Expanding the Scope of the Writing Center: Helping Students with Informal or Non-Academic Writing

When a Writing Fellow visits a Freshman ID1 seminar in the fall, one of the points s/he’s told to emphasize is the fact that the Writing Center will help you with any paper, regardless of subject or even language, to an extent. We work on biology labs, research papers, case studies, literary criticism, reading responses, and more. What many people think we don’t do is work on informal writing. (That’s not to say we’d tell a student with an informal essay to leave; it’s just that no one really comes in for help with those and we aren’t specifically trained to deal with them.)

But it’s not actually that uncommon for Pomona students to receive informal writing assignments. Those that are interested can take fiction or nonfiction writing workshops that focus on things like album/concert/movie reviews, blog posts, magazine columns, profiles, interviews, short stories, poetry, and more. And even students who aren’t in one of the workshops sometimes have to leave what may have become the comfort of academic convention for something a little more personal and a maybe a little scarier. Some music classes require concert reviews; dance classes have dance reviews; most seniors write personal essays; etc.

While to a large extent we’ve already addressed the application essay by advertising our own workshops and having special Fellow training, we have yet to work on making the Writing Center more accessible for students with informal writing projects. Ultimately this will require publicity informing the student body that we help with this type of writing too, but for now, here are some tips I’ve come up with in case a student comes in with a non-academic essay:

1. Always have a point! The student may not call it a thesis or put it at the end of the first paragraph, but the paper should still have an argument or unifying theme.
   - A corollary is that these pieces should still have narrative arc. It’s more compelling to talk convincingly about three songs in a concert than to briefly touch on each one.
2. That main point still shouldn’t be obvious. It may not be controversial in the academic sense, but it should be something that not everyone would think of (think of a reporter getting a cool angle on a story, a reviewer focusing on an apparently unimportant song, etc).
3. Make sure the student knows the assignment. If it’s a review, should it have specifics about technique or can it be more impressionistic? Do you need to have sources? How long should it be? How informal is this (i.e. can you curse or flexible about grammar rules)?
4. Finally, have fun! These are fun and unusual assignments, so enjoy them!

1 Disclaimer: These all come from my own experience writing in a nonfiction-writing workshop, not from tutoring a student. These are tips that would have helped me. (Also, I’m basically dealing with only non-fiction here.)