# Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road:" Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch

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## Recommended Citation

# DIALOGUE
*The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*

# Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road:" Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch

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## ABSTRACT

This study draws on media literacy to suggest pedagogical techniques that aim to combat boredom and enhance student engagement in freshman writing classes. Students often complain they cannot relate to course work; they maintain that course materials do not connect to their real lives and are therefore uninteresting. Because writing classes can serve as an introduction to academic discourse and skillful writing promotes academic success, negative attitudes about writing matter. Instructors craft courses to achieve learning outcomes but also to foster the habits of mind effective writing demands. I contend that discussing and writing about timely, controversial topics from students' social media feeds teaches them to identify the complex power structures at play in the materials they do find pertinent. Students gain confidence by demonstrating adept understandings of contentious issues and, in fostering this process, instructors neutralize the relatability problem by allowing students to choose the topics they deem compelling.

**Keywords:** Freshman writing, media literacy, student engagement, lesson plans, social media, pedagogical techniques

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Furtive texting, whispered chatting, errant napping: these are the classroom behaviors of bored students, and most writing instructors have had the disagreeable experience of failing to coax them into group conversation. Indeed, engaging indifferent undergrads in meaningful class discussions can present a significant hurdle to effective teaching. This holds especially true in freshman writing courses, where most American college students first encounter the complexity of academic discourse. Fortunately, pedagogical practices constructed with the analysis of popular culture in mind can catalyze student participation. However, in creating lesson plans, writing instructors face the challenge of identifying which materials work best to promote class conversation and aid the achievement of course learning outcomes (Sellnow 4). To this end, instructors would do well to draw on the educational benefits of critical media literacy in their pedagogical planning: "more than simply guiding how students read and interpret the texts they encounter, critical media literacy pedagogy pushes to illuminate the underlying power structures that are a part of every media text" (Garcia, et al. 109). By examining power structure dynamics and how they inform texts, students learn "to sift through the reams of information that bombard them on a daily basis and identify spin, half-truths, and outright lies" (Garcia, et al. 109). For this reason, the ideal lesson has students analyzing the implications of obfuscation in texts they know well and genuinely want to explore. While these factors are not necessarily prerequisites for the purposes of selection, they can influence student enthusiasm, or what students identify as a text's 'relatability,' and therefore affect participation and learning.

## RELATABILITY AND THE SITCH

Students tell us time and again they want course material they can 'relate' to, and though we intuit what they mean by this, we are frequently baffled by how to make it happen. Often instructors avoid the relatability issue by side-stepping it altogether and analyzing the media they like. This approach, though legitimate and usually fruitful, has its limitations. Even though *Hulu's* "The Handmaid's Tale" and *Showtime's* "The Chi" might enthrall instructors and rack up record viewership, student reception, if they've never heard of these programs, can be chilly or worse, disdainful if they've rejected the shows altogether. One strategy for tackling the relatability conundrum involves reframing the dynamic between texts and students. What if instead of introducing texts we find compelling, we introduce timely *con*texts first? What if we encourage our students to mine social media and let the latest flare-up, the "sitch," drive text selection? The *Urban Dictionary* defines "sitch" as "short for situation." This would include trending, usually controversial topics inundating social media. Our students know them well. By enlisting a sitch for class discussions we meet students where they are *now* as they navigate trending topics in real time. Constant, updated feeds from *Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat News* and the like swell into tsunamis of information that flood students' social media and thereby provide instructors with a sea of topics and texts to consider. Discussing trendy sitches in class allows students to "access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms within print and non-print media" (Garcia, et al. 112), all critical thinking activities crucial to writing instructors' learning outcomes. Debates about sitches, when well-handled, can offer entree to these educational goals.

Take for example the recent debate over the GameStop short squeeze ("Controversy over GameStop's Stock"). This dispute provides a perfect illustration of a sitch ripe for classroom consideration. Students are able to speak candidly about the purpose of the coordinated stock buying blitz executed via the aptly named *Robinhood* trading platform (DeNisco Rayome 2021). Here, flying in the face of stock market norms, bands of young, small-time buyers drove up a floundering company's stock price for the express purpose of undercutting major hedge funds' short positions ("Melvin Capital and the Road to Ruin"). Indeed, the scrappy investors, which included many high school and college students who bought twenty or fifty dollars-worth of shares, succeeded in causing Melvin Capital to lose half of its thirteen-billion-dollar fund ("Controversy

over GameStop Stock"). This stitch can allow students to examine where and how the sabotage plan was hatched (on the sub-*Reddit* forum "r/WallStreetBets") and what that online coordination signifies for its users. Student conversations might explore the varied motivations for day-trading investors to purchase and hold their GameStop stocks with "diamond hands." These include making quick fortunes, also known as getting the "tendies;" 'sticking it' to Wall Street hedge fund operators; and avenging their parents' 2008 economic losses. Jacob Hall, a Generation Z freshman college student, offered his take on the brouhaha:

> People my age have accepted they're never going to be financially secure, and Covid had most of us unemployed and at home. The world is so insane now that we said 'screw it' and threw the little money we had in the market expecting to probably lose it all, knowing we'll never get the wealth the top ten percent have. Our generation and the Millennials are in the grip of existential fear. We are adopting nihilism and apathy due to the chaos of the world and uncertainty of the future. The insanity of GameStop is, I guess, a metaphor for this or an ironic grand gesture. Also, this may sound weird, but there's a strong sense of community in all of us little guys banding together. (Hall 2021)

For Hall and many of his peers, the GameStop sitch functions as a *cri de coeur,* a passionate protest, for a generation alienated and angry about a bleak future with scant chance for the financial security Boomers claimed as their birthright. Students can be prompted to write about this subject, because it's probable they or someone they know invested a few dollars in the soaring stock; many have skin in the game and for Gen Z, the personal is financial (Anderson 2021). With this in mind, instructors can capitalize (pun intended) on the thrill and anxiety permeating the GameStop sitch to drive class discussions which, in turn, will generate intriguing research and writing assignments.

## SITCH HUNTING

The ubiquitous nature of sitches make them incredibly useful pedagogical tools. Recent controversies involving musicians can lend themselves to lively class discussions and therefore make excellent sitch choices. For instance, regardless of musical tastes, the vast majority of students will probably have opinions, albeit perhaps uninformed, about the consumption and value of Michael Jackson and R Kelly's music in relation to their alleged crimes (Mahdawi and Donegan 2019). To be sure, their responses might be kneejerk in nature, ranging anywhere from he's a victim and I'm always going to listen to his music to he's an evil person and no one should ever play his music again. Such judgments can mark points of entry for students to practice critical thinking via class conversation. Moreover, interrogating multiple attitudes pushes students "to explore difficult-to-see ideologies and connections between power and information" (Garcia et al. 112). Hence, letting students identify and discuss *why* they find certain sitches relatable to them as individuals or as group members is a valuable activity in and of itself, because, as I've found in my classrooms, a sitch's pedagogical usefulness is predicated on contentious views touching on race, class, gender, privilege and power.

The beauty of sitches is that students can readily identify them and track their development in real time. In fact, given social media's omnipresence, many instructors would say their students know more about trending topics than they do. That said, instructors can still set parameters to frame the hunt. Designating topics such as sports, music or movies challenges students to limit the scope of material to explore and thereby initiate more targeted discussions. For example, in fall of 2017, I taught two sections of freshmen writing. Both classes were populated with first generation African-American and Latinx students. Early in the semester we explored the dynamic between writer and audience and how a writer's understanding of their audience helps them craft ways to best relay their message. I asked students to think of a sports-related topic connected to audience reception that personally resonated with them. After consideration, two students suggested we

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discuss the race-based media storm surrounding the NFL player Colin Kaepernick and his taking a knee at games during the national anthem (Wyche 2016). They were certain they understood the athlete's message which Kaepernick had made clear in the press: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (qtd. in Wyche 2016). The majority of my students readily identified Kaepernick's pronouncement as valid and important, but then they had to work more assiduously to parse different audiences' reception of that message.

One audience they considered was Donald Trump and his indignant response to Kaepernick's protest (Graham 2017). Some students calculated his outrage was probably intended to gain political points with his base. They also discussed the uproar among Americans like Kurt Schlichter, a combat veteran who claimed Kaepernick was targeting veterans: "He knows what this [the national anthem] means to us. He knows how insulting it is" (qtd. in Puri 2018). Students examined why Schlichter believed Kaepernick's act dishonored his service, and because a cohort of students had family members in the military, a few agreed with Schlichter's indictment. They also considered how Schlichter's complaint was roundly rejected by a large faction of veterans who supported Kaepernick (Szoldra and Woody 2017). Vets like Benjamin Starks, retired from both the US Navy and the US Army Reserve, maintained that "Kaepernick is exercising his constitutional right, and I'm glad that he's doing it" (quoted in Szoldra and Woody 2017). Stark and his likeminded soldiers identified freedom of speech as the issue at stake in the controversy. Through our conversations, students explored the Kaepernick stitch to investigate how the complex intersection of political spin, national identity, and freedom of speech informed an audience's reception to the football player's protest. I found that the Kaepernick sitch stimulated productive class discussions, because students were able to dig deep to consider how and why audiences play a role in determining a message's meaning. Successful sitch studies can interrogate familiar institutions like the NFL and the current political environment to contextualize and tease out meaning swirling in the media frenzy. Moreover, no one complained to me of being bored!

**THE "OLD TOWN ROAD" SITCH**

To illustrate this practice in finer detail, let me now offer a case study demonstrating how scrutinizing a sitch can enrich the writing classroom. A recent sitch involves Lil Nas X, a twenty-two-year-old rapper from Atlanta whose hit song, "Old Town Road," has been a hot button topic since its release in December of 2018 (Frank 2019). After remaining seventeen weeks at the top of the charts, the track's influence showed no sign of abating at the end of 2019 (Fortin 2019). Positioned in the crossover genre mash of country and hip hop, also known as hick hop, Nas X's single was a pop success even as it raised hackles on the country music scene (Chow 2019). Billboard charts refused to acknowledge the track and some country stations even declined to air "Old Town Road" (Frank 2019). Because Lil Nas X is both African-American and gay, charges of racism and homophobia followed, forcing many country, hip hop and pop fans to reevaluate their understandings of race, sexuality and the taxonomies of genre (Jacobs 2019). Musicians soon stepped into the fray to redress the snubbing of Nas X's hit. Billy Ray Cyrus, a well-known white country singer, sprang to Nas X's defense and the two artists produced a remix of Nas X's music video (Nas X 2019).

Nas X's remixed video soared in popularity and the track finally received the public respect it deserved. The "Old Town Road" remix is the first and longest running hick hop song ever featured in Billboard's "The Hot 100" hits (Chow 2019). Tongue in cheek, the video tackles the race and genre issue head on, even as Cyrus's imprimatur functions to tamp down the controversy. In fact, at the start of the video, Cyrus tells Nas X, "you're with me this time, everything's gonna be alright" (Nas X 2019). But Cyrus's involvement with Nas X, his making everything alright, appears to come at a cost. Cyrus often gets first billing in the video and frequently sings lead vocals in the refrain or hook, "the catchy part of a song that draws in the listener" (*Urban Dictionary* 2021). Nas X also adds a new framing device to this video, one that gestures to how only

an exceptional Black man can succeed in this music genre. The video opens with an all-Black posse, featuring Chris Rock as its sheriff, in a horse race to capture Nas X who holds a large sack of money. Rock stops the chase and lets Nas X go, telling his deputies, "when you see a Black man on horseback goin' that fast, you just gotta let him fly" (Nas X 2019). Nas X rides hard till he stumbles across Cyrus's ranch and at this point in the story the song begins. To close the frame, the posse returns at the end of the video where Rock declares with admiration, "I've never seen nothing goin' that fast in my life" (Nas X 2019). The result is a video rich for analysis, because it raises as many questions about race, power and genre as it attempts to answer.

## USING A SITCH IN LESSON PLANS

Students have a lot to unpack from the "Old Town Road" sitch. For example, Nas X's song lyrics and different iterations of his music video present opportunities to teach elements of the rhetorical situation by drawing on aspects of critical media literacy. Author, purpose, media, stance, audience and genre *all* function as flashpoints in the Nas X controversy, but for the purposes of this piece, let's look specifically at genre. A close look at the lyrics prompts students to think about how they define genre in the context of Nas X's chosen mediums and how those definitions are not neatly delineated when viewed through a critical lens. A simple introductory exercise to demonstrate this might have students listing aloud key items, the words they associate with country songs, and next identifying those features in the "Old Town Road" lyrics, as in lines 5-8:

> I got the horses in the back
> Horse tack is attached
> Hat is matte black
> Got the boots that's black to match (qtd. in Silver)

Country music's staple images are explicit here in references to "horses," "tack," "black hats" and "boots." Some students may not know the word "tack," but this is easily remedied with a quick google search which will show that "tack" means equestrian equipment, articles such as saddles, bridles and reins (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2021). Indeed, Nas X's use of "tack" emphasizes the speaker's credibility while reinforcing generic expectations about country lyric content. Yet, despite the song's country tropes, many country music fans resisted associating it with the genre. One possible reason for this rejection lies in the track's transition from traditional country tropes to others associated with hip hop (Chow 2019). We see this in the lines 17-24:

> Ridin' on a tractor
> Lean all in my bladder
> Cheated on my baby
> You can go and ask her
> My life is a movie
> Bull ridin' and boobies
> Cowboy hat from Gucci
> Wrangler on my booty (qtd. in Silver)

Here the class can identify factors that give country fans pause. For instance, words such as "boobies" and "booty" point to the overt sexuality often heard in hip hop lyrics and references to "Gucci" and "Wrangler" mirror the brand name-dropping also associated with the genre (Gallagher 2019). A free writing exercise might include exploring the connotative tension found in Nas X's word choice and how diction serves as an important principle of music classification.

This free write, in turn, can prime students to consider the remix video's visuals as strategically paired to the song's lyrics and how this particular pairing foments controversy. Perhaps more important, such writing

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tasks oblige students to contend with *how* and *why* racial stereotypes are affixed to genre, and how generic conventions manifest differently in different mediums. For instance, Nas X's original song and video show him acting as the protagonist of his story and singing all his lyrics alone. In this role his lyrical refrain has implications that are distinct from Cyrus's in the remix video. In the latter, both men sing the following:

> Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
> I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more
> I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
> I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more (qtd. In Silver)

When Nas X sings these lines, his cadence intones weariness but also urgency; he's fleeing from something threatening, in this case a posse. This anxiety is affirmed by Chris Rock's Sheriff character who specifically describes Nas X as a Black man running from law enforcement at top speed (Nas X 2019). Unlike Nas X, when Cyrus sings the same lyrics, the tone and import of the message appear different. Cyrus's vocals sound more relaxed; they ring of a man confidently striking out toward a new horizon. Both Cyrus's actual singing and the visual of his singing lack the urgency found in Nas X's. This fact is reinforced in the video when we see Nas X riding alone at full gallop while, in contrast, Cyrus calmly croons on stage to an adoring white audience (Nas X 2019). This juxtaposition might be interpreted as signaling how an artist's race can affect country fans' acceptance of his music in "their" genre; in Nas X's rendition, the Black man flees while the white man revels.

Nas X's remix video also plays with hick-hop's racial implications when his character line dances with older, white country music fans. The scene appears to portray the Black cowboy as an anomaly in their midst and, though played for humor, situates the singer as an outsider. In contrast, his interactions with Black characters show him at ease in their company. Students will likely note that in this video Nas X also engages with hip hop dancing and the Black community. His character rides through a Black neighborhood in full cowboy regalia, and Black folks stare at him in shock and amusement. He pairs this interaction with lyrics that draw on hip hop's brand name-dropping. As he sings and the scene progresses, a girl breaks into dance, people relax and children play with his horse. The episode ends with Nas X being embraced and accepted by the Black community. Though Nas X dances and sings with Cyrus's white country music crowd, it's ultimately the Black hip hop community that reflexively offers him safety and support. Hence, it is the shifting dynamic between lyric, image and singer along with the merging of two mediums and genres that make Nas X's art so wonderfully complex. And the complexity at the heart of the "Old Town Road" sitch can provide instructors with meaningful material to teach students the value of analyzing controversial topics, topics that do in fact relate to their real lives.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In all their messy, provocative complexity, sitch materials afford writing instructors a strategy to tackle the relatability issue writing students cite as hindering their engagement in course work. Teaching controversy is nothing new for most college instructors; the practice can be crucial to promoting critical thinking. Developing a pedagogy that pays keen attention to critical media literacy and therefore to our choice of what, when and how to teach controversies can benefit students greatly when we take into account their desire to connect personally with the material they study. I have found this is especially true for anxious freshmen adjusting to the new modes of writing that college demands. In my experience, employing a sitch can work because students are usually comfortable discussing and writing about subjects which they believe they have a kind of mastery over, and indeed instructors can make a strong case for student sitch expertise. Familiarity and relatability inspire confidence, something all good writers seek, but when our students struggle by virtue of our pedagogical practices, their texting, chatting and napping are telling us that, in the words of Nas X's

song, "You can't tell me nothing / Can't nobody tell us nothing" (qtd. in Silver 26-27).

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**SUGGESTED REFERENCE CITATIONS**

**APA**

Zimmerman, L. D. (2021). Guiding students down that "Old Town Road:" Writing pedagogy, relatability and the sitch. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 8*(1). http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v8-issue-1/guiding-students-down-that-old-town-road-writing-pedagogy-relatability-and-the-sitch/

**MLA**

Zimmerman, Lynn D. "Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road:" Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy.* vol. 8, no. 1, 2021. ttp://journaldialogue.org/issues/v8-issue-1/guiding-students-down-that-old-town-road-writing-pedagogy-relatability-and-the-sitch/