

Learning to Write / Writing to Learn:

10 Core Competencies

CHAPTER 1

I'm afraid of coaching, of writer's classes, of writer's magazines, of books on how to write. They give me "centipede trouble" – you know the yarn about the centipede who was asked how he managed all his feet? He tried to answer, stopped to think about it, and was never able to walk another step.

Robert A. Heinlein in Letter to Blassingame, 16 May 1947 quoted in "Grumbles"

I never thought of myself as a writer until I was 42 years old. I had been teaching English for 20 years by then and I loved to read what kids could write. But that year I learned that writing is not something that teachers “teach.” It’s rather something that teachers either encourage or stifle in students. I had been stifled as a child – and it was one eighth grader who brought me to the moment that was my personal turning point.

The day before that experience I had been sitting in the staff room paging through the current edition of *Read* – a literary magazine by and for young readers and writers. One particular article caught my eye. It was called “The Nutty Poet” and was about a young girl named Ann Bowler who had won poetry contests with her somewhat bizarre - yet insightful - free verse. Although a fifth grade teacher had crushed her budding ability as a writer, she experienced some sort of an internal shift during the next few years that allowed her permission to express herself on paper.

The reason I liked her story so much was that I deeply identified with it. I had been crushed as a writer long before the fifth grade. The difference between Ann and me was that until that next day in class – I never reclaimed the “permission” Ann found – until I was confronted by that one particular student.

I took the *Read* magazine to class the next day and decided to see how my students would react to Ann's story. My plan was to introduce the concept of free verse, read the story – and encourage them to write their own poems.

Most of them liked the story, and since we were reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, it was easy for them to identify with the two girls. The two “Ann/Anne’s” had more in common than the ability to write from their hearts: they both died before they were out of their teen years and the world never got to know the adults they might have become.

My classes were deeply touched by Ann's poems and were anxious to start their own “Nutty Poems.” What they liked the best about the idea of writing free verse was that they could simply reach inside themselves and pull out a feeling - an idea – or an image – or a memory and capture it in words on paper. They believed me that there were no “rules.” The poems didn't have to rhyme; they didn't have to count words or syllables; they didn't even have to use words that made a lot of sense to other people. They just had to be honest – and “play” with ideas.

We read a few of Ann's poems to get started:



have been
called
immature
“nice”
greedy
ugly
talented
pretty
creative
hardworking
abstract
depressing
humiliating
actually
I wonder
how many people really know
ME

IT didn't happen in

New York City
but in that little bitty place
“Down by the river side”
when the old man said
World War THREE
and the funny people laughed
and the fraidy cats cried
but the majority went home
to see it all happen
on their color TVs.

ONE Day

while riding
 through
 my mind
I peeked outside my nose
and looked in the gutter
 to see the world
 still there
 tattered
 and
 torn.

And I stared.

God came and sat on my shoulder
and said, "Well, man, don't just sit there –
 do something."

I stood silently looking around
And I finally said,
 "Can't you, God, do the job better?"

He said, "You're the man I created
 And this is the world you created."

I looked around again.

"Yes"

After reminding my class that these were award-winning poems – that Ann had written many others that probably weren't so interesting – they were ready to get started. The only direction was that they reach back into their minds and remember a time, an event, or a thought – or a *feeling* - they might be able to capture on paper.

I had asked them to clear their desks and have a pencil and paper ready before beginning to read the article, so they were able to immediately focus on the blank pages in front of them. Some started writing immediately. Others sat and stared at the paper or across the room, but it didn't matter. They were all thinking deeply and it was one of those satisfying moments when I remembered why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place.

I returned to my desk, sat down, and started doing “teacher stuff.” You know. Checking the “To Do” list and crossing off the call I had made to the parent at recess. Remembering that I needed to talk to a student from Period 4 about a missing assignment. Then I began to read the top paper on the stack of essays that needed to be corrected before I could start report cards.

The class was silent – except for one boy who was on his way to my desk. I had so hoped there would be no questions and shot him a look that said “Please don't disturb the others.” He kept coming and was finally standing by my desk.

“I can't do this.” It was simply a statement of fact – not a question.

“Oh sure you can, Paul. All you have to do is “. . .” - and I repeated a shortened version of the directions I had just given the class.

His stare never left my face. I CAN'T DO this!” he stated – still quietly, but this time with far more defiance.

“All you need to do, is. . .” I began. I suppose I was going to repeat what I had just said for the third time, but I never got the chance.

He interrupted me, looked straight into my eyes with fire in his, and said “CAN YOU?”

OUCH! Why didn't he just punch me in the stomach? It would have felt the same. My first thoughts, I'm embarrassed to admit, included words like – “shut up” and “I don't have to, I'm the teacher.” Instead of letting on that these feelings had come up, I realized immediately that he was absolutely right. I wasn't so sure that I *could* – and I *certainly* didn't want to. But I do know about learning, and I realized immediately that I was at a defining moment in my own life.

“I don't know,” I said. And I really didn't. “But why don't you sit down and give it a try – and I will too.”

He was satisfied and walked back to his seat. I pushed “the stack” away, put the “To Do” list aside, and took out a blank sheet of notebook paper.

Blank.

Do you know how blank a sheet of notebook paper can look when you know you have to prove yourself to a student?

My first decision was whether to “fake it” – or to be honest. I could take the easy way out – the way I described to the students - and write about a time remembered. A lazy afternoon sitting by a stream on vacation in the Sierras last summer. The taste of warm apricots picked off a friend’s fruit tree after getting out of the swimming pool last Fourth of July. I could have written about a lot of wonderful “remembered” events.

Or I could be honest, dig deep, and learn something. Something about myself *and* something about teaching.

So I looked back at the blank sheet of paper, took a deep breath, and reached inside . . .
..

words

I lay them down on paper
they look back at me and laugh

who am I to chain a word to paper?
lock them in my head and they want to explode

let them out into the day and they ring false

lay them down on paper
they look back at me and laugh

“Ooooo. The paper isn’t blank anymore. Did I write that? Hmmmm. It really is how I feel. Did I know that? I’m not sure. Why did I write? Oh yes. Paul.”

I looked up and Paul was watching me – anxious somehow, with a question in his eyes. I motioned for him to come. I was excited. I really didn’t know I could do that! Thank you, Paul.

I can’t remember the rest of our conversation. I do remember that we shared our “nutty poems” with each other, but I don’t have a copy of his. Thankfully, however, before the class left that day, I scribbled the title of his poem on mine. It was called “I Have No Power.”
