

# Chapter 2. Starting Down a Path: Earliest Dispositions, Interactions, and Education

Although we are in the metonymic habit of thinking of writers as minds, those minds reside and grow in bodies. Writers start within the bodies, genes, and neurology of their birth and the dynamisms of biological growth, which then interact with what the infant comes to discover in their world. So I start my personal story with some clinical details.

## The Body That Reads and Writes

I do not know what cluster of genetic accidents, early physical and nutritional experiences, and early caregiver interactions went into forming my dispositions nor to those characteristics that fostered school success. As far as I know, I was born healthy with no major atypicality, though I wore glasses for as long as I remember, and had only a partially successful surgery for a turnout in my eyes (exotropic strabismus) when I was 12. I never did develop full binocular vision because of the discoordination in my eyes; this didn't impact much seeing the flat page, which I favored over the three-dimensional world. It may also have contributed to my sorry history in sports, which gave me more time with books.

I had similar physical endowments of those who invented writing and for whom writing was invented: eyesight with sufficient acuity (with glasses) to discern letters of standard size, hearing in the normal range (facilitating initial language learning and especially useful for alphabetic and other phonological based systems), standard vocal means of producing sounds (again facilitating language learning and preparing learning phonological correspondences), arms that could hold documents at anticipated distances, digits that facilitated use of standard inscription devices, etc. I also had sufficient cognitive capacities for processing written language and composing messages, though these capacities involved cultural retraining of capacities evolved for purposes that pre-existed the invention of literacy. I also had the biologically evolved orientation toward sociality and awareness of the intentions and attentions of others. These established the potential for imputing shared meaning in the oral and visual signs of others, creating a sense of collective intentionality—necessary for engaging in the ostensive practices of forming collective meanings through writing (see Tomasello, 2019). It is easy to overlook these evolutionary underpinnings of writing, but they are implicit in our practices and create substantial barriers to literacy for those who have difficulties in any of them.

At times I have wondered as well whether other less typical cognitive, affective, biologically dispositional, and neural endowments may have given me advantage over others for literacy success. At this point in our knowledge, however, it is too easy to make such attributions (offering genetic explanations for aptitudes that

manifest years after birth) and too hard to disambiguate any such effects from post-partum cultural learning. Until such time as we know concretely what such favoring genetic predispositions are, if any, it is best to avoid such attributions, especially for teachers or any others who might have proleptic influence on the development of others.

Further, if I had been born within the first 97% or more of human history before the invention of literacy, writing would not have been available to learn, let alone as a primary lifetime vocation. Any biological advantages I may have had for literacy would have been of no particular value. Biological evolution, therefore, would be unlikely to have selected for any disposition toward writing and literacy; rather, cultural history has repurposed for literacy and writing capacities that were evolved for other purposes. Further the factors that made for success in the relations, institutions, and practices that formed in the wake of literacies (whether journalism, legal drafting, financial evaluation, novel writing, or the production of scientific articles) again would depend on cultural learning for the retraining and repurposing of our biological endowments.

## Early Years of Family Life

My mother remembered me as an active, happy baby, not prone to crying or disobedience. She told me that she was ill during my first year and she had to be hospitalized for kidney and liver operations. She was weak thereafter and later had repeated operations. When she was ill, she could not feed me. She said she left cereal on the table for me to feed myself; when I was finished, I would place the inverted bowl over my head. I am not quite sure whether my comic compliance indicates an early habit of amusing others, a sense of needing to take care of myself, a disposition to figuring out things, or a lack of expectation of reliable guidance or support of others—or some combination. But I can recognize all of these in my adult self, and all impulses appearing my writing.

My father was distant, did little childcare, and did not teach me sports; most of my memories of him were around his business and his business friends. He was, nonetheless, very attached to his large extended family of brothers and sisters whom we would visit regularly. His parents had died before I was born. While he approved of my early school success, I think he wanted a more practical career for me and was not particularly supportive of my heading towards an intellectual life as a teenager. Later in my life, after his death, when I had achieved financial security and had shown some success in organizational administration, I had for the first time the feeling he might have been proud of me.

Early photos show I had no weight difficulties until I started schooling, but weight emerged in the earliest grades as a major problem; I remember weighing two hundred pounds before I was five feet tall. I was placed on a strict diet in junior high school when I was twelve to look good for my Bar Mitzvah. I was given amphetamines for several months which increased my irritability. I have since

then constantly struggled with diet and weight, not always successfully. Fortunately, though, that was my last encounter with uppers stronger than coffee.

While I was active (playing active kids' games and riding my bicycle to meet friends or shop for my stamp collection in a city five miles away), I was klutzy and never good at athletics. I was the oldest player in the minor leagues of our local Little League baseball, never making it to a regular team. My attempts to play were accompanied by constant anxiety and shame at my regular failures. Nonetheless, I was a baseball-history and statistics nerd for a time, subscribing to *Baseball Digest* and reading all the available baseball biographies. While not making too much of this for my writing, it suggests I had problems as a child in proprioception—awareness and control of bodily position

and movement, magnified by anxiety arising from failures. I used my cognitive and perceptual resources more successfully for internal intellectual activities and school success. It also suggests that I had difficulties in fulfilling the gendered expectations of young boys in the highly gendered world of fifties suburbs.

My family did provide a good literacy environment. The earliest picture of me is as a toddler amused by a comic book in my lap. Before I was able to read, my brother (five years my senior) read to me. As I started reading, my parents would buy me many of the inexpensive Little Golden Books. My mother would regularly take me when I was seven or eight to the community library and then a few years later to cultural institutions and theaters in New York City. The book shelves in our house had books from my father's college years, current popular novels (some steamy and risqué which I discovered as I approached puberty), *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, and business self-help books. We had subscriptions to *Time Magazine* and *Reader's Digest* as well as the local newspaper. Surprisingly, though, given my parents' youthful politics and continuing progressive leanings, I remember no political and few historical books. This may have been part of a McCarthy era cleansing of our shelves. When *Mad Magazine* began publishing in 1952, however, it provided me a particularly formative critical window on the world, and I remained a loyal reader well into junior high school.



*Figure 2.1. A reluctant Bar Mitzvah Boy.*  
Photo courtesy of Charles Bazerman.

## Early School Literacy

My memories of writing in the earliest grades (in Wisdom Lane Elementary School for Kindergarten through Grade 3, 1950-1954) are mostly sporadic and punitive, though I did enjoy the activity, sociality, and achievement in the early grades. In second grade I had problems making well shaped cursive letters and my mother was called in to a teacher conference to set up extra homework exercises for me in forming letters. In addition to the torture of the endless classroom workbook pages tracing Palmer method shapes, every night I was supposed to make endless circles and loops. I also was constantly enjoined to be guided by the ruled paper lines. Talkative and otherwise naughty in class, I had to write endless pages of “I will not talk in class.” I remember a cramped hand, while building endurance to pain. The task did keep me busy and out of mischief for the time it took me to complete, but did not actually improve my behavior or automatization of handwriting that my teacher may have hoped for—though it primed me for Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony” and Bart Simpson’s weekly penance on the chalkboard. These handwriting exercises left me with mild aversiveness and a “hell with you” attitude toward handwriting neatness—until I had positive incentives to make my writing intelligible to others.

My earliest report cards noted that I was talkative and highly verbal, but not always easily understood, as my words seemed to fall over each other. Throughout life, in fact, I have had impulses to talk a lot and I have often been hard to understand. I frequently called out in class and interrupted others. As an adolescent I wondered why ordinary talk of people around me seemed so wandering and unfocused. As I started to read play scripts, I wondered why conversations couldn’t be as efficient and pointed; dialog tightness became an ideal that I consciously followed. Consequently, I came to see myself as more a writer than a speaker, as more bookish than gregarious, and expecting less from spoken interaction, which I found problematic and frequently misunderstood. As I became older, I became more strategic and reflective in speaking with others, learning to keep remarks simple, reaching out to what I imagined was familiar to my interlocutors, not talking more than necessary, and using indirection and questioning to build areas of common understanding. As I monitored my talk more carefully, I became more selective in what I said, and I came to talk more slowly with long pauses, staging step-wise sequences of statements. This pattern, however, means that I frequently do not get to complete my thoughts and need to return the discussion to prior moments to make my previously composed point.

Several of my early report cards also noted that I acted impulsively, in frustration or anger. Similarly, early report cards indicated I did not always take directions from others. These seemed to be harbingers of knowing my own mind and feeling impelled to follow my own head, even if it did not agree with others’ views. I needed to be convinced of the others’ rationale if I were to follow them. While this reliance on my own view has continued, I have learned to respect the views of others, and look for the value in perspectives that others are offering.

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT		SOCIAL SUBJECTS		Report Teacher		Period Rating		1		2		3		4	
Language Arts		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Reading Levels		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Reading Readiness		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Primer		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
First Reader		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Second Reader		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Third Reader		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Higher Levels		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Check student's reading and do tests!		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Understands what is read to him		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Understands what he reads		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Tends well to others		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Spelling		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Writing		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Expresses ideas well		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Contributes in discussion		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Displays creative ability		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Arithmetic		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Has sound number concepts		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Knows arithmetic facts		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Social Studies		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Science		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Is courteous		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Is considerate of others		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Respects group decisions		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Shows self control		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Respects rights and property of others		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Obeys safety rules		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
WORK HABITS		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Works and plays harmoniously		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Works well alone		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Completes work		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Follows directions		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Observes good health habits		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	
Displays good physical coordination		Spelling		Math		Science		History		Geography		Physical Education		Art	

  

WORLD HABITS		ATTENDANCE	
Blue line written work		Days Present	
Clipboard well in class		Days Absent	
How students in kindergarten did themselves		Days Tardy	
Books carefully maintained in classroom			
How business requests met here			
Take care of school property			

  

SOCIAL ATTITUDE		ATTENDANCE	
Is courteous		Days Present	
Respects the rights of others		Days Absent	

  

HEALTH HABITS		ATTENDANCE	
Does not breathe on wall		Days Present	
Blue good posture		Days Absent	
Creates for one and other's safety		Days Tardy	

  

PHYSICAL TRAINING		ATTENDANCE	
Blue good posture		Days Present	
Creates for one and other's safety		Days Absent	

  

INDUSTRIAL ARTS		ATTENDANCE	
Days Present		Days Present	
Days Absent		Days Absent	
Days Tardy		Days Tardy	

Figure 2.2. Second and sixth grade report cards identifying me as “difficult to understand,” lacking self-control, and poorly behaved. Photo courtesy of Charles Bazerman.

The first time I remember having fun with writing was in fourth grade (in Sawmill River Elementary School, for grades 4-6, 1954-1957). Much of the writing was reporting dull information from dull textbooks. While this seemed a stultifying task (I still can visualize pages from the ancient history text that even then seemed itself ancient), it planted the seeds of intertextual skills, being able to report with accuracy on what I had read, and then to recall it. As for many academically oriented students, these practices continued to ramify in assignments throughout school, and became a basis for my own inquiries. Ultimately it can be seen as a source of my later studies of intertextuality in academic and professional writing—but more of that later.

The highlight of writing in fourth grade was the weekly spelling exercises. Each week we had to incorporate each of the words of our spelling list into a sentence. To escape the tedium, I set myself the challenge of using as many of the words in a single sentence as I could. This decreased the physical task of handwriting, but even more it inspired my problem-solving and competitive spirit. My syntactic cleverness and meaning complexity grew. I expanded from two or three vocabulary words in a sentence, to incorporating the whole week’s list into a single sentence by the end of the year. Such early syntactic play helped give me the means to form complex relations among ideas. Only later in my twenties did I work on simplifying my writing, to make the meanings more transparent to readers.

My fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Glickstein, provided us a much wider array of creative writing activities mixed in with the reports and spelling lists. I do not remember her class in detail, but I do remember it felt more fun and welcoming, and a place I did not have to struggle against or find tolerable niches of satisfaction. I have a vague memory of writing stories and poems in her class. I was also the class librarian. In sixth grade I again found myself contending with work I found tedious



and unchallenging (My report card for this year shows some B's and C's for effort and behavior, while all my academic grades were A). I often finished early and was allowed to read extensively and visit the small school library, where I read through the entire Landmarks book series with its triumphalist, individualist ideology that gave inspiring stories of the great adventurers who made America.

## Learning I had a Light to Follow, but with Doubts

By this time, I started to be aware and proud of being one of the top students, and I hung out with friends, all male, who were also higher achieving students. Since none of us were athletic or engaged in other typically “manly” activities, we felt separate from highly masculinized cultures, though no doubt we benefited from our teachers treating us as potential professionals. At sixth grade graduation I was recognized as the top all-around student. During the ceremony, however, as the awards for excellence in various subjects were being given, I must have been becoming visibly upset, as I remember my father from the audience (where he had the program with all the awardees listed) giving me a hand sign that all would be ok. So by this time I must have had an expectation of success with some self-confidence, but still looking for external validation of my internal self-evaluation.

In my life, as I continued to go further down my idiosyncratic path driven by my perceptions of what was right, my choices were not always accepted, recognized, or rewarded by those around me. I began to doubt my vision, but I had no choice but to follow my lights. Often enough I left traditional paths of success as I moved through majors in college, and then heterodox positions in literary studies, ultimately to leave the field for teaching literacy and writing. Then I began advocating research in this practice field, and pursuing sociological inquiry when what research that existed was linguistic and cognitive. At each point in my life I looked hard for corroborating evidence that I was not deluded or crazy, and I sought the support of those who might appreciate the directions I was taking. Sometimes that corroboration came from a very far distance, and sometimes I was deeply disappointed by those whom I hoped for more from. But these experiences only hardened me to keep following my lights, not be too bothered by those who didn't get me, but to cherish those who did. This tension between confidence and doubt also drove me to become knowledgeable about any theory and findings from any discipline I thought might bear on issues, to make my arguments as well reasoned as I could, and to be obsessive in gathering relevant evidence. I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing anything potentially relevant and I wanted to show others what I saw. These were good dispositions for a writer and scholar to develop, so as to share one's truth and vision with force, clarity, and evidence. Only later in my career, however, when my work started gaining recognition did this anxiety begin to fade, as I saw others were finding sense in the paths I was taking. But I still feel I must keep explaining myself. I am afraid even this book won't be the end of it.