluations when read through from start to finish constitute a running commentary. What story are you telling about yourself if those self-evaluations show someone who never thought back over any previous learning? who never had any perceivable goals? whose experience at Evergreen for four years was nothing but one disconnected activity after another?

Myth: The faculty evaluation is so important that it will always over-ride anything I have to say.

Truth: The faculty evaluation is important, but a student self-evaluation can always over-ride it.

If the faculty evaluation is negative, but the student self-evaluation is well-written, self-assured, positive, and convincing, the student account will cast serious doubt on the faculty account.

If the faculty evaluation is positive, even enthusiastic, but the student self-evaluation is inept, sloppy, cursory, and maladroit, the student account will utterly undercut anything good the faculty has to say.

If both accounts are positive, they very powerfully reinforce each other, the student account providing concrete information to fill out faculty generalities.

If both evaluations are (alas) negative, then the student account can nevertheless rescue something from the shambles, point to bright spots, explain the situation, point ahead to future accomplishment...

How To Write Self-Evaluations

1) You are literally writing your transcript! So the evaluation must be clean, neat, well-typed, and free from spelling, punctuation, and syntax blunders. Really bad copy probably won't be accepted by the Registrar's Office, but some persistent students have managed to get sloppy evaluations accepted. They pay for that later when they discover to their horror that the transcript cannot be changed! Take no chances.

The evaluations must be typed directly on to the STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION form. Program secretaries will not type them for you. The Computer Center has a program which will print your (perfectly corrected) self-evaluation directly on the proper forms, and in the number of copies you will need.

2) The self-evaluations taken as a whole should provide a running account of your ACADEMIC PROGRESS through Evergreen. Readers who start with the first evaluation and read through to the final one, should be given the autobiographical story of your work here. Why did you choose to come to Evergreen? What were you prepared to do? What did you want to do? Why did you want to do it? Why did you choose this program at this time? What did you learn? How have you changed? grown? developed? Are your goals still the same? What do you plan to do next? and why?

The first evaluation in the set should always provide all the preliminary information: "I came to Evergreen from a Community College in Arkansas, where I had concentrated on secretarial skills and accounting. After working in the Florist business for 10 years, and saving a modest amount of money, I decided to move to Centralia, Washington, where I had family. I enrolled in Evergreen largely to round out my education and to study all those things I had been forced to ignore back in Arkansas.....I joined the Multi-cultural Fractions program because.....I had no past experience with mathematics, but.....I hoped to learn how to..."

Every evaluation thereafter should start with a similar statement of your reasons for taking this particular program. Each should end with a statement about what you plan to do next:

"Now that I have satisfied all my curiosity about Inca mathematics, and have decided to do studio art next, because.....I hope that all that work on mathematics will help me to..."

The final evaluation should sum up the entire Evergreen

experience, not just comment on that final program. What has your work at Evergreen meant to you? What have you accomplished? What have you yet to do? Do you want to get a job? go to graduate school? take a long vacation? sell surfing equipment in Hawaii?

3) Thing to leave OUT of evaluations, unless they are absolutely necessary:

A) Negative comments about yourself, your own work, your own abilities. You can acknowledge poor work, but should let the faculty evaluation describe it. YOU should concentrate on what is positive.

B) Negative comments about the program, its format, its faculty, your fellow students..... Save this stuff for the evaluation you write of the faculty! Your future employer or graduate school doesn't need to hear this, and it can do you great damage in their eyes. It makes you sound like a sore-head.

C) Emotional statements, "feeling comments," and excessive information about your personal life, unless such information is absolutely needed to explain why something went wrong, or why you did something different from the other students. You can, of course, say that you were pleased with something or not pleased...but be brief, and rather vague.

4) Things you should definitely put IN to the evaluations:

A) Explain what you hoped to accomplish, why you wanted to accomplish it, and to what degree you met or surpassed your expectations.

B) Describe accomplishments you did not expect but nevertheless turned out to be very important to you. Why were they important?

C) Concentrate at least 1/3 of the evaluation on anything in the program that would be important to your future plans, a future employer, or future graduate school. IF YOU KNOW WHAT THAT FUTURE EMPLOYMENT OR GRADUATE SCHOOL IS, then tailor your self-evaluations accordingly. After all, it is stupid to write evaluations that ignore any connections with journalism if you know you are going to try the newspaper game.

(On the other hand, all future employers want to hire people who have more than mere narrow competence and narrow experience, so, once you have made sure your evaluation says what your employer would need to know, you should freely discuss other matters.)

Don't worry that you might change your career goals in the future. Of course you might. But an evaluation tailored to the goals you have now- IF you make those goals explicit in the evaluation- will read better and make you seem a better student no matter how your goals change. If your goals change while you are still a student, simply acknowledge that fact in the self-evaluations: "Last year I imagined I would become a fashion model, but..... Now I plan to go to medical school."

D) You should concentrate on things that

a) pertain to your future goals

b) connect to past work, or point to future work

c) were vital to the work of the program, and your relative accomplishment in it;

d) explain why you deserve the amount of credit you are earning in your "credit equivalencies"

e) personally affected YOU whether or not they were important to the program or your future work.

This would involve a LOT of writing if you tried to cover everything that happened. Since you can't cover everything you must make a careful selection.

Here's what you can leave out

- * Anything the program description says, you don't need to repeat; simply assume it is already described.

- * Anything the faculty can and does say adequately, you don't need to repeat. You can acknowledge what the faculty says, but you don't need to go over the same ground again.

- * Mere lists of your activities and accomplishments are never convincing: ANYONE can write a list, even someone who never read the books and who slept through every seminar can make a list of books he supposedly read.

Here's what you SHOULD put in:

- * Choose the two or three (no more than three!) specific items which were most important during the quarter, for whatever reasons, and discuss these items in detail.

- * If you make convincing statements about these things, showing

that you really do understand them fully and well, then lists of other items, and general claims of accomplishment will be convincing.

- * It is important to be CONVINCING, to make the reader see that you really do know what you are talking about. Raise substantive issues and make substantive statements. This will NOT be boring. The usual bland list of things done is intensely boring.

- * While it is important to be positive, to blow your own horn, you want to avoid arrogance and boasting. Admitting deficiencies and/or failures can actually strengthen a positive evaluation. Don't go on and on about these deficits at length - just admit them, explain why they were important, explain what you hope to do about them in the future.

- * Make the self-evaluation as stylish and as uniquely yours as you can. You want to write an evaluation that no other student in the program could possibly write. You want to present a recognizable portrait of yourself. You want to write something no one could mistake for the evaluation of any other student.

Sample Self-Evaluation Number 1

This is the final quarter of my junior year at Evergreen. I entered spring quarter with a deep desire to create. After spending the first two quarters of the year analyzing other people's art, I was more than ready to start making my own. I wanted the opportunity to write creatively and to explore the immediate world around me, not just the dusty world of past events. In **Take a Look** I was afforded the opportunity to do this and much more. From the first day of class I was challenged to re-awaken my senses, experience the world with an objective and open mind and above all, to use these as tools in creating effective art. We were required to write profusely, writing response papers for every day of class, as well as larger synthesis and reflection papers. We had drawing workshops every week, in which we learned useful techniques on how to create convincing art. Perhaps the most influential element of the class, however, was the weekly field site observation, during which we utilized all of our new powers of perception.

Sitting in silent solitude and in the same spot every week for my field observation, my perceptual powers became finely tuned. Nestled amongst tall trees and feathery ferns, the miniscule and microscopic world in front of me expanded. Tree stumps became continents and ant colonies great civilizations. I let go of meanings and let the metamorphosis of metaphor take over. Soon, my small field site encompassed the entire world. I appreciated my eyes again, and attempted to invest the objects they encountered with the admiration and enjoyment I did as a child. This was the first step I took towards improving my writing. To write well about what you see, you must be able to see well what you write about. By observing the world with innocent and objective eyes, I was able to capture that elusive sense of wonder that makes good writing even better.

While I considered myself to be a capable writer when I entered **Take a Look**, the constant flow of writing we were required to produce during the program, and the techniques we were provided with to do so, helped to improve my writing enormously. We were encouraged to observe people and events objectively, search for patterns of ritualized behavior and capture as many specific details as possible in our notes, all the while writing freely. It was not until after observing the event that we were expected to expand on, edit and polish the paper. These techniques helped my most noticeably when we did ethnographic research for the class. When I wrote about my experience observing an historically significant café in Olympia, I was able to create a much stronger, more vivid and convincing portrait of the setting than I could have before, due to the close scrutiny and attention I paid to details and the relative level of objectivity I maintained while doing so.

The books we read during **Take a Look** stimulated deeper thought in me about course concepts, and inspired me to form more developed opinions of my own. The idea that everyone perceives the world from a different perspective, and that none of these perspectives are less real than any other seemed to re-occur in all our readings, and affected my most deeply in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Oliver Sachs' *An Anthropologist on Mars*. In seminar on these books and others, I came prepared with a carefully conceived analysis paper and attempted to push discussion deep into the texts with thought-provoking questions and insightful comments. I made an effort to take on a leadership role in the discussion when it was necessary, and overall found that seminar was an engaging opportunity to build upon ideas and reach towards broader conclusions about them.

The drawing component of the program was another chance to improve my powers of perception and gain some technical skills along the way. We learned about shading, proportion, and---in what was one of the most enlightening workshops for me---perspective. Drawing objects in relation to a horizon line and using vanishing points as markers to guide me along the way, I was at last able

to successfully draw objects in perspective. I emerged from the drawing workshops a much more capable visual artist than I had been upon entering the program.

Take a Look has helped me to write more descriptively, draw more effectively, and, most importantly, perceive the world with greater honesty. I have begun to utilize all five senses equally in experiencing events and managed to recapture a sense of wonder towards the world. All of these things have improved my creative output tremendously. The real challenge, of course, lies ahead, when I leave **Take a Look** and must take it upon myself to continue perceiving the world with child-like clarity, avoiding the pitfalls of disenchantment. It is my goal to maintain the powers of perception I honed during this quarter and push them even further during future experiences. Who knows? Perhaps by the time I am an old man I will see things even more clearly than I did as a child.

Sample Self-Evaluation Number 2

Before I came to Evergreen I attended Linn-Benton Community College, studying a wide range of subjects including---among many others---writing, anthropology, geography, photography, and Eastern religions. I came to Evergreen to study environmental sciences but chose **Myth and Sensibility** for my first program. The art history and cross culture studies attracted me to the program. I felt that it would be helpful to have a background in those areas because of the prospect of travel in my future. I felt, however, that it was important to get started on my environment studies, which is why I have chosen to leave the program after only one quarter.

Before participating in this program I already had a background in the study of eastern religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. I had not, however, studied much of the Eastern cultures as a whole and I wanted to learn more about the way their societies functioned. The first book that we read proved most influential to me. By reading *Woman Warrior* I got a very in-depth look at the Chinese culture and its effects on women in society. I learned that the demands that were placed on women were and continue to be detrimental to their physical and mental health. The Chinese culture is an extreme example, in comparison to American culture, of a patriarchal society in which women historically have either been under valued or had little influence. From our study of the ancient Greek culture as well, I learned to draw concise comparisons between two contrasting cultures.

Coming into the program I realized that there was going to be a lot of writing expected and I knew that it was going to challenge me to improve my writing skills. The writing process has never been easy for me, but having to write weekly papers helped me develop better writing strategies. Open-ended papers were something that I was not accustomed to and it pushed me to form an opinion of my own and develop a strong thesis that I could back up with information from that books that I read. As well as writing, there was also extensive reading, which challenged my time management. Without daily tests or reading assignments I had to push myself to get the reading done throughout the week before seminar. From this, the pace at which I read has increased, improving my ability to read long books in a timely manner. From the seminars, I gained a wide range of perspectives on the books that we read, challenging the opinions that I had formed prior to seminar.

During the program I also participated in workshops involving Chinese calligraphy, Sumi ink painting, and ceramics. By participating in the Chinese calligraphy workshops I learned how to manipulate the ink and brush in the traditional Chinese manner. The calligraphy is written by not only controlling the hand but the body as well. By controlling the body's movement and energy flow with the direction of the brush, one can attain the correct shape and stability of the lines to form strong characters. I also learned that most of the Chinese characters came from a simplification of their original forms. In addition, I worked with ceramics, learning to manipulate the clay to resemble an ancient art form from either Greece or China. Working with such media as clay and ink gave me a different perspective on the ancient Chinese and Greek cultures.

While working through the program I challenged my ability to complete all of the work required. I feel that although I did not fulfill every single requirement, I did work to the best of my abilities and pushed myself to accomplish as much as I could. My writing skills improved, my reading pace has increased and my knowledge of two different cultures has expanded. I have learned to comprehend complex theories and, by placing myself outside of my own cultural context, I have come to a better understanding of some other cultures as well. The program has increased my ability to think outside of the box and I feel that I will continue to do so in all other aspects of my life.