

Content warning: violence, assault, bigotry

How many of you have heard the expression “never read the comments”?

Right.

Why is this? The short answer is because often, the comments section seems to bring out the worst in people.

I find that I often can't help but read the comments—from a strategic, rhetorical perspective. It's impossible, though, to not have an emotional response to some of the things that I find. Often, I can pick out glaring logical fallacies in people's arguments and counterarguments. I can also pick out glaring examples of bigotry and unbridled hate.

I am part of the body positive and fat activist communities, and much of our work happens online. In my activist communities, people get comments on their work that range from being called gross, disgusting, lazy, and unhealthy, to rape and death threats. People even get doxxed. All, just for daring to exist, and to not be ashamed to be in a body that is not the current Western ideal.

About a year ago, I was finishing my dissertation about self identified fat fashion bloggers and their clothing choices as rhetorical practices, and wrote a side piece about my journey to body positivity and my experience both wearing a fatkini in public for the first time at the beach, and my subsequent encounter with an online

troll. The piece, titled “What Happens if We Post Pictures of Happy Fat People on the Internet?” was published through Millihelen, a small offshoot of Gawker Media. To my surprise/joy/terror, the piece made it to the main page of Jezebel, a pop-feminist news site, where it received over 69,000 views, and 1000 comments.

And the comments were...overwhelmingly positive. In fact, in many cases they were very constructive—readers were talking with each other and building theory about what I had proposed in my piece. I saw people working through their own experiences and coming to realizations about body positivity—it was like I was teaching a class.

I’m not going to lie: I was very surprised. I mean, things weren’t perfect: there were a few people who felt obligated to tell me how gross I looked, how I must be happy because clearly I was eating “17 cheeseburgers a day”, and even a (self-proclaimed) doctor who informed me that shame was the best way to get people to lose weight.

## **eyeroll**

Yes, many of these comments got taken down. But they still **happened**. And, they continue to happen.

So, what if, as writing teachers, we sat here in this space for a moment and considered the possibilities of the comments section as a teachable tool?

What if we dismantle the binaries of scholarly/popular, public/private, and push for embodied writing in digital spaces that actively encourages people (our students, our friends, etc) to **not** be trolls and to engage in digital discussions as informed, responsible citizens?

This could happen in a variety of ways: from using a popular online article and the comment section as a text for class discussion, to having students look at a comment thread for logical fallacies and writing a response paper that speaks back to the misuse of information. We could also encourage each other to continue to put work out there for popular audiences that pushes the boundary of scholarly and popular. And above all, we could continue to model **not** being trolls.

That's it for now—I'm excited to talk more in the discussion.