As I surveyed the various Writing 100 courses at freshman orientation, this class “Disability in Contemporary American Culture” immediately caught my eye. As a special education major, it makes sense that the subject of disability would be of interest to me. I thought that I would be fully prepared for this course after taking a memorable and intensive course in English last year. In retrospect, after attending class for about two months, I certainly did not expect to learn an entirely new process of writing. Never in my writing career in high school did we go through multiple stages of revisions or reflections, nor did we practice fundamental writing skills such as clear argument formulation, the insertion of naysayers or the art of summarization. I believe that my academic papers in high school would have benefitted greatly from implementing these skills. After acquiring and working to master these writing techniques through our various in-class practice sessions and multiple essays, I feel that I improved tremendously as a writer. As I examined the stages of my writing, I believe that my main claims have become clearer and I have become more successful at emphasizing why these topics matter based on concepts learned in class.

Before I begin to prove my development as a writer during this course, I want to describe my strengths as a writer. I believe that I am good at structuring my writing in the form of paragraph placement and the sections in each body paragraph. An adequate example is in my second essay about wrongful births. I organized that essay by beginning each body paragraph with a common stereotype, such as “‘Raising a disabled child is a burdensome venture,’ some supporters of wrongful birth suits may contend.” Then, I would usually insert a quote from Purdy’s text, followed by analysis and the connection to my main claim. I feel that this type of structure is easy to follow and it can firmly hold the reader’s attention. Regarding paragraph placement, my fourth essay demonstrates my attention to this type of organization. In this essay, my body paragraphs are positioned in groupings of two paragraphs on a similar topic relating to my main claim—one paragraph focusing on the media exhibits, and the following paragraph focusing on Mark Haddon’s novel. For example, my first body paragraph highlights miracles and the absence of violent behavior in the media’s representation of autism, while the corresponding body paragraph about the novel showcases the real lives of children with autism and the prevalence of violence. Why does this arrangement even matter? This type of structure allows my readers to understand exactly how my points flow from paragraph to paragraph, and it causes my transition sentences stand out. In addition to my organization, I believe that I am good at selecting the appropriate evidence to support my main claim. In the first essay, I attempted to find evidence that was not always the most obvious, such as Dr. Bragdon’s statement about seven “possible” cases of HIV transmission between patients and dental workers. This type of evidence shows the reader that I care about detail and that I wish to highlight the best and often less obvious evidence in order to make my claim stronger. Certainly, I still have room for improvement, as does any writer, but I will outline these goals towards the end of this essay.

As mentioned in the first paragraph, I believe that I have improved in my writing of main claim statements. In the first essay, my main claim was ambiguous and seemed to be embedded in strange locations of the paper. Additionally, it seemed as if I had multiple main claims, which could be confusing to my readers. This is a main claim of my first essay, located at the beginning of the third paragraph: “After becoming familiar with this case, I support the Supreme Court’s ruling that Ms. Abbott is entitled to ADA protection because her life is considerably inhibited, and that Dr. Bragdon was acting in a discriminatory manner since he was not in danger of contracting HIV.” One may also argue that my other claim, stating that the court case helped the rights of Americans with disabilities, is also central to this piece. Now, as I have gained more experience, these claims seem adequate, but they do not reflect the best work that I could produce because of the wordiness and ambiguity. For my final
essay, here is the main claim: “The media, notably in the articles referenced above, presents a distorted rendition of autism in its emphasis on miracles, ideal lives and relationships, and mass appeal through the perspective of the non-autistic community. On the contrary, Haddon presents a more balanced and reasonable view of autism by showcasing the true lives of many individuals with autism, stressing violent tendencies and struggling relationships, with the goal of tailoring readers’ viewpoints of autism into a more realistic and informed outlook through the angle of Christopher Boone.” This claim is located at the end of the first paragraph, distinguishing it from the rest of the text. I believe that this claim has a focus, despite its lengthiness, and that readers will instantly have an idea of what will be presented in the remainder of the essay. This type of main claim was more difficult to express than the rest since there was a large amount of information that we were required to put forth in a single statement. However, I believe that I encapsulated my main claim in the best manner that I could by forming two separate sentences and by keeping them narrow and to the point. Therefore, it is clear that I have improved in my writing as far as formulating clear, focused, and arguable main claims.

Another area in which I have improved is my ability to show why the essay topics really matter. I learned this skill as we examined the "So what? Who cares?" principle outlined in the book They Say, I Say which we commonly refer to throughout this course. During my high school years, I always believed that my teacher cared about our writing, so I did not need to suggest that any other groups or individuals had an interest in my papers. However, after reading the chapter entitled "So What? Who Cares?" I learned that my writing could easily lose my audiences' interest if I did not give further explanation of why my argument is important. In my first essay, I unknowingly made an attempt to show "who cares" about my paper. I wrote, "Although it is now 2009, I sincerely hope that physicians are aware of this case and remember it in order to make the lives of their patients slightly easier when receiving treatment." This example shows that physicians should care about my paper. I think that although the "who cares" aspect is clear, I could have found a way to show that this topic impacts every reader of my paper. I believe that I successfully accomplished this objective in my third paper, where I frequently asked questions regarding whether or not it was acceptable for audiences to laugh at films such as There's Something About Mary. I asked in the introduction, "Is it acceptable to laugh, or not?" and later in my conclusion, "Is it acceptable to laugh at Tucker’s ‘struggle,’ since he is not actually disabled?" These questions apply to every reader of my paper, illustrating the paper topic’s widespread relevance. In my forth essay, I attempted to put the principle into practice again. First I began with a fact from a 60 minutes presentation, then I wrote in my conclusion: “Therefore, since there are many more individuals in society who fit into this category today, the perception of autism according to members of the public must be accurate and informed.” Then I added at the very end, “It is now the public’s responsibility to determine what depictions of autism are beneficial and realistic and which are not…” Once again, these statements demonstrate that the public has a role, which encompasses anyone who reads my paper, and thus proving my progress in outlining who should care and why.

In retrospect, I believe that my second, third and forth essays are among the strongest of my work this semester. These three essays, in my opinion, best encapsulate my strengths as a writer. The main claims in each essay are easy to locate, setting up my readers for an interesting paper. Specifically, my second essay demonstrates my newly acquired skill of inserting naysayers. As mentioned, I inserted a naysayer at the beginning of the most body paragraphs. I believe that this type of structure is unique, and holds the attention of my audience since some readers may believe in the naysayer, or common stereotype, that opposes my argument. In my third and strongest essay, my main claim is focused, encapsulating my argument in a concise manner, followed by a logical structure that helps readers to effortlessly glide from point to point. Lastly, in my fourth essay, I worked particularly hard to saturate my body paragraphs with the appropriate quotations. A good example of this is in a paragraph about the relationships in Haddon’s novel. I wrote: “In Mrs. Boone’s letters to Christopher, she continually spells words incorrectly, referring to patient as “pacient” (106), lonely as “lonley” (107)
and she mentions her new job as a secretary, admitting that she is “not very good” (111).” Then I proceeded to explain why these quotations are significant. In addition to my use of quotations, after an intense revision process, I completely transformed the transition sentences in this essay in order to prove that my points build upon one another. In my first draft of this final essay, I noticed that I would insert phrases such as “Another difference is…” or “There is another factor…” These expressions do not demonstrate how my points connect, which is a crucial component of any paper. However, in my final draft, I did my best to connect the last sentence of each paragraph with the first sentence of the next paragraph. For example, at the end of body paragraph two, I asserted, “Significantly, the disparities between miracles and cures versus the struggles of daily life are further emphasized by the ideal lives and relationships presented in the media and the financially strained, damaged relationships in Haddon’s novel.” Next, in the beginning of the following paragraph, I stated: “The media time and time again presents model families with ideal relationships committed to paying the high expense for innovative therapies…” By implementing this technique, I hope my readers will understand that in the first grouping of paragraphs, miracles in the media and struggles portrayed in the novel are emphasized by ideal lives in the former and damaged relationships in the latter, which is stressed in the subsequent grouping of paragraphs. I have to admit, however, that these transitions did not come easily to me and I still question whether or not my readers will fully grasp my intent. Because of this uncertainty that I feel regarding my transitions, I believe that my third essay is the strongest of the semester, with the forth essay and then the second essay closely following it.

Thus far in this course, I have been pleased with my development as a writer. Before this course, I would write a paper in one or two sittings and be done with it forever. Now, I have been able to adapt to new ways of writing a paper that involve peer review, my professor’s comments and multiple drafts, which have all contributed to improving my writing. Even with this progress, I still have goals for improvement. My goals are to be less wordy in my writing, to be more thoughtful and dig deeper in my analysis section, and to put more time into formulating smooth, clear transitions. I am hopeful that as I write papers in the future during my college career, I will be able to improve my writing skills further and reach these goals to compose many pleasing and satisfying essays.