

The Making of Writers

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“All in all I do not think I am a good writer,
and I hope to get better,
but the chances are very slim.”

—First-year student

Students don't begin their first-year composition class as blank slates. They come instead with a full history of writing experiences behind them which have shaped their attitudes and expectations. Sadly, most students don't begin their composition class eager to write. They begin instead with trepidation, apologies and anxieties. Most lack confidence in their abilities and have little expectation that composition will be a pleasant experience. I have asked my composition students, every semester, as one of the first exercises for the class, to write about their writing histories. In this very open-ended writing assignment, I ask them to reflect on everything they have done or had done to them which has helped form their writing and their views of themselves as writers. I ask them to think about things that helped and things that hurt them as writers. Semester after semester, the responses are strikingly

similar.

Most of the students who write about their earliest memories of themselves as writers tend to remember writing as a positive thing. One student writes, “I learned to write at an early age because both of my parents are teachers and love their jobs very much. . . my parents would show me letters, ask me to read street signs, menus, and anything else they could find. I used to love this as a child, learning to sound out words, then to copy and write them out.” Another remembers, “As soon as I could write, I would tell tales about things that I have done or pets that I have owned. As I grew, these stories became more imaginative and enjoyable.” Many built a firm foundation for loving to write in the early grades, “I remember little [about grades K-4] but one thing I do remember is writing pieces about my life, for instance how my vacation was, or a significant family event and so on. I always loved writing these pieces because when I sat down and thought about what I wanted to write, the unforgettable memories came back.”

Unfortunately, not all students had these positive early experiences. One student recalls only being constantly criticized for his messy handwriting. And even for those who had a good start, things often turned negative shortly thereafter. As one student puts it, “When I was younger, I sort of enjoyed writing, like writing letters to my parents and stuff like that. Now it’s the complete opposite. I really never write unless I have to, including writing about myself.” What happens to so totally turn off writers like this one?

Students speak forcefully and clearly about the things that discouraged them as writers. Almost all of these factors involved their losing control over their writing: over its form, its content and the evaluation of it. The factor mentioned most often was their teachers’ tendency to stress form over meaning. Matters of length, footnotes, citations or the five-paragraph form were given more emphasis than the meaning the student was trying to communi-

cate. In this era of state-sponsored testing, we may begin to see even more of this type of response. This student's experience is typical, "I remember one year in high school I had to do a research paper that had to be ten pages and everything had to have a certain format. We had to have footnotes, margins, underlines, the whole nine yards, plus it was the lamest topic. . . . I knew the teacher wasn't really going to be correcting my writing, but the way I had followed the directions and if my paper was long enough." Another puts it more simply, "I can't stand constantly writing three or five paragraph essays—and furthermore you can't write what or how you want to, or even what you think is good. You have to write what the teacher wants."

Most students rebelled against assigned topics, although a few said that they felt lost when told they could write about whatever they wanted. Many did not appear to trust this freedom and felt that the teacher had a hidden agenda. Assigned topics robbed the student of ownership over the most fundamental element of writing—the content—and they resented it. Most students echoed the student who wrote simply, "I really despise having to follow a structured topic."

Our writing is, above all, an expression of ourselves and criticism of writing tends to cut deep. Students handed over these bits of themselves, often after working long and hard, only to face harsh judgments of their work and, by extension, of themselves. Poor grades on writing hurt. After working hard on a paper, one student reacted to a poor grade in this way, "I felt like nothing. 'Why couldn't I write?' I thought. Was I different from everyone else?" Another wrote, "All I wanted was someone to tell me what I needed to do to become better. I knew I could write well, but I hadn't perfected it yet. I knew I still had a long way to go. . . . I just needed someone to show me." Another spoke for many when he wrote, "it wasn't the grades that really hurt, but the lack of confidence that the teacher had in me. This really gave me a complex about my ability. . . . To

this day I still don't like to write and feel that my writing is well below average for a freshman in college."

People react strongly to this kind of assault on their self-esteem. Students used terms like "hate" and "despise" to describe their feelings about writing. One said, "I would become so discouraged and frustrated by [writing assignments] that they would make me cry." Even students who learn to get by on these types of assignments are left bitter and discouraged. "I got used to the proper way to write an English paper. I still didn't like them and had no fun doing them, but at least I got better grades. I really, at this point, started to hate writing." Their relative success did not increase their confidence. As one expressed it, "Although I learned this method, I was still a terrible writer."

Many, even the more successful students, lowered their expectations and began to think of writing as a job, as a chore. "It was work. It was an assignment. I was always graded. . . . Eventually I got used to the idea of writing to please other people and I got good at it. . . .but it never was much fun." Another student asks, "How creative can you be when you are being forced to write for someone else?" One student expresses the logical end of such treatment, "It's just the same as any other subject—work that you have to do."

Fortunately, for some, writing is able to become much more. I am constantly amazed by how much bad instruction some students can survive and still become writers. Many sharply distinguish the writing they do for themselves from what they do to get grades. In writing for themselves, they discover the power of the written word, its capacity to heal, to help a person reflect on his or her own life. "Writing for myself in my journal is a cathartic experience. I've been writing almost daily for about five years now and I probably couldn't live without it." Another says, "Until I discovered that I could sit down and write for my own personal pleasure, it was just a nuisance. Now I take the time to sit down

and write because I want to.” When they write for themselves, students discover whole new meanings and new purposes for writing. “The thing that helped my writing is writing letters and keeping an almost daily journal. . . . I seem to express myself better in writing than in actual talking words. I can get stuff off my chest easier and have them sound how I want them to rather than choking on my words when I’m face to face. . . when someone is writing about something they care about (like me) we can go on forever.”

Even those who didn’t discover personal writing sometimes discovered meaning in their journalism classes. “During my sophomore year a wonderful thing happened. A friend of mine talked me into joining the school paper. I found a whole new world of writing. Once I was able to write on topics I enjoyed and that interested me, the words just flowed.” Journalism class gave these writers readers, and suddenly many things made sense. One student writes that journalism class was the first place where he found “a real use for grammar and all that other technical stuff which up until then had been just for some out of touch English teacher.”

Happily, some English teachers did inspire their students to write. Students wrote passionately of teachers who believed in them, who cared about writing and English and who recognized them as writers. They write, “he presented the material with such conviction and enthusiasm. English was Mr. M’s life and he made it a part of mine. . . for the first time, I actually enjoyed looking for symbolism and spelling words right as I did so.” These inspiring teachers offered “encouragement and not scrutiny.” They were “more interested in what you were thinking than the grammatical end of it all.” They were “very supportive” and would “often comment on the content of the essay. They gave praise as well as pointing out what should have been done differently.” They allowed their students freedom. One student writes, “I had a teacher, Mrs. D., who gave me the confidence to write again. [Her assignments]

gave us the opportunity to use our imagination and explore different types of writing... she always took the time to give positive feedback.”

Many of these exceptional teachers also arranged for students to receive recognition and publication outside of the classroom. Many students mentioned being entered in contests or having their papers read aloud as an example of good writing in class. One writes, “[the teacher] suggested that I submit one of my stories to my school newspaper. . . . Thinking my article could help others gave me a great feeling.” Another remembers, “My poem had been published and I was so proud and happy that my teacher had thought it was good enough for the whole school to read it.”

I am always amazed in reading these testimonies at how much trauma and bad instruction these writers could survive. Some survived because they were able to find meaning in their personal writing or in journalism. But many were able to turn their attitudes about writing totally around simply because they just had one good teacher who believed in them and who would take the time to offer, not just criticism, but praise and help in improving their work. Most often one good teacher who took them seriously as writers could turn everything around. Often these attitudes about writing had radically changed by the end of the semester, a reassuring reminder for all of us that the first year of college is not too late to find the teacher that could turn it all around. The hopeful thing for us about all of this is that any one of us could be that teacher.