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Mixing Messages and Skipping 13th Grade

by John Straus

Freshman year of college is 13th grade for most of my students. For many of them, a required composition class is a mild form of punishment. Maybe not so mild. More diagnostic essays to reveal their “writing skills.” Complicated sentences and big words will be rewarded. The passive voice will be acknowledged. Good or bad? Depends on the teacher, right?

And who am I? The professor who knows all. Not me. Or is it “Not I”?

All semester, I’ll repeat the message that they’re all writers. They happen to be in a composition class, but that shouldn’t prevent them from thinking of themselves as writers and acting accordingly. They’ll write, revise, write, and revise some more. They might even have some fun. 13th grade it isn’t.

In *Writing Alone and with Others*, Pat Schneider says that anyone who writes is a writer. So I tell my students that if you think of yourself as a writer instead of as a convict doing time in English Composition, you’ve got a better chance of having fun, and of saying something that has meaning for you and that will entertain and instruct me – the teacher.

When I tell them that I have no use for the “F” word, they yawn and smile, probably wondering why I bother to make this obvious point. There won’t be a penalty for writing it, but ugly language should be avoided. So I’ll circle it to show my displeasure. (My wife Phyllis, an editor at *The New York Times*, won’t allow it in a story. The same goes for “utilize” and “exacerbate.”) I pause. Then, in a clear, confident, pedagogical tone, I explain, “If you write ‘facilitate’ in an essay, I’ll invite you to find a less offensive word.” Citing E.B. White’s admonition to “avoid fancy words,” I assure them that “fuck” is just fine with me.

The 13th graders smile. Welcome to my college writing class. The tension begins to break. This extended form of incarceration, this required writing class might be different from what they expected. Or should it be “different than”? I don’t much care, and I hope they don’t either. I hope that they learn to write the truth in their own voices. The next mixed message? Here, they’ll get the chance to develop those voices and still sound like themselves.

And here comes the mixed message from the same list of “suggestions and cautionary hints passage” that White offers in “An Approach to Style”: “There is nothing wrong, really, with any word – all are good, but some are better than others. A matter of ear, a matter of reading the books that sharpen the ear” (77). So they’ll analyze the language of beautiful pieces by Sherry Turkle, who explains how technology has isolated us exactly by connecting us, by Dan Barry, who shows us William Zinsser teaching students how to read with our

ears, and by Oliver Sacks, who describes how he'll embrace the joy in the last days of his life.

Then this from Jack Lynch, my colleague at Rutgers: "There ain't a rule in the language what can't be broke. The so-called rules of English **grammar** and **style** were not spoken by a burning bush; they're just guidelines about what's likely to be *effective*."

That effectiveness will depend on how their audience takes what they have to say. Now they know that their audience in this course – me – has a "weird" sense of humor. (See Rate my Professor to verify this.) Were they writing for a computer grading program, polysyllabic jargon and convoluted syntax would be rewarded as part of the "strategic plan" (the latest redundant stinkweed) to get an A. Michael Winerip reports on how to talk this talk in his sadly funny *New York Times* piece, "Writing for a Robo-Grader? Just Keep Obfuscating Mellifluously."

Goodbye SAT words learned for the test. It's time to write something meaningful. The elegant prose the students will read during the coming semester will be written in General English "a happy compromise between formal and informal. Being a compromise, it is by far the most palatable of the written styles, and its area of appropriateness, at least in the real world, is virtually unlimited" (Trimble 63).

But who am I to confuse and amuse them? I'm a drummer who escaped a Ph.D. program in 1976 and who has taught freshman composition at Mercer County Community College, American and George Washington University in DC, and at Rutgers – Newark, since 1988. My application letter had my teaching cred in the subordinate clause: "I am a drummer who teaches writing." That sentence should be revised to make the clause coordinate. ("I am a drummer *and* I teach writing.")

I distance myself from the English teacher types who so many of my students have met and whose disapproving, bullying, snide voices are lodged in their heads. Anne Lamott says, "What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head" (26). I'm a drummer, who spends his time laying down a groove for a band and for dancers. I'm here to make the song work and their writing, too.

Many high schools prepare students well, but not for my writing class at Rutgers. They've had points taken off for exhibiting egregious, non-academic conventions: "Don't use 'I,' 'you,' or contractions. Even worse, they've earned points for phrases like "exhibiting egregious non-academic conventions." They've learned they'll be punished for not following the rules. The only question they have is what the punishment will be for each crime.

Bryan Garner's essay "Writers Can Relax by Not Worrying About Supposed 'Rules'" debunks the legitimacy of the 'rules' by citing authorities "chapter and verse" and inviting us to check those sources ourselves. He observes, "One of the most interesting points about writing is that those who pounce on 'errors,' especially in the United States, don't know what they're talking about. Their negativity is misplaced. They never bother to check

what the authorities say.”

Most important, he reminds us that, “too many children learned writing at the hands of someone who took all the fun out of it.” His advice to students is to “work on your expressiveness. Learn to polish your writing at the end, but first... relax and convey your thoughts forcefully. Avoid beginning with *dos* and *don'ts*. Carried to an extreme, those things would make writing stutterers of us all.”

As you’ve probably figured out by now, I’d better have some support for what I’m telling my students about how to approach their writing. Since I’ve been teaching, they’ve told me that what I am saying about their writing goes against what they’ve heard from previous teachers.

This is where John Trimble’s *Writing with Style* comes in. Garner recommends the book that’s become the central text of my class for a few decades, advising, “If you want to know what it’s like to learn at the hands of an unintimidating master—an encouraging mentor—try Trimble.” When I discovered Trimble, the head of the writing program at American University warned me that the book’s mixed messages would confuse students. I’ve been sending those messages ever since.

I’ve used this text with hundred of students, who’ve treasured its liberating common sense message to write what they themselves would like to read and to think of writing as a way to have fun, to communicate clearly and honestly, and to bring their ideas to light. And sometimes daring to say “Fuck it.”

Here’s an example. He warns them, “If you view [your assignment] primarily as an essay, which seems logical enough, beware. Why? Because the conventional essay format, which you’ve had pounded into you since junior high, is dead. It’s static, formulaic, boring – in a word, undramatic. (Which is why you instinctively hated learning it.) You may have good ideas and they may be coherently organized, but the form itself is dead. *Readers want variety; they want ideas dramatized.* They don’t want to read about ideas; they want to *experience* them” (Trimble 109).

They nod their heads and agree. That’s what they want. And I spend the semester helping them do it. (How I help them dramatize their ideas is the subject of another essay.)

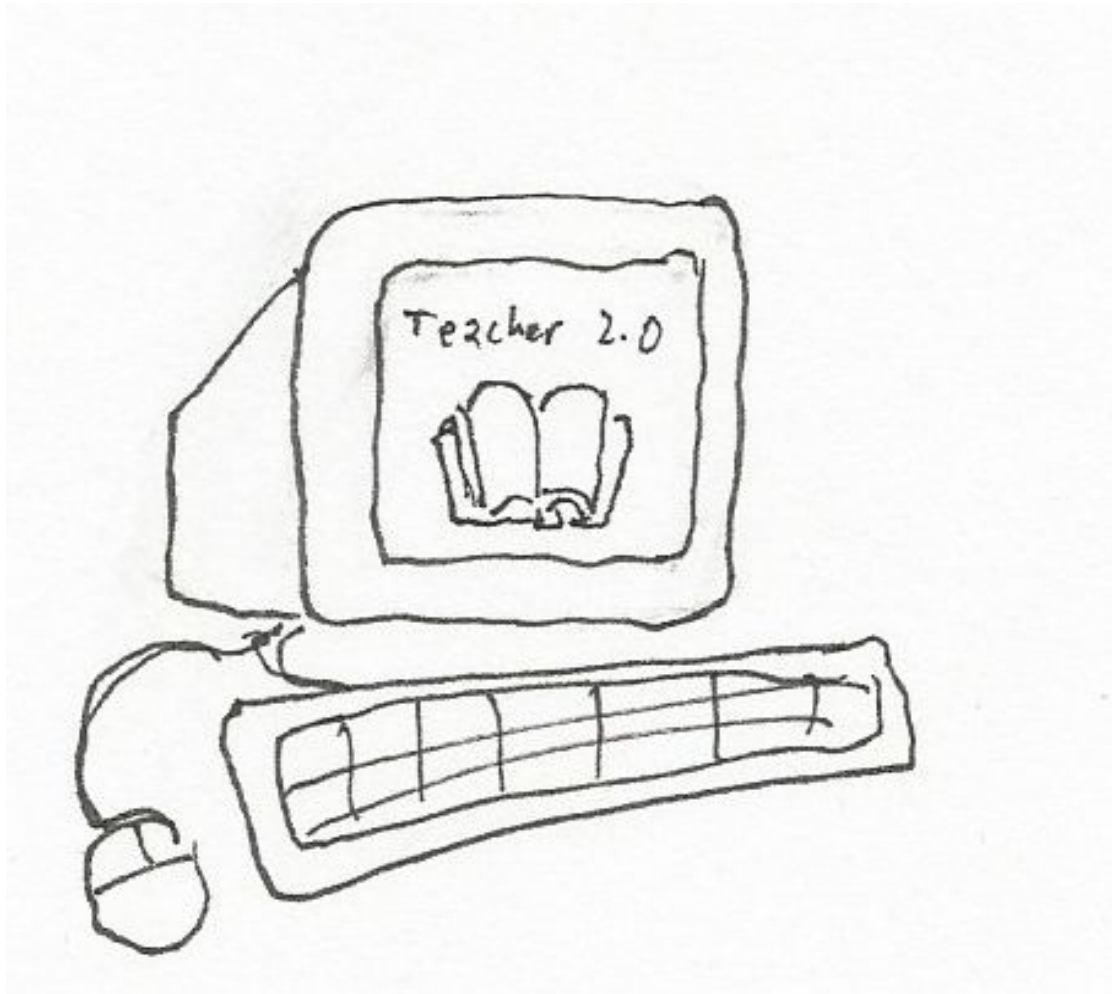
I want to invite students out into the open air, even when they’re scared to take a deep breathe, relax, and enjoy the freedom. Years of school have taught many of them to stay where they are, where it’s safe to follow the “rules,” to be well behaved, and to move on to the next grade with more good marks of approval. In *Stylish Academic Writing*, Helen Sword reminds writers in academia that to achieve the goals of “communication, craft, and creativity” in their prose, they must practice the other three C’s of “concreteness, choice, and courage” (173). She observes that “Concrete language is “the stylish writer’s magic bullet,” that” the principle of choice, however, means that you don’t have to use concrete language,” and that “to change one’s writing style requires courage” (174).

Let's teach our students to choose to be courageous. Let's make it safe for them to be. And let's allow them to skip 13th grade.

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Artwork by Izzie Boyce-Blanchard