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“Guess what? I got an A!!”

Teaching High School Students To Write About Everything (And Maybe Even To Like It a Little)

Audrey Gebber

In every student handbook, with the rest of the school requirements, rules, and regulations, the following statement should be listed:

“All students will realize that writing is NOT cruel and unusual punishment devised by ancient, professional torturers from medieval times to provide teachers with free entertainment and chuckles during lunch in the teacher’s lounge and/or topics for conversation at faculty meetings when they should be listening to new policies on gum chewing.”

It should come right after the rule that says students will have at least one change of P.E. clothes and that they will wash them weekly.

Even your best students rarely get excited over any writing assignment. Math homework is lousy, yeah, but at least you do it and you shut the book. English stuff, on the other hand, may include, like, research and dictionaries and a thesaurus, and has the serious potential for revisions and rewrites and gunk, turning a three-to-five page essay into a three-to-five day project, putting a major cramp in a student’s social life. So how are passionate English teachers supposed to convince their charges that delving into their own writing can be more fulfilling than the three-hour

“Welcome Back, Kotter” rerun marathons on Nick at Nite? Well, here are the philosophies I employ when trying to teach my kids a thing or two.

Be a Good Reader

Even though I make my students read passages aloud in class (No excuse is good enough to get them out of this—they’ve tried, “But, Gebber, I just had gym before your class and I didn’t have time to get a drink and I think my tongue is really swollen in my mouth” and “The chili at lunch was really hot and it burned the insides of my mouth raw” and “But I think I’m illiterate”), I also love to read to them. I used to think that high school students would be beyond this bedtime story-type, kindergarten-baby thing, but they love to be read to almost as much as I love to do it. And it’s not because they think they’re off the participation hook and get to sleep. They listen to me because I read to them like I love the material. Because I do. They listen not only to the words coming out of my mouth, they’re listening to how they come out—with expression and inflection and energy. They also **watch** how the words come out—I use my whole face to read stories and

passages, not just my vocal cords. I furrow my forehead, I raise my eyebrows, I look at them, and lock them in with my eyes (they also can't snooze if they know I'm checking up on them). If someone else's writing is going to act as a prelude to their own, I try to show them that the author wasn't simply rapping things out on some crummy type-writer in a rat-infested apartment, sucking down coffee like Colombia was to be annihilated within the next 24 hours, hoping that some story or poem would make them enough cash to pay the electric bill. Whoever wrote the piece had something to say and probably ended up really liking what they said (as did editors, publishers, and textbook compilers). Please like what you're doing, too, I tell them. And make me like it just as much, so maybe one day I'll be reading your story out of a literature text to a group of students sitting right where you are now.

Be a Christy Brinkley

Before I introduce any new assignment to my classes, I put myself on a runway, walking up and down, showing my audience exactly what it is I want them to see about my new "line." I model for them just what it is I want them to buy into. (I never have to worry about my students becoming copycats, mimicking my examples to an extreme, because I explain to them that Giorgio Armani can pick out a cheap Sears' rip-off quicker than they can come up with excuses about why they were late to first hour. I'll nab them for unoriginality.) Not only is modeling an assignment fun for me since I get to write a little bit, too, but it serves as a springboard for the kids. They see that the assignment is more than just the words and directives on the hand-out—they get an idea about how to manipulate those instructions into a personalized piece of work.

I also try to show my students that, contrary to popular parental and other ancestral beliefs, not all English assignments are stodgy, five-paragraph essays written in the often unintelligible language of PBS documentaries. If there is any slight crevice where creativity can slip through, I get out my crowbar and pry that crack right open. When my classes see that I, evaluator supreme, empress of grade distributions and a

power with potential influence over their receipt of future college scholarships, am having a good time with homework (is it possible???), they're likely to see that they're allowed to take some liberties, too, and I'm constantly amazed by what they turn in.

Let Them In

Sometimes an assignment will involve personal recollections, past experiences, and introspection. If I'm requiring my students to share pieces of their lives with me, it's not really fair for me to remain strictly business, indirectly judging them as I mark their papers. Modeling this type of assignment for my students should be no different than any other. They all know about my most embarrassing moment, the time in fourth grade when Aunt Trudy shrank my corduroy jeans and then in school the gym teacher called an emergency practice for our shuttle-run team the day before track and field competitions. Being uncomfortable, I unbuttoned my pants without realizing that the zipper would come undone, causing my rust-colored Levi's to fall to my hips, exposing a lovely little pair of flowered underpants to every other fourth grader practicing within 25 feet of me. They know about the biology teacher I had in high school who used to hang fruit from his ceiling, letting it corrode and change not only shape, but probably molecular consistency as well. We all sort of tip-toed around the man, and the fruit would hang alongside a GI Joe Doll—we never figured out the reasoning behind that one. After about a month some kid would get up the nerve to ask him what the deal was. The class would be hushed in anticipation—maybe he's working on some new kind of penicillin—and we'd watch him survey us, darting his eyes up and down the rows of lab tables. Finally, he'd say, "Well, it just goes to show you, if you hang around doing nothing, you'll rot."

Oh, geez.

My students love these anecdotes, and even more than the actual stories themselves, they appreciate the fact that as some sort of supposed expert in the subject of teaching them English, I haven't apotheosized myself. I'm human, too, and I'm strong enough to admit it. After I've let them

into my life outside the classroom and the school, they're less hesitant about letting me into their lives. I've even found that their stories are better than mine in many cases.

But I Don't Know What To Write About!

Ah, those famous words. These words used to frustrate me, but no longer. Usually while I'm taking attendance, turning to the right page in the textbook, and getting ready to pass things out, the first few minutes of class are filled with things that have happened to them or that they have witnessed within the 24 hours that have passed since the last time I saw them. I usually get a run-down about what they did over the weekend. I hear about kids I don't even know and may never meet and about what they have done. My students, most students, would rather fill a class period with idle chit chat and gossip instead of doing work. They have a lot to talk about, as I'm sure every teacher has noticed with each note that's passed, with each whisper in the middle of a lecture, and each stroll through the cafeteria—never quiet there. So, I tell them, pick one of those things that you've yapped about with your pals and write it down. **YOU ARE A WEALTH OF MATERIAL.** I try to give them a kick-start by rattling off some of the amusing things they have told me. On your mark, get set, go.

And they're off.

Yes, I Teach Five-Paragraph Essays, Too

I always took it for granted that students metamorphose into knowing how to write a good, standard essay over that summer between middle and high school. Naaah. Before I assign the first major composition, we work on writing solid paragraphs before piecing them into a whole. I explain that writing good paragraphs (and, therefore, good essays) is just like following a recipe for muffins: you've got your flour, your eggs and oil, your baking powder, but what makes each muffin different is all the extra things that go in the batter—blueberries? cranberries? apples and cinnamon? The basic ingredients are the same, but each muffin differs somehow anyway. Just like

your essay. You've got your thesis statement, your topic sentences, your examples, your intros and conclusions. Those "proportions" need to be followed exactly, but the rest of the ingredients are up to you, because only you know what flavor, so to speak, your essay is going to be.

We spend some time for several days writing various individual paragraphs together in class (they call out ideas and sentences while I write them on the board and they copy them down) and then alone before attempting the essay in full. And I never let them attempt an essay in full on their own before we've mocked one up together. Last year I had a World Literature class (fondly known as "sophomore skills" as it is pretty obvious that most of these students' skills, other than being fabulous at not doing any work, are lacking) where this technique worked wonders. All tenth graders in Florida are required to take a writing assessment test; and by spending a good three to four weeks, most of my students performed one-and-a-half to two grades better than other skills classes. I even had a handful of students whose scores rivaled those of some students in "regular" English classes.

Writing with my students is something I do for all my classes—skills through honors—because working together successfully gives them the confidence to work successfully by themselves. They also see that it's something I want to do, too, that I like it, and we're all in the same boat sometimes, doing the same thing. Students, and teachers, often have this big, invisible electronic fence thing installed in that space between the chalkboard and student desks. If you try to cross it, ZAP, you're fried. When my students learn from me that good fences **don't** make good neighbors, we can inch toward each other when we need to, and go back to our own yards when the time is right.

And As For Rewrites And Revisions . . .

They hate them. We hate reading the same paragraphs and drafts and lousy sentence structures over and over, but life's rough. As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect.

I let my students know that writing can be one of the hardest things to do because a part of them,

part of what they think and feel, gets arbitrarily rated by someone who can't truly understand what they're trying to say, because those arbitrary raters aren't YOU. The job of a writer is to write as clearly, vividly, and pointedly as they can so that even if I, the reader, have never had four teeth knocked out of my head, I feel like I have. Even if I've never faked sleep while a masked man ransacked the house, I feel like I have. And if it takes you 12 times to get it right, so what?

When you learned how to ride a bike, you didn't just stand around and watch the neighbor boy. You didn't listen to his father, huffing and puffing as he pushed the neighbor boy along, scream advice and then write down all that he said, go inside to your father and say, "Now I know how to ride a bike." You had to get on there yourself and have **your** father huff and puff and scream. You had to fall down, get scraped up beyond recognition, cry, cry more when the mercurochrome hit your wound, keep crying while the Band-Aids and gauze covered you until you looked like a two-year old who got into the medicine cabinet, and keep crying some more until your dad gave you a shot of whiskey to knock you out (and one for him, too). Writing is the same kind of thing. You try, you flop, you get hurt a little, you clean things up, and before you know it, you've reached your destination. There are very few things in life we do well right away. Writing is no different.

Maybe They Still Can't Spell, . . .

But by mid-year at the latest, my students wince a little less when I pass out the next writing assignment because they know I won't set them loose, clueless, into the big, scary world of clearly and appropriately expressing themselves. Plus, they all know that they have the opportunity to stylize their assignments. I want them to. If there's a personal investment in what they're turning in to me, they'll care more about the work they do.

I can't turn every kid into Steinbeck, nor do I expect to; and lots of students still leave my classroom at the end of the year knowing that, if they can help it, all they'll write when they graduate from high school are checks. All I can really hope for is that during their time with me, they don't view writing as a chore or as something other people do; and that maybe, they'll even get a little bit of a charge out of writing a couple of pieces for me. I got a letter from a student I had almost three years ago, now in college, who wrote, "I saved all those hand-outs you gave us about writing essays and I used them when I had to write my first paper at school. And guess what? I got an A!! Thanks, Geb!"

My pleasure.