



The Truth about High School English

MILKA MUSTENIKOVA MOSLEY
*Sequoyah High School
Canton, Georgia*

When I was contacted about writing an essay concerning college-level writing, I was excited. I love to write, but rarely do I make time for professional reflection. I am usually too busy planning and reading my students' papers. Since I am familiar with both worlds, high school and college, I saw this essay as an opportunity to express my observations about student writing. I have been teaching high school English for fifteen years and college composition since 1998 (part time). I do believe I have an idea of what is going on in both worlds, and I would like to share my experiences regarding student writing at both the high school and college level.

In general, I would call high school writing *formulaic*. We have too many students and too little time for grading, so we often allow students to follow a formula to produce a product. This strategy helps both students and teachers: students learn how to get to the point quickly and organize their ideas logically, and teachers are able to grade a large number of papers more efficiently. Otherwise, if we just assign a topic without any type of guidance to our inexperienced writers, we will receive poorly written papers that will be time-consuming to grade. For example, whenever I assign an essay, my students and I write one together *orally* first. I explain the assignment and with their help write a working outline on the board. I then discuss with them the specifics necessary for the completion of this essay. This strategy helps me provide more writing opportunities to my beginning

writers and helps them acquire and use their skills to write papers not only for my class but for their other classes also.

In contrast, I believe college-level writing should focus more on the student's ideas and exhibit his or her individuality. College-level writing differs from a piece of high school writing because of its greater level of sophistication, as well as a certain degree of eloquence and the use of rich vocabulary. I know this is not evident and rarely accomplished in lower-level college classes, but I believe that students in upper-level classes should be *expected* to write intelligent papers because of their exposure to diverse and rich academic materials, their age (especially the aspect of independence my high school students dream of), and their rich cultural environment. All of these will contribute to the originality and the uniqueness of a piece of college-level writing.

High school-level writing is usually very predictable. High school students typically write mainly to conform. They want to know exactly how many words they need to write, when the assignment is due, and whether or not they are allowed to say "I" in their piece. Occasionally, they will look up some synonyms and try to incorporate new vocabulary into their essays, but oftentimes these words do not work well within the context of their essays. This is due to their lack of reading and writing experience, to their youthfulness and age, and to already established routines. All they have done since kindergarten has been conforming to the requirements set before them by their educators. It sounds harsh, but, for their age, the application of certain rules and regulations protect and guide young students as they begin to develop into writers and thinkers.

However, in order to prepare students for careers in today's competitive world, college students are required to produce very specialized writing tasks in their classes such as "lab reports, case studies, research papers, proposals, literature reviews, memos, arguments, interpretations, historical narratives, impact statements, and essay questions based on different sources of information and specific professional models" (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 4). Many college professors and especially English instructors seem frustrated by the poor quality of work students produce in their classes, and they often wonder whether high

school English teachers are aware of their students' incompetence in writing and, if they are, what they are doing to prepare young adults for college.

My response to this concern is yes, high school English teachers are somewhat familiar with college-level writing expectations. After all, teachers are college graduates, and we have taken all kinds of courses in different subject areas during our college careers. However, once a teacher becomes a member of the real high school world of teaching, everything changes. All the theories and practical applications that college English instructors swear by often go out of the window because college theory and high school practice differ greatly. I am reminded of this discrepancy whenever I work with a student teacher. From my experience as a classroom supervisor, I find that most of the time student teachers are highly enthusiastic and, on the basis of what they studied in college, they are oftentimes convinced that what we do in high school is outdated and inefficient. However, once they start working within the prescribed curriculum that our school systems have established, they realize that there is more to teaching high school English than just fun drama improvisations and writing creative poetry.

Just like the students, high school English teachers have to conform to and cover the curriculum approved by our school boards because everything we do is closely monitored by standardized testing. If our school receives poor reports on standardized tests, we are labeled as a nonstandard school and put on probation, which would greatly complicate the running of our normal school activities because time would need to be allotted for many additional administrative procedures and meetings, along with lots of paperwork, to rectify the situation. We often have to suspend our curriculum instruction to prepare our students for all types of schoolwide standardized testing such as the End of Course Test, Georgia High School Graduation Test, Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT), Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), and the Prewriting and Writing Assessment Tests. All of these disruptions take away from class time, which we could otherwise use for teaching writing. Besides testing, we also have to deal with daily interruptions such as assemblies and pep rallies and sometimes even discipline problems. Also, since every

student has an English class, students are taken out of our English classes for any schoolwide activity such as picture day for the school yearbook.

Nevertheless, as a group we English teachers usually take everything in stride. We adjust our lesson plans and go about our work. Preparing our students for standardized tests does not mean that we strictly teach to the tests. On the contrary, we provide our students with various learning activities to prepare them for college. However, it is important for college educators to understand that our English classes are not composition classes, but are *surveys of literature classes*, mainly surveys of different genres of literature, but also surveys of World Literature, American Literature, and British Literature. We also cover study skills, grammar, and vocabulary. Through the study of literature, high school English classes provide students with a window to the world, so they can understand and appreciate the universal aspects of the human experience. The various readings acquaint students with different cultures from ancient civilizations through modern times and enrich student awareness of the world so they can build on the life experience, wisdom, and knowledge of others. This is especially important in today's multicultural, Internet-dependent, and CNN-connected world.

This does not mean that all we do in high school is read and discuss literary work. In my case, for example, we also follow the county's *Language Arts Curriculum Guide*, but we have some freedom in deciding how to teach the items listed in our program of study. Much depends on what is available at our particular school: textbooks, supplementary materials, videos, audiotapes, and computer labs. When it comes to writing, we do provide students with many writing assignments as well as various creative projects so they can learn to express their knowledge to their peers. For example, I am fortunate to teach Honors English 2. I have small classes, intelligent students, and parents with great expectations. I do my best to provide my students with practice for the PSAT and the Practice Writing Assessment test because these scores basically predict how well students will do on their SAT and Georgia High School Graduation Test. Plus, from the Practice Writing Assessment scores, the Advanced Placement (AP) World History teacher gets a sense of what our students need to

work on in order to do well on the AP World History exam. Usually, the same students who take Honors English 2 also take AP World History.

Besides these classroom activities, I work closely to cover the material listed in our program of study. For example, last semester I covered two chapters of grammar, provided my students with a few vocabulary practices, and exposed them to eight classic pieces of literature: *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Julius Caesar*, *Oedipus Rex*, and excerpts from *Gilgamesh*, *The Once and Future King*, Hamilton's *Mythology*, and the *Iliad*. The county *Language Arts Curriculum Guide* listed more titles than these, but this was what I was able to cover with my students. Along with the readings, the students completed many different types of projects such as PowerPoint presentations, video enactments, live newscasts, and writing activities such as narratives, creative writings, journals, essay/essay questions, and research/summaries. They also took several quizzes and tests and completed two impromptu argumentative essays. Teachers of different subject matter in the AP department work closely because we teach the same students, and these reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities will prepare our students for their AP language and AP literature classes taught in their junior and senior years. They also provide writing skills for other subject matter AP exams such as biology and history. Our honors and AP students usually perform very well on the AP exams, and many of them earn college credits, which allows them to skip basic-level college English classes: this means that lower-level college instructors do not have the chance to work with good students who are good writers.

Most of the students who take freshmen college composition classes are our college preparatory students whose program of study differs greatly from our honors and AP curriculum. The reason for this is because the college preparatory classes are large (usually over thirty students per classroom) and the learning ability level varies to accommodate all learners. Since the college preparation-level curriculum is not as dynamic, students are not exposed to as wide a variety of readings, writings, and creative project assignments. When it comes to the students in the college preparation program, I have noticed a trend: a lack of confi-

dence in their writing abilities. Many are the times when the college preparatory students in my Advanced Composition class (an academic elective) come to me and say, “I am good at storytelling, but I am not good in grammar.” I hear similar statements in my English 1101 class at the university. This is because most of the students’ formal papers, which carry the most weight toward their final grade, are evaluated with the *infamous* grading scale (points are taken off for every little mistake), and the low grades cause them to doubt their writing abilities. I believe giving students failing grades on formal papers without a chance for revision is an ineffective practice. Just like anyone else, failure negatively influences the fragile psyche of the high school student and the first-year college student. I often wonder if the grading scale is a real gauge of students’ competence in writing! Maybe we need to rethink and modify the point system to match the quality of writing and the sophistication of ideas.

When it comes to the college preparatory writing assignments, it is important to take into account the large class size. Oftentimes, teachers avoid assigning much writing because they have very little time to grade it. Depending on the number of students, the load can often reach around 150 papers per writing assignment. We all know that the class size will not decrease, but the writing has to increase because of the new SAT writing requirements. Maybe Laura Vanderkam’s solution deserves some attention: “Pay to make grading fly. Students learn grammar, mechanics, and grace when teachers demand—and correct—three or more drafts of each paper. NCLB [No Child Left Behind] can cool teachers’ ‘grading hell’ by giving grants to outsource grading—not to India, but to freelance writers or grad students looking for cash” (2). I do not think this will ever happen, but for some reason college preparatory teachers do not realize the fact that everything does not have to be graded with the grading scale. Some of the pieces can be shared orally (for some reason, teachers forget the *speaking* aspect of teaching English) or graded for completion or graded for certain skills because it is better for students to have many writing opportunities that will help them find their voice and gain confidence in their writing abilities. Plus, the extra grades will help students’ overall grades. Nevertheless, without a chance

for revision and improvement of formal papers, extra writing opportunities will not help our young writers. For example, Amy Horacek, a student of mine, stated:

“I remember a D on a junior research paper. . . . I went to college. . . . I ran into the same high school approach. Write the paper. Hand in the paper. Receive the grade and the feedback with no instruction in writing. I withdrew with the first attempt because I made a D on the paper. I see the teaching approach changing. For the class I took three years ago . . . The professor gave feedback on each section and conferenced with each student. In the current class, I see the same workshop approach with more conferencing than I’ve ever witnessed in any English class.”

My student feedback confirms my belief that writing and revising is what will help students become competent writers. After all, using the grading scale on all student writing and doing all that math is time consuming, especially for us, English teachers, who are *allergic* to math.

From my personal experience, I have realized that when I provide my students with extra help before I collect the final drafts, I have more enjoyable papers to read. I usually hand out an essay checklist so they can personally eliminate from their papers all that I mark with the dreaded *red or green* pen. I provide them with peer editing sessions, consultations, and, of course, opportunities for revision. I believe that only through revision can students learn from their mistakes and avoid repeating them again. We just have to make sure that we talk about writing to students with *fervor* and model and share our own pieces so they can become excited and connect with us as fellow writers. I also believe that we must, if necessary, extend the due date or take a late paper because *a missed writing assignment is a wasted opportunity*. Once students see the teacher as a fellow learner, they care more about their work and try harder.

On the other hand, it is important to notice that most high school English departments have their own departmental procedures, which protect and justify their actions when it comes to explaining graded papers to students’ parents, and often are not up to date with the latest in teaching writing because many of them lack the exposure to English graduate classes and univer-

sity-held workshops. I personally believe that each teacher should attend some of the workshops held by the National Writing Project because this is the place where regular teachers, assisted by university experts, teach regular teachers. I believe my involvement with the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project for three separate institutions has not only given me confidence in what I am doing professionally but has enriched my teaching repertoire by allowing me to share lesson plans and experiences with my colleagues. It also provided me with writing opportunities that helped me gain confidence in my own writing. This is the reason why I believe that teachers need to incorporate some of their graduate-level English work or experiences into their classes. It is true, many of my colleagues do have graduate degrees, but many are not in English. Their graduate degrees are in health, administration, or counseling. Teachers often try to complete graduate programs that are convenient and inexpensive (and fit into their busy schedules) in order to receive a pay raise. For example, I was fortunate to receive my masters in rhetoric and composition and was able to experience and then apply *the true essence of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the classroom*. The most convenient and affordable option for my specialist degree, however, was the administrative program. For this reason, we need workshops conducted by college English instructors in order to learn what we are required to do to prepare our students for college. Most high school teachers think that a grammatically correct piece is what is needed for college. I believe they have to be reminded to consider the sophistication of ideas as well.

Fortunately, besides teaching high school English, I am a part-time college instructor at the local university, and I have been able to make a few observations about the attitudes of both groups towards writing and schoolwork in general. I have noticed that the first couple of papers by freshmen college students lack originality and are poorly written. However, first-year college writers show great interest in writing and excel at a much faster pace than high school writers do. All of a sudden upon entering college, students become serious and responsible and try hard to keep the scholarships they have obtained, justify the school expenses to their parents with good grades, or hold two jobs to pay for their college classes personally. I often hear statements such

as “I have to keep HOPE” (a scholarship provided by the Georgia lottery) or “My parents are paying for my education” or “I am working two jobs to pay for my college tuition.” I believe that maturity is an important aspect when it comes to students and their attitude towards schoolwork. This is an issue that is not present at the high school level, and that is why high school students need more writing opportunities to improve their writing skills.

One of the most exciting aspects of teaching a first-year college composition class in comparison with high school English is the diversity that I encounter in the college classroom. It is enjoyable to hear not only different gender perspectives on an issue, but also different age and even cultural perspectives. When it comes to writing, even though I provide instruction and all types of handouts to help students eliminate their grammatical errors, my first-year college students do poorly on the first couple of formal papers. The reason for this is, of course, not having enough writing practice at the high school level and not being familiar with the grammatical jargon. I see this during individual consultations and during peer editing workshops, which my students and I find very productive. For example, in her reflection about one of the college writing classes I taught, Francis Garcia said, “I like the fact that you explain everything in detail, how to write an essay and what to do in order to achieve the best score . . . I also like the fact when you return our essays you talk to us individually telling us what we need to do next and give us an opportunity to make a better grade on it by rewriting it.” I have noticed that after the second paper and two consultations, students’ papers dramatically improve because they are mature enough and care about learning. I am always pleased when they make comments in their reflections such as, “The interest that I have developed in writing is almost a surprise . . . This class has encouraged me to pursue many dreams that once I thought would be impossible” (Olson). It is wonderful teaching and discussing writing with a *willing* audience! When it comes to high school, this process is much slower. I guess that is why we have year-long courses.

One concern that I have about the college first-year English classroom is the English as a Second Language (ESL) writers. Their learning process takes much longer. Besides the problems

they encounter with language and grammar, oftentimes they are not familiar with the requirements of formal essay writing and, most of all, they have hardly any knowledge of the worst offense in writing: plagiarism. It was just last semester when, during our consultation on her argumentative essay, one of my ESL students told me that she does have a thesis statement and that it is in the conclusion because it makes a better emphasis there! Another serious problem is the poor use of the Modern Language Association style of documentation and wide application of patchwriting. ESL students often simply cut and paste words and phrases from the text and occasionally change tense or include a synonym. This is a cultural issue, and educators have to be patient and understanding. That is why I often allow my ESL students to revise their papers two or three times, and still I do not think they are ready for the next class. Even though I am a non-native English speaker (I was born and raised in Macedonia) and am aware of their personal situation, still I cannot help them in one semester. I do believe they should take more remedial courses before they sign up for a regular first-year class.

In order to understand our separate worlds, high school and college, I propose that we establish a line of communication between high school English teachers and first-year college composition instructors. College instructors have to become aware of our reality and take into consideration all the responsibilities we high school teachers have in our daily English classes and provide us with advice and practical workshops so we can help our students become better prepared for college-level classes. Some may say the professional magazines offer everything teachers need. However, even though we receive the *English Journal* and other journals, unless we are working on a graduate class, we rarely have the time to read about the latest in theory and practice when it comes to teaching writing. However, if we had practical workshops where both sides could share student writing samples and teaching experiences during our staff development days, we would gain much more than listening to a motivational speaker or a sales person discussing teaching strategies, just to sell his or her textbook. I believe we need *teamwork* where we can visit each other's territory and immerse ourselves into specific teaching/learning situations in order to help both high school and college-level writers.

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