

Teaching

by Lisa Stine

RHET 5317: Advanced Nonfiction Writing

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A Bit of Explanation

I teach ninth grade English at the Bryant High School Freshman Academy in Bryant, Arkansas, a small suburban community about 20 miles south of Little Rock. I also advise the yearbook staff.

I wish that the short description above did justice to what I do every day. So many people assume that they understand the teaching profession, since we have all been students. However, this analogy is very much like assuming that because you have been a patient, you understand how to be a doctor. The giving end and the receiving end exist in two very different places.

I've heard that teaching runs in families, and in my case, that is absolutely true. Both of my parents teach with me at Bryant. My mom teaches Business classes. She loves teaching students skills that she knows they will use in the workplace, such as using Microsoft Office, designing layouts using Adobe InDesign, and editing photographs using Adobe Photoshop. After 29 years, she will retire in June. My dad teaches Health and coaches Cross Country and Track. He loves to run, and he loves to share his passion for running with young people. I have a feeling he'll still be coaching when he's 100. My sister also became a teacher--Bryant hired her to teach U.S. History in 2012. So, everyone in my immediate family teaches at the same high school. My students always find this interesting.

I've been teaching for four years. According to the National Education Association, about 46% of new teachers leave the profession in the first five years, which is, unfortunately, completely understandable. My first year, I easily worked 80 hours a week--often more. The workload has lessened slightly, since I have learned how to use my time more efficiently. I firmly believe that no amount of education can adequately prepare a person for teaching. Starting a teaching job is like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool: you either sink, or you quickly learn how to swim.

Even though I watched both of my parents work as teachers while I grew up, I didn't realize until I began working how truly multifaceted this job is. On any given school day, I mediate arguments between students, lead meetings with other teachers, answer e-mails, write proposals for fundraisers, analyze data from student assessments, talk to parents about student grades, write recommendation letters, meet with counselors to talk about troubled students, prepare sub materials for co-workers who stay home sick, and perform a seemingly infinite number of other small tasks. Planning, teaching, and grading are also essential, of course, but most planning and grading happens outside of school, when I have a few quiet hours to think at home.

I am married with no children, but I do have two cats. My husband and I are both in school—I just started a Master's in Rhetoric and Writing, and he is taking deficiency courses for a Master's in Computer Science. We don't have much spare time to spend with our friends, but they are good friends, so they understand. We get together when we can.

Missing Work

Amy, one of my students, has a 0% in my English class for fourth quarter. She hasn't turned in a single assignment.

After giving her extra copies of some missing work at the end of the period, I tell her that I'm e-mailing her mom after school so that she can remind her to finish it this weekend.

Panic fills her eyes.

"No! Please don't! I wasn't even here when you gave this out before! Please don't tell my mom!"

"Amy, I can't go home with you to make sure this work gets done. You're not in trouble. I'll just explain that to your mom."

"No!"

She stamps her foot emphatically and swivels away from me. The other students, waiting for the bell to ring, start to whisper and look in our direction. I don't want to create a scene. I try to get her back.

"Amy, I don't want to get you in trouble. Look at me."

She turns hard, her black curls defiantly whipping past her face. Somehow, she glares at me with half boiling anger and half desperate pleading.

"Okay, Amy. I won't e-mail your mom if you promise me that you'll have that work done on Monday. My birthday is tomorrow--I'll consider it my birthday gift if you turn in that work and bring your grade up. Is that a deal?"

Her face softens, and she cracks a small smile.

"Okay," she says. "I'll do it."

"Do you promise? I take promises seriously."

Yes, I promise."

The bell rings, and students scatter into the hall. I wonder if I made the best decision. Did I cave to her? Did she win? I can't get that pleading look out of my mind. What was going to happen to her at home this weekend if her mother found out she hadn't done her work? Just a grounding, or worse? I want to think that parents are always advocates, but I never know.

I hope she has her work on Monday.

Extracurricular Activities

At 8:15 p.m. on a Wednesday night, I receive this text message from one of my students, Amelia:

*Is there any way you can get Anna
Jacobs's parents numbers for me?
Especially her father.*

A knot forms in my stomach. I do not have Anna in class, but I assume that a student would not be asking me for contact information for another student's parents unless something had gone wrong. I look up Anna's profile on Pinnacle, our online grade book website, then reply:

*I can only see the number in Pinnacle,
which is 852-935-5702. Mrs. Harris
might have more info. though since
she is in her class. Want me to text her
and ask? Is everything okay?*

No, it isn't.

*She told me that she tried to OD and
says she's going to the hospital with
her dad but I don't know if I can trust*

her right now. I know her dad is home. If you could get her dad's number from Mrs. Harris, I'll call. She took a lot of antidepressants and some other things. She's not sure what they were and says she's okay. She needs to be at the hospital.

Amelia is 14-years-old. I admire her bravery and honesty in this situation, but she should not have to deal with this. She told me because she trusts me to deal with it. My mind races. I try to focus. She trusts me. I am the adult here. I must do something.

The number listed in Pinnacle does not work. I call Mrs. Harris, who I know has Anna in class, to see if she has any other contact information. I explain the situation. She has no numbers, but she says she will call the school counselor immediately.

I hang up with her and call the Little Rock Police Department.

"Hello, I'm a teacher at Bryant High School. One of my students just alerted me that a friend of hers is claiming that she has taken several pills and is overdosing."

I provide Anna's name and address. Surprisingly, my voice sounds calm. Inside, I am panicking.

The dispatcher's detached tone comforts me somehow. She explains that an officer will do a welfare check at the home and asks for my contact information. Meanwhile, the school counselor contacts an assistant principal, who heads to school to locate Anna's file and find other phone numbers. She also alerts the principal. Amelia texts with an update.

I called her and she answered. She wouldn't let me talk to her dad.

LRPD is on the way to her house now to do a welfare check. Did she claim that she was in the car?

Thank you. Yes.

Okay. Did she say which hospital? Or could you text her and ask?

She wouldn't say.

Okay. Well I'm hoping she is on the way to a hospital, but if she isn't then the police can check on everything when they get to the house. They took my number so I'm hoping they will call me back, and if they don't, I will call in 30 mins and see if I can find out anything.

Thank you. I'll let you know if she says anything.

You said you weren't sure if you could trust her--did you mean about actually taking the pills or that she was with her dad?

That she is with her dad. I believe that she took the pills. I've talked to her and she doesn't sound okay. She has a history of doing things like this.

Okay. Mr. Carter is on his way up to the school now to pull her info. from her handbook form to get some more numbers to call.

Okay, good.

I realize at this point that Amelia is communicating with the very person that we are attempting to locate, and it would probably be prudent to get Anna's phone number. For some reason, I worry that Amelia will not want to give it to me, so I ask delicately.

Would you mind giving me Anna's cell number? I'm not going to call her,

*but if the police get to her house and
no one is there they will probably
need it.*

852-932-5584

Whew.

Thank you. Is she still texting you?

Yes ma'am.

Good. Keep her talking. I decide to pass Anna's number along to the school counselor through Mrs. Harris. I update Amelia.

*Okay, I'm talking to Mrs. Harris, and
we're going to give Anna's number to
Mrs. McDonald.*

*Okay. Please let me know if the
counselors, Mrs. Harris, or you find
anything out.*

*I will keep you informed. Dr. Patterson
is on it now too. Thank you so much
for doing this--you are a great friend.*

Thank you, and you're welcome. I just wish she had never felt like she needed to do this.

Me too.

I spend the next thirty minutes in terror. Is Anna overdosing in her bedroom without her parents' knowledge as she texts Amelia? Will the police arrive in time? Should I have called the police immediately instead of calling Mrs. Harris first? Should I call Anna and talk to her? What will I do if Anna dies because they get to her too late? What could I have done differently?

After what seems like hours, I receive a text from my assistant principal, Mr. Carter.

Police are at the house. Parent is aware of the situation. Anna is SAFE. Anna is attending a funeral in the a.m. and will come to the school with both parents tomorrow. We will follow the suicide protocol of the district. Thanks for all you did! You did everything by the book.

Relief. The police call shortly after to confirm that the "female juvenile was located and no medical assistance was required." In other words, Anna did not take any pills. She lied. I feel a twinge of anger--I have spent the last half-hour shaking and nauseous, wondering if she was

alive. She scared the wits out of Amelia, who cares about her deeply. Mr. Carter left his family at home to go up to the school and find information to contact her family. The police department used their resources to locate her.

However, grief quickly replaces my anger when I realize that fourteen-year-old girls don't just tell their friends they are dying for fun--she was crying out for help. I hope Anna gets what she needs before this happens again and it is real. I wonder whether any of my students thought about ending their lives tonight. I think about the ones who might not tell a friend because they really mean to do it. I think about what I will do when, inevitably, I lose one of my own.

I cry in bed that night while my husband holds me tight, trying to contain my sobs.

Grading

There is a tote bag full of papers sitting on my dining room floor right now. About four inches thick, the stack contains two different assignments for all 105 of my students. I also have 105 research papers shared with me online, with 105 additional documents containing source notes that I must check. When I think about all those papers at once, I get a little overwhelmed.

Let me put it this way: There are 420 total assignments for me to grade. Even if I spend an average of one minute per paper (and the research papers will definitely take at least two or three), it will take me seven straight hours of grading to get through them all. Seven. Hours.

I know that I could think about it as an hour of grading a day for a week, which doesn't sound too bad. But more often than not, I cannot think about anything but the whole pile, and I get so freaked out that I don't even want to look at them. In the meantime, I take up more and more assignments. I put them off because I think I should set aside a long block of time and get them all over with at once, and since long blocks of time are hard to come by in my schedule, this rarely happens.

If I sound flippant about it, don't get me wrong. I acknowledge the problem. I feel very frustrated with myself when I realize how rarely I go over graded work with my classes. A couple of weeks after the due date, when I finally find time to grade an assignment, we have moved on. While I do revisit the same concepts frequently in my class (such as finding good evidence from a text to back up an argument, or identifying author's tone through analysis of diction) to give students plenty of practice, I don't do nearly as much as I should to make sure students are aware of what they do not understand. One of the best ways to help them with this? Going over graded work together and letting them clarify misunderstandings by asking questions.

I love planning lessons. I love circulating the room while students work on an assignment I created for them. I love watching them struggle with a question, then seeing them realize that they know the answer. I love when a hand goes up, and I walk over to a desk, and a student asks me to explain something again or to reword it, and when I do they nod their head and say "Oh, that makes sense now." I love watching them work together and think together and help each other. It's like magic.

But for some reason, when I take up those assignments and clip them together and put them in my bag, the magic disappears. The papers become a chore, a burden. I forget the focused faces of my students, their hands grasping their pencils as they write down their answers, most of them doing what I've asked of them because they trust me. They know that if they try, they will learn.

I wish there was time in my day for them to sit with me while I graded their work, for me to show them what they missed and why, for them to ask questions, for them to nod in understanding. That would make it much better.

Barefoot

Last week, Samantha got caught drinking alcohol at school. Her boyfriend brought cinnamon rum in a Thermos and gave some to her. A girl in their class told on them to their science teacher, who turned them in.

As punishment for distributing alcohol, her boyfriend was moved to the "Alternative Learning Environment," which really just serves as a separate school where the bad kids go before they drop out or get expelled permanently. Only a few make it back to the real campus. It's about as effective as our prison system.

Samantha, as a distributee, received a lesser sentence of 5 days suspension. She returned to school today.

Samantha moved to Bryant with her mother last summer, from Colorado. Her mother met a man online and decided to move to Arkansas, where they knew no one but her newfound love interest. That relationship ended quickly, but another soon replaced it when she met a truck driver. She once left Samantha alone at home for a week to go visit him in Alabama. When her science teacher found out about it, she asked Samantha what she had been eating.

"Oh, Mom ran to Taco Bell and stocked me up before she left."

"So you've been eating warmed-up Taco Bell all week?"

"Well, no, the microwave is broken, so I just eat it cold. It tastes good though."

As a mandated reporter, the teacher had to contact the Department of Human Services and tell them about the neglect. They came to school to interview Samantha, and she denied everything. She didn't talk to her science teacher for a week, I suppose out of embarrassment, anger, or both.

Today, the teachers on my team and I decided to call Samantha in to our meeting to see how she is doing. We are worried about her. Teachers get attached to students like Samantha--an old soul, with a sharp wit and an easy laugh. However, she has a 43% in math, and her grades have been steadily slipping. The alcohol incident served as a red flag, alerting us that we need to intervene.

Samantha walks in barefoot, dangling her flip-flops from two fingers. This is typical--Samantha's habit of never wearing shoes is a running joke. She pushes her thumbs through holes that she has ripped in the sleeves of her hoodie. She sits down in a chair.

"Am I about to get a lecture?" she asks, half-serious.

We spend the next forty minutes talking. We tell her we feel disappointed in her, because we know how much potential she has. She tells us how disappointed she feels in herself. She blames herself for not keeping her boyfriend from bringing the alcohol. We try to help her understand that she can only be responsible for her own actions, not anyone else's. I'm not sure if she believes us.

Near the end of our conversation, we somehow arrive at the topic of Samantha's shoes (and her usual preference for removing them). She laughs, then quietly says,

"Just so you know, the reason I'm always taking my shoes off is because they're not big enough and they hurt my feet. We can't afford to buy new ones right now."

She looks so small in the chair, dangling her bare feet a few inches from the ground. Her head hangs in embarrassment. I try not to cry.

"Oh, Samantha!" I say. "You have to tell us these things. We can help you with shoes!"

The other teachers chime in. We tell her to please let us know when she needs anything. If we can't help, we will find someone who will.

We realize that the meeting period is over. We all hug Samantha tight and tell her we love her. I'm sure this would be frowned upon in some circles, but let someone try to tell me that what Samantha doesn't need most is love.

When we check with the counselor's office, there are no shoes in Samantha's size in the school clothing closet. I spend my prep period browsing shoes on Amazon. I find a perfect pair of sneakers: DC brand with a black and white checkered pattern. When I send them to my team, they agree that Samantha will love them. We decide to split the cost.

I can't wait to give them to her next week. New shoes, new start. I hope this is enough.

Learning to Read and Write

Finally, May arrives. We are reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in my class. Only 24 days of school remain--students pine for the carefree days of summer, and attempts to convince them to focus on schoolwork often result in pitiful whines or outright refusal. Students agree wholeheartedly with Scout, the six-year-old narrator, as she describes her feelings about school in chapter four:

...as I inched sluggishly along the treadmill of the Maycomb County school system, I could not help receiving the impression that I was being cheated out of something. Out of what I knew not, yet I did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for me.

Every year, when we perform a close reading of this passage in class, many of my students echo Scout's boredom with her education. They feel that they shuffle from grade to grade with no sign of advancement, and some of them fail to see the point of coming to school at all. This year was no exception, and while their end-of-year impatience probably has a lot to do with these views, I can't help but feel responsible for showing them the value of their education. So, after we read Scout's comments in chapter four of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I give students Chapter 7 of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In this section, the former slave describes learning to read as a young boy:

...reading...enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers...As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment

which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity.

Douglass' seeming desire to rid himself of his knowledge because of how powerfully it has affected him demonstrates the incredible potential education has to change one's life. Douglass recognized his own situation, which gave him the ability to remove himself from it. Through this example, I challenge students to value their own education and respect what it can do for their lives.

After we finish reading, I give students a writing prompt, combining elements from Douglass' description of learning to read and write and Scout's reflection on her education in chapter four of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They must explain their own experiences with learning to read and write, then provide a reflection on their formal education so far. I give them several questions as a guide:

- Who first taught you to read and write?
- Do you clearly remember learning to read and write, or did it just happen over time?
- Do you remember feeling frustrated, or was it easy for you?
- Did anyone other than a teacher work with you on reading and writing?
- Did you go to preschool? Did you have to start from scratch when you started school?
- Did you have a favorite book as you learned to read? If so, how did that help you?
- What is the purpose of a formal education?

- Have you had effective teachers? What difference does the teacher of a class make?
- What other life experiences count as "education"?
- Do you feel that your formal education is preparing you for life?
- How would you change your formal education if you could?

I love this assignment more than almost any other I give all year. I receive powerful feedback from students--many of them do feel frustrated like Scout, but like Douglass, they understand the value of education. Some of them express complete resignation, and some provide insights on how to improve teaching and the school system. I'll let them speak for themselves:

Hannah: *I think that class should be an environment where you should not be afraid to raise your hand and ask a question.*

Nicole: *When a teacher tells you to do something without heart into it, you aren't going to want to do it.*

Nicholas: *I think that no teacher should ever have any sort of bias when they are teaching because this can make things misunderstood, confusing, or even offensive. Even though teachers may think it their rightful duty to teach kids these things, they don't realize they are taking away a child's ability to think for themselves and even destroying the core values they think they're protecting.*

Ben: *Most teachers are very good at teaching and love their jobs.*

Amy: *I'm miserable everyday just to sit in a classroom where I will never understand what's going on with a bunch of rude people that just bully everyone who isn't exactly like them. It's stupid. I'm just wasting my time at school. Like Mr. Smith said, I'm just going to fail anyway so why try when I know I'm just going to fail? School is nothing but a waste of time and a way to punish children and teenagers for not being adults yet and not knowing how to handle living on their own.*

Jill: *As funny as it may seem now, I was terrified when [my sixth grade teacher] told me to come in after class. She thought I was suicidal because I had killed off one of my main characters in my short story. I tried to reason with her that I had read someone do it in a similar book, but she didn't care. I was just weird. So, I stopped writing.*

Paulo: *Reading and writing is so frustrating sometimes! There's so much you have to watch for. For some reason, I just don't like it, so its twice as hard, because if you don't like something you don't want to do it. It's not that I'm stupid or anything, I just find it harder than any other subject. It just doesn't come easy to me.*

Amelia: *Math was something I had to work for, and I had never been pushed to work. An ineffective Gifted and Talented program had told me I was special and the fact that I was actually average was killing me.*

Elizabeth: *If we were able to observe how people's moods change over one night or how many airplanes pass over our house or just something different where we can observe other people and interact and not just have our heads shoved in a textbook quoting exactly what it says, I would not mind homework.*

Chad: *When I get out of high school I'm not gonna know how to get insurance, write a check, do my taxes, or balance a checkbook, but thank God I'll know the slope intercept formula.*

Dylan: *If there was anything I could change, it would be our time we spend in school. I would shorten it an hour or so so kids could sleep in a little more. Studies have shown that kids aren't ready to learn until about 10:00 AM.*

Nathan: *I think getting an education in high school should be more specific because we could just take everything we need to learn in middle school such as Algebra and Economics and not have those types of classes in high school. Most people know what they want to do by the end of the freshman year, and so after the freshman year they can think of what they want to do and they tell the school.*

Sean: *If the current education system was more specialized, then what would happen if you decided to change your mind? It is expensive for college students to change their majors if they already have taken an*

extensive amount of classes, so what would happen if students had to come back to high school if they decided that they didn't want to be an artist? The current formal education system prepares us for a variety of lifestyles and jobs that are available to us in the workforce. Once students leave high school, they can pay for higher education and receive the specialized education that they have been desiring for so long.

Samuel: *I don't like that it is a law [that kids must go to school]. If you want to throw your life away and go be a hobo, you go right ahead. I would rather be in school with people that actually are trying to make something of their lives and want to be there instead of the pot heads and lazy kids in school that don't try whatsoever. It messes me up when kids around me are screwing up the school system and not trying to get the education they need.*

Caleb: *Think about the things we had about ten years ago up to now... imagine what would be different in ten years from now just from people who tried and got an education.*

Lucas: *When I was young, I think it was 3rd or 4th grade, I "dated" this girl who loved this book series called The Spiderwick Chronicles. Well she kinda got me into it, and I fell in love with them. I still like them today even though they are kinda childish. It has a really neat and great story line and I'd still classify them as my favorite books. I think it didn't help me in*

school much, but it grew my imagination which in my opinion is something bigger than school.

Reading these responses near the end of the year gives me the push I need to stay strong until the last day. I have to be here for them. I have to give them the education they deserve. I have to help the hopeless ones regain hope. I have to support the ones who need me, I have to challenge the ones who don't. I have to be creative and passionate and give them opportunities to feel creative and passionate. I have to take advantage of every moment I have with them, because after June 6, they will be gone from me, and I will have to wonder all summer--Was it enough? What could I have done better?

Then, after a whirlwind two months of attending teacher trainings, taking summer graduate classes, reading as many books as I can cram into my free time, and relaxing my brain, August will arrive, and a new set of faces will appear in my classroom. And I will be ready.