



Whistling in the Dark

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Thanks to you, Lacey and I are having no trouble in college composition,” said Carol. “But some of the others are. Actually, we’re just doing many of the same things you had us do the last two years of high school,” she boasted.

We high school English teachers love to hear those kinds of comments coming from former students. Unfortunately, though, we hear other, less positive kinds of comments as well. Another student from the same class, who went to a different college, said, “Well, my first two papers were pretty bad, but my professor just expected something different, and when I learned what he wanted, I started doing better.”

Having taught high school English for thirty-one years, the one thing that I have learned is that there is no guarantee that students who do well in high school composition will automatically do well in college composition. Nevertheless, the school system where I taught for twenty-seven years now claims that students who complete their rigorous Honors College Preparatory program are “guaranteed to be ready for college.” This kind of claim puts the high school teacher in a position of needing to know more specifically what college professors expect in terms of writing skills.

There is an old expression about “whistling in the dark” which refers to walking along and pretending to be confident in the dark when in fact we are scared to death. That is the way I have often felt about trying to prepare students for college. I tell them what *I think* they should know and be able to do, but in

reality I know that the expectations vary greatly between colleges and even among professors in the same college. Also, there is generally little communication between high school teachers and college professors. I was fortunate to have three colleges in the small town where I taught, and most of the time I knew at least one professor in each college, so I may have had a slight advantage. I also attempted to seek help through Internet searches for any information that might give me clues to college writing expectations. When I attended state and national conferences for English teachers, I took advantage of breakout sessions related to college composition. I must admit that mine were rather haphazard attempts to help students prepare for college-level writing. Nevertheless, there are four areas I have stressed with my students over the years in an attempt to prepare them for college-level writing.

First, there is the matter of *mechanics*. I have often printed out statements from colleges that tell of giving a grade no higher than a C to students who commit even one error, such as a sentence fragment, a run-on sentence, or a comma splice. It scares the pants off my students, but it gets their attention! Unfortunately, many teachers in other disciplines allow students to get by with good grades even if their writings contain gross errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. These students often think their English teachers are just being “picky” when they give a poor assessment to papers filled with errors.

Second, I believe that in order to be successful in college writing, students need to be able to use *analytical skills* in written responses to literary texts as well as the media. Many of my students seem to have struggled most in college composition when they have been asked to explicate a poem or analyze certain elements of a piece of literature. Early in my teaching career, I did not allow students to practice these skills early enough in high school, so they were very uncomfortable if not outright perplexed with these kinds of assignments. This resulted in very awkward-sounding comments that revealed a lack of understanding about how to talk about literary works. I would often read papers with sentences such as the following: “The author was a very good writer. He used many great literary devices in his writing and he had great themes.” They could talk about what happened in the

story or give the main idea in a poem, but they had little experience in discussing theme, tone, mood, or style.

Third, when students leave high school, they should also be able to *develop a specific idea in detail, supporting that idea with meaningful facts, illustrations, experiences, analogies, quotes, or whatever is needed to make the thesis or premise clear*. This skill begins to be important when students are young, but it becomes even more important when they begin to analyze literature. The more abstract the literature they read and the more abstract their own ideas become, the more important it is for students to be able to clarify their ideas with concrete details. More than once I have reminded my students that they do not convince their reader by merely repeating their main ideas over and over, but by elaborating on and discussing these ideas in meaningful detail.

Finally, not only do students need to be able to support their ideas with specific details, they need to be able to *organize* the material (in such a way that the reader can separate one idea from another) and also *provide adequate transitions* from one idea to the next so that the reader can follow easily. The often-berated five-paragraph essay is an attempt to teach students how to do this. Unfortunately, some students do not make it past this stage before they leave high school, when they should have moved beyond it in late elementary or middle school. I remember using a program called STEPS, which taught my middle school students this form. They loved it because the three points in the essay were called “Bing, Bang, and Bongo”! The program actually moved the students beyond the basic five-paragraph essay very quickly if they understood the concept of developing an idea in an organized way. Unfortunately, many teachers just kept repeating the process instead of moving the students beyond the basics.

Having given some of the areas I have stressed in teaching writing over the years, I need to add some insights that I gained during the last ten years of teaching. Basic expectations do not change much, but the emphasis does. For example, when I was in college and during my first years of teaching, the emphasis seemed to be on grammatical and mechanical *correctness* in writing. Whether it was verb usage, punctuation, documentation of sources in research, or sentence structure, the focus was on get-

ting it right. Over the last few years, however, the emphasis seems to have shifted, and I'm hearing more about expectations of *developing a voice* and *choosing an audience* in writing. I asked some of my friends who teach at the college level what they expected and most of them mentioned *strong voice* as an important factor, along with *ability to organize ideas*, stating that the mechanics are "easier to help students fix." This is not to say that college professors no longer expect college students to write mechanically correct papers, but the focus does not seem to be entirely on correctness. There seems to be more of a balance in form and content than there used to be. I suspect that even back when I was in college and early in my teaching career, professors valued audience awareness and development of voice, but they did not evaluate those factors as much.

The real question is *how proficient* is a college student as compared to a high school student? In reality, I have had high school students who could write better than some of my colleagues who had several college degrees. But high school teachers constantly struggle with what to focus on with student writers. One teacher says that she works with students on "more formal, stylistically mature pieces such as research papers and essays" while helping them "eliminate major sentence errors like fragments, comma splices, and run-ons." She assumes that college professors will expect students who can write "grammatically correct, well-thought out pieces that present evidence of their reasoning." Still, she is not sure if what she is doing is enough. She wonders if she should be doing more literary analysis and less persuasive writing about current topics. Should high school teachers be teaching more formal papers or more informal responses to prompts?

I have always thought that high school should give students a good foundation so that they can adapt to whatever comes their way in postsecondary education, but it is difficult to identify specifically what college-level writing is and how it is (or should be) different than high school-level writing. My belief is that these lines will always be rather fuzzy, and high school teachers will have to continue to "whistle in the dark" sometimes. Given the complicated nature of writing, I am not sure we can expect college professors to come up with exact guidelines for

college-level writing. Nonetheless, I would like to make two suggestions that might help us all. First, colleges need to have teacher education programs that give students specific help in the teaching of writing. Student teachers often seem much more comfortable teaching literature than they do teaching writing. Second, college English professors and secondary English teachers in the same geographic areas need to find ways to communicate on a regular basis so that high school teachers can gauge how they are doing in preparing students for college work. This dialogue could be initiated by either the college professors or the high school teachers because both would benefit.