



## *Am I a Liar? The Angst of a High School English Teacher*

JEANETTE JORDAN, WITH KARENA K. NELSON,  
HOWARD CLAUSER, SUSAN E. ALBERT,  
KAREN M. CUNNINGHAM, AND AMANDA SCHOLZ  
*Glenbrook North High School*  
*Northbrook, Illinois*

As a veteran high school English teacher, there are certain things I never want to hear. This past holiday season, Mike, a former student, stopped in my classroom to say hello. He had just graduated from college and was beginning a job search. We were having a pleasant conversation when we were interrupted by a current student hoping to clarify something about her research project. Assuming the voice of experience, Mike said, “Don’t worry about it. I just graduated from college and I never *once* had to write a research paper.”

I turned to him, shocked. I knew what he was saying was not true for a typical college experience. Or could it be? I thought that research-based writing was the foundation of academia. I had just dedicated six weeks of junior English to guiding (okay, maybe dragging) my students through the process by promising them that for college they needed to learn how to research, to evaluate the validity of sources, and to document their sources using MLA format. I coerced them into taking the project seriously because developing an original thesis and supporting it with evidence was critical to success in college and beyond. Now my former student returns and says he never wrote a research paper after he graduated from high school. Am I really that out of touch with what is expected of my students in their postsecondary edu-

cations? I saw my current student silently question my credibility, and I cringed.

I am convinced that my students learn to be better writers, readers, and thinkers through their high school English experiences. My colleagues and I take our jobs seriously, and we are consistently pushing ourselves to stay current with the best practices in the field. We diligently work with our students on their writing. Outside of the classroom, students work with peers and adults in the writing center to get even more feedback. Our students regularly score at the top on state assessments, and alumni overwhelmingly report that they feel well prepared for the demands of university life. Still, with 98 percent of our students going to college after they graduate from high school, it is important that I am accurate with my statements about what lies ahead for them. Again, I pondered. Was Mike's experience unique or typical for college students today? If I am mistaken about the importance of research-based writing, what other myths am I operating under? Does it matter, for example, that my students can distinguish between *who* and *whom*?

"Is Grammar DEAD—and does it really matter?" reads the cover of a recent *Chicago Tribune Magazine* (13 Feb. 2005). I plead with my students to learn the differences between phrases and clauses so that they can properly punctuate sentences. But does it really matter? I sometimes tell myself that writers need to understand the traditional rules before they can learn a sense of how and when these rules can be broken. But that theory leaves me with the feeling that I, as a high school teacher, am saddled with the burden of teaching the rules and gaining the reputation of a stickler, while professors get to sail through uncharted linguistic waters, throwing rules overboard at whim, gaining their students' approval and respect at every turn.

I wonder how strictly professors adhere to the conventional standards of grammar and format. If my students use first person in an argumentative paper, will someone assume they have been woefully underprepared for the rigors of college study? If I pound into their heads that they should avoid first person and they dutifully attempt to use third, but struggle with awkward constructions involving "one" and some mysterious "reader,"

will a professor somewhere shake her head at how out of touch and antiquated high school teachers are? Am I focusing on the wrong rules?

My colleagues and I work with our students to ensure that they have a good grasp of the basics of grammar and essay structure. We value nonformulaic writing and struggle to push our students beyond the very limiting five-paragraph structure that they find so comforting and familiar. Am I doing a disservice to my low-level writers, however, if I throw out this scaffold that they are still trying to master? Does putting the topic sentence as the first sentence in the body paragraph provide a security that helps them in their struggles to communicate? Is voice more important than well-structured writing? Whose definition of well-structured writing should I use as a model?

A colleague who recently returned to the classroom after a career in business wonders if writing teachers at all levels should be preparing students to write in the nonacademic world, where they will be asked to produce functional documents. He earned a small fortune consulting with businesses, enabling their employees to write clear and coherent letters, memos, and reports. He worked with college graduates—engineers, managers, business people, scientists, lawyers, even doctoral graduates—many of whom could write exquisite prose that did not mean a thing. My colleague muses that our high school-level instruction could be contributing unwittingly to the output of soulless techno-jargon that plagues business and government writing today. Should we focus our students on writing functionally in plain simple English rather than on developing elaborate theses supported by passages from the text, documented on a works cited page, and stylized by an occasional periodic sentence? I wonder how all the potential audiences for my students define good writing.

I see in my own department a diversity of views on what a good paper looks like. Beginning writing students looking for a single template that they can apply to all writing situations are frustrated and confused by these myriad opinions. They don't understand that different writing tasks require different writing forms. Instead, they blame their teachers. I remember working as a writing tutor in graduate school and listening to students struggle to integrate these sometimes mixed messages. "But my high school

teachers always told me my thesis had to be one sentence!” or “Everyone else wants me to use research, but he says it should be entirely original!” they would complain. I sympathized, but I also found that the more I got to know a professor and his or her assignments, the more they made sense, even if the students were convinced an assignment was the most ridiculous thing they had ever been asked to do. So how do I impart to my high school students that different writing tasks and audiences expect different outcomes? How do I prepare them for what may seem like moving targets and conflicting goals without turning them into complete relativists?

Although I taught a variety of college writing courses when I was a teaching assistant working my way through graduate school, that was fifteen years ago. My perception of what is expected may be dated. What I do know is that my colleagues and I do our best to prepare our students for the challenges that will face them after they leave us. I would like a clearer idea of what those challenges are at the college level today.

I wonder what frustrates college writing instructors the most about the level of writing preparation students have before entering college. I am sometimes disappointed that in four years of high school, we often repeat very basic lessons over and over again (“show, don’t tell,” “specific is terrific!”). I believe that students learn in spurts and slips and false starts, and that seeds that I have planted may not blossom for years, especially when the growth is in the most difficult areas. But I wonder, at times, if there are basic competencies my students are missing. What are those basic competencies? To know how to use a semicolon? To understand the idea of intellectual property and how to use textual support without plagiarizing? To value their own voice and feel that they have something to say?

My visions of college English are updated mainly by alumni who visit and share their experiences with me. I eagerly listen to what they have to say as I question them: “What kind of writing do you do?” “What have you written about?” “What are you reading?” “What was the most difficult part about writing at the college level?” “Did you feel prepared for it?” “What advice do you have for us as high school English teachers?” Cate, a student of mine who graduated ten years ago, prompted the revamping

of our research paper project when she shared the scathing remarks a college professor made on her first college research project. His many negative comments evidenced his anger and frustration with her writing. “Your paper is entirely meaningless” was just one of the criticisms of the piece. Cate was an honors student and National Council of Teachers of English Achievement Award nominee! If she experienced this difficulty with research-based writing, we knew we needed to revise our project to better prepare our students for what awaited them. That was nine years ago; however, a lot has changed since then. My doubts return, and I consider that my skills may not be current anymore. Is Mike’s experience a more accurate reflection of contemporary university expectations? Are we now spending too much time on a project that is irrelevant to postsecondary success? I know that my students’ experiences vary by college and class, but I think that there must be some consistencies. These consistencies are what I need to hear about so that I can confidently tell my students, “Yes, you will need to do this when you write in college.”