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How Many of My Students Will Be Like Me?

Many times people ask me why I am a math major, and usually I tell them it is because I love math. Most people accept this as a good answer, but some do not. For those people, I explain more. I tell them that I love math because it is very structured, that there are rules to follow for every problem, and there is always a correct answer. These three things are important for me when I am learning something. I also like math because it requires little reading and even less writing.

My biggest problem with reading and writing is that there is no single right answer to a question or interpretation. Too many reading assignments can be interpreted in many different ways. There may be a more correct answer, but

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most answers are not wrong. This frustrates me to no end. I want the answer to be clear-cut and straight forward. I have the same problem with writing. I know most of the rules for grammar and sentence structure, but all of the rules have exceptions and I hate that. Again, one answer is more correct, but most are not wrong. It is also difficult for me to decide where to begin when I write.

What should I say first? What is most important? In math, the beginning of a problem is usually easily determined.

My first memories of reading involve reading quizzes. I had to read a story and answer questions on it. We students had to do so many of these before we could move on to the next level. We had very few choices about what we could read and the stories were always boring. After that I remember going to the library at school and being told that we had to check out a book, but how was I to know what to read? There were so many books that I had never heard of. What if the book was too hard? What if it was boring? I think giving students a choice as to what they read is good, but too many choices for an eight year old was overwhelming.

Around the seventh grade I started to read for pleasure. A friend of mine read a "historical" romance novel and encouraged me to read it. It was an interesting book full of adventure and hardship as a family traveled the Oregon Trail and a young girl fell in love. My teacher had many different titles of books along this same nature in her classroom. These are what really got me started reading. However, I still do not like to read something

if I have to. I remember in high school I had to write a book report. As the day of the report drew near, I realized that I had never even picked that book up to read. I had read many other books in the mean time, but did not want to read the one I had to. For the next book report, I stupidly choose a book without checking to see if the local library carried it. The library did not, but it had the book on tape. I checked out the book on tape, and felt like I was cheating. I was not reading the book; it was being read to me. This however, is the only book report book that I remember anything about. I was able to really pay attention to the story instead of struggling to decipher the words.

It was in high school that I had to really start writing papers. I always felt like what I wrote was stupid or went in circles. Every time I had to give my work to another student to proof read, I would apologize and say that it was only a draft and I did not have much time to work on it. Even when I got good grades on papers, I still thought they were poorly written. I think much of this was due to the fact that there is no "correct" way to write a paper. I would convince myself that the teacher gave me a good grade because s/he liked me, or felt bad for me, or because I had good grammar skills. Never was the paper itself good. My writing experience in college did not help. My first college English class required me to write papers about my life, and then give them to a total stranger to grade. At this point I felt as if my life was being graded more than the paper itself. I even tried to write a well thought out paper on the assigned topic and not relate it to my life. I was given an incomplete. This was very discouraging to someone who does not like to write. I am a very private person and felt that I should only have to share the details of my life that I wanted to share.

The longer I am in school, the easier it has become to write. I can even write a paper and feel good about it, until I have to give it to someone else to read. But I think writing will always be a struggle for me. Something never clicked for me in English and Language Arts classes. Now that I am almost a teacher, I wonder if I will see students in my classes who are like me.

Amanda Orr is a Mathematics major with a secondary emphasis at Grand Valley State University.