



Bam

AMANDA WINALSKI
Temple University, Class of 2004

An afternoon of placement testing, one of the more delightful events scheduled during the four-day orientation for incoming students at Temple University, promised to reveal individual academic potential, thereby ensuring that students would be assigned courses according to their abilities. These exams, the administration explained, would guarantee that those who had already mastered calculus would not be sentenced to a semester of remedial algebra, while those unfamiliar with rules of punctuation would have the opportunity to pore over a grammar book or two before plunging into Chaucer. Thus, in theory, a few hours of multiple-choice questions dictated students' academic standing relative to those of their peers. In theory. (Of course, that individuals—whether because they were greedy for high marks [easy As] or because they believed the test results overestimated their potential—could ultimately elect to take courses the university deems too easy for them seems to render these administrative suggestions obsolete.)

Many students ignored the university's pleas to take the exams seriously, handing in their packets minutes after the tests had begun, while others hunched over their desks, furiously underlining passages and scribbling notes. I was in the latter group, determined to demonstrate mastery of the fundamental skills that core classes promised to develop.

I learned I was exempt from English Composition a few hours after I had completed the three-part test. Although I had finished the exam early and handed my papers in with confidence, I was surprised that the university urged me to skip the required class. The test had been a rip-off of the verbal component of the Scho-

lastic Aptitude Tests (SATs); we read passages, filled in blanks, corrected grammar, and defined words. (In fact, a particular section of the reading comprehension—a page from Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” followed by five or so multiple choice questions—appeared as a review for the advanced placement tests in my 11th-grade literature class.) According to the university, the questions were representative of the subjects covered in English Composition; therefore, students with strong backgrounds in and familiarity with these topics, as demonstrated by their performances on the exams, were excused from the basic course that taught the fundamentals.

Although I was eager to dive into the more exciting classes outlined in my major, I admit that I was apprehensive regarding the idea of exemption. Yes, I could conjugate verbs and summarize main ideas, but wasn’t it presumptuous to assume I could prance straight from high school English courses to a class filled with college upperclassmen? Wouldn’t a transitional preparatory class be beneficial? When I approached an academic advisor with my concerns, he scoffed at my anxiety. He told me the introductory course was easy, boring, and a waste of my time. Although his suggestions were dripping with disdain and elitism, I followed the advice. My first-year roster did not include the composition course. (Fortunately for incoming students, this advisor is no longer employed at Temple.)

The apprehension I had regarding my decision to skip the introductory course faded as the academic year continued. My professors and I followed a very simple routine: they assigned paper topics, I spent hours (days) choosing the exact adjectives and sentence structures that best expressed my ideas, and I was rewarded with As and metaphorical pats on the head in the form of scribbled praises and exclamation points. I relished compliments from my instructors, nearly all of whom awed me with their seemingly endless knowledge of literature and language, and triumphantly read the comments aloud to my parents. I was convinced I had found the formula for good college writing—or, more cynically, the formula for an A paper. (In a first-year student’s mind, there is hardly a difference between the two.)

During high school, I operated under the assumption that what I wrote was much less important than how I wrote. For

four years, my papers screamed “Style and structure essential, content optional!” I realized that teachers concentrated so intensely on revising dangling modifiers and comma splices that they tended to ignore the actual ideas embodied in the essay. More simply: the student’s ability to communicate effectively (and not *to effectively communicate*) had precedence over the raw quality of the ideas. Armed with this knowledge, I dressed up the content of my papers. Longer sentences, larger words, and creative uses of punctuation, I reasoned, compensated for merely average content. Indeed, attempting to dazzle a professor with eloquent rhetoric was a dangerous endeavor; an extra comma or a superfluous adjective was just as likely to receive a murderous red slash. It was not, however, just as likely to receive a minus. Too many semicolons resulted in a gentle reprimand. Simple sentences and one-syllable words earned lower grades.

Of course, work that impresses a ninth-grade teacher accustomed to students who cannot be bothered to use apostrophes or punctuate sentences will not necessarily electrify a college professor who reads thousands of pages of student essays each year. In high school, students often assume that a thesis sentence guarantees a passing grade. One who clings to this assumption while making the transition to a university should either amend these preconceived notions regarding writing or learn to expect poor grades. Thus, it is obvious that that which is sufficient for a high school paper is not predictably adequate for a college paper. (Furthermore, who attends college with an ambition of adequacy?) Without a doubt, then, there is something unique about college-level writing. But *what*? And why is it that some individuals learn to write at this mysterious level, while others require a course introducing its concepts?

I could not have begun to answer these complex questions had I not enrolled in a particular course concentrating on the grammar and linguistics of language. Do not mistake me: I did not coast through my years at Temple. I wrote and rewrote, revised and re-revised. I never handed in a paper until I was certain that, regardless of whether another party could improve upon the text, *I* had written as well and as passionately as I could. Still, the hours of huddling over my notebook were devoted to perfecting my rhetoric rather than the ideas it expressed. I strove to

find balance in my writing. I wanted to be neither simple nor pretentious, but a brilliant writer who expertly worked between the extremes. I wanted to sound intelligent, but not such that my reader suspiciously pawed through a thesaurus or dictionary, ready to accuse me of littering my works with SAT words; I wanted to sound comprehensible, but not to the extent that the reader grew bored. Therefore, in addition to creating outlines and rough drafts, I allotted equal time to improving my papers. During revision sessions, I made sure I weaved in enough five-syllable words with bare nouns and verbs, and that my flowery, paragraph-like sentences were offset by short, declarative remarks. (This because a professor once kindly advised me, “Not every sentence needs a semicolon. Don’t be afraid of the simple sentence.”) So, as I struggled to find the balance between “I need to demonstrate academic prowess by using big words!” and “I can’t irritate my reader by trying to set sentence-length records and using eight words when two will suffice,” I welcomed the course on grammar, a class characterized by worksheets and discussions rather than term papers.

The class—and its ridiculously entertaining professor—instantly became one of my favorites. The first half of the course was dedicated to the archaic rules of grammar and punctuation (thus/therefore, further/farther, I/me). The second half concentrated on the relation between linguistics (what we do say) and grammar (what we *should* say, as dictated by *the rules* and those obsessed with following them). Although I devoured the daily worksheets, I was a bit nervous about the final assignment. The instructor asked us to write a few pages about the course. The subject was straightforward and simple; however, I knew that despite the hours I would spend editing my prose, my paper would be flooded with monumental grammatical errors, invisible to any reader save he or she who did not shriek in horror at finding a dangling modifier in a campaign letter. (That the professor was obviously joking did nothing to assuage my fear of committing similar grammatical atrocities.)

When I finally handed in my paper, I was confident that it was representative of my best ability. I wrote about the transition I experienced while in the class. I drew a character arc that showed my evolution from a bratty high school student obsessed with

correcting any individual who dared to utter blasphemy such as, "I could care less." Now, I wrote, I understood that one's diction does not reveal his or her intelligence. A writer should learn the standards of grammar to facilitate communication; however, there is nothing inherently wrong with a writer who chooses to use the passive voice or to nominalize verbs. Yes, I reasoned, a writer may invent words when the dictionary just cannot capture a certain idea, and he or she may use collective pronouns to avoid sexist language. When a writer is comfortable with the rather arbitrary rules governing the conventions of English, he or she can choose to modify or even dismiss these standards. This is not to say that an eager student should reject accepted rules of possession and declare that *its* is an improved version of the *it is* contraction. One should only scoff at the grammar check if he or she knows the meanings would be better expressed by ignoring its suggestions. Thus, I presented an essay that reflected my appreciation for the course, and I impatiently waited to receive my praise and collect my A.

This time, however, the professor did not follow the formula.

I was shocked by the hideous B- that engulfed page six of my paper. Despite that semester of diligent grammar study, I made mistakes on every page. I was not penalized harshly for my awkward commas or unclear modifiers; rather, the professor accused me of a literary crime far more frightful: I had not answered the assigned question.

I choked down the well-meaning criticism, then destroyed the evidence of my failure. I was not upset about the grade because I knew I must have earned it. I was upset that I had disappointed both my instructor and myself. According to the vicious red attack, I had ignored half of the assignment. I was so obsessed with illustrating my character growth that I had not included even a sentence about the linguistics component of the course. I did not appreciate the irony that my written tirade combating the importance of obsessing over detail insufficiently fulfilled the assigned requirements because I had failed to pay attention to detail.

I had completed a course on grammar and linguistics, which emphasized and challenged the meaning of standard literary rules, and I then proceeded to break one of the most fundamental con-

ventions of communication: I did not address the subject of discussion.

Stripped of the illusions that good writing required merely an impressive vocabulary and an enthusiasm for sentences that cannot be spoken in a single breath, I had to reevaluate my definition of a successful college writer. It was clear that multisyllabic words and superfluous punctuation could not salvage an essay devoid of content. I further noted that a writer should actually *consider* the topic before concocting phrase structures and stringing together adjectives in her head. Such constructions could dress up an inadequate answer; however, unless accompanied by equally worthy content, they could not express anything greater than poorly applied writing skills. Thus, the argument would be pretty. Nothing else.

What can this lengthy, at times painful, anecdote reveal regarding the controversy of college writing? A college writer must anticipate the reader's response. Once the writer has conquered the grammar check and can confidently justify using the passive voice or splitting an infinitive, he or she begins to demonstrate a level of comprehension and application that I would consider characteristic of the *college-level* label. Those who bow before the grammar check and heed every suggestion—whether because they doubt their abilities, overestimate the power of the computerized rulebook, or think the reader will use any grammatical error as evidence of ineptitude or justification for a grade reduction—can only improve their writing by first tending to their confidence.

There does not (yet) exist a checklist for the requirements that compose college-level writing. The transition from high school to university writing is not as simple as the memorization of a few grammar handouts; rather, it consists of a student's willingness to learn, understand, and modify the rules that govern language in order to communicate ideas. One can easily write five pages of nothing that sounds lyrical or drainingly intellectual or fill five pages with brilliant thoughts that are presented in bullet statements. To achieve a balance between the two is to be a successful college writer; it is a goal to which one must aspire every time he or she picks up a pen. Thus, writing at this level is perhaps an ongoing process that necessitates a persistent willing-

ness to try, fail, and try. (Writers will always lament the forced revision process in which, with waves of nausea, they cross out adjectives and adverbs, leaving nude nouns and bare verbs.) After all, despite my transcendental literary experience, I still cannot help but insert those extra commas, without which my writing would *clearly* be gibberish. (No need to address further my ostensibly haphazard use of parenthesis, italics, and dashes, which I gleefully excuse by maintaining I choose to ignore certain conventions in order to communicate more colloquially.)

And thus the process continues.