



*Whose Paper Is This, Anyway?
Why Most Students Don't
Embrace the Writing They Do
for Their Writing Classes*

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Members—And the Price We All Pay*

When student essays are turned in to me, often my name is written larger on the cover page than the student's. Sometimes my name is placed in such a way that it looks like I myself wrote the paper. When I request that students provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the return of assignments submitted at or near the end of a semester, very few students actually provide them—although I always get a slew of follow-up e-mails about grades. When I have left graded assignments in boxes visibly marked with my name and course in an easily accessible space—the mailbox room, the faculty secretary's office—most assignments remain unclaimed, growing dust mites long into the next term. Whatever is in the box, however hard the students worked, few want it back.

Also, assignments regularly show up in my mailbox long after the original due date has passed, when any feedback I can provide will probably be of little use to the student. At other times, usually between the end of classes and the final examination period, a late assignment (or many late assignments from an excessively absent or negligent student) appears in my mailbox. Does the student believe that *writing* the assignment was the only thing he or she needed to do? What about evaluation? Reflec-

tion? Feedback? After all the work of the semester, why do these suddenly become irrelevant?

And the winner for the most disheartening experience is returning a set of papers that I have corrected and seeing one (or two or three) glibly tossed into the garbage when I leave the classroom at the end of the period. I might have spent ten, fifteen, twenty minutes reading that essay, asking questions of the writer, marking sentence errors, offering suggestions on additional development, and this is what happens. Perhaps the student scanned the paper quickly, saw the grade, liked or disliked it, and discarded the paper accordingly. Perhaps he or she read over the comments and committed them to memory. Or perhaps, all they wanted to do more than anything was to get that paper out of their life.

How many other papers meet the same fate? How many ride unread in tattered folders until they are hurled into end-of-the-semester dumpsters? Do the students not realize that this might be a project they will want to do more work on later? Do they think there is nothing in this paper they can't learn from?

When college writing assignments, perhaps struggled over for hours or days, can simply be tossed into the trash, what did this writing ever mean to the student, in their class, in their mind, in their life?

Who are these students writing this paper for? Why are they writing these assignments? Where do they, as writers, fit into the writing?

My answer is that, as a group, the students who fill my college writing classes don't care enough or don't care enough in the right way about the work they are doing. Obviously, this is the opposite of what is supposed to be happening in a college writing course, and it is very different than my own personal perspective and very different as well from my attitude in college about the writing I did for my classes.

Who Am I?

I went to college because I was a writer. I started writing what my family called "little stories" when I was eight. A writing teacher

I once had called me a born storyteller. I spent a good amount of time in high school writing novels full of adolescent angst that were supposed to be serious but in retrospect were hilarious. I spent my post-high school years writing and marketing short stories of every stripe.

When I enrolled in college after being out of high school for several years, I went to Parkland College, a community college in Champaign, Illinois, initially with journalism dreams dancing in my head. The first thing I did after registering for courses was to stop by the student newspaper office. Within weeks, my byline was all over the newspaper, and I was read weekly by friend and foe. I grew as a person and as a writer when teachers and fellow students would speak to me about an article I had written, and I grew with pride and a sense of accomplishment as I filled one bulging scrapbook after another with clips. After moving to Boston to complete my undergraduate degree, I spent my junior and senior years writing for a new student paper, and continued to do so briefly as a graduate student.

Since completing college, I have worked for “real” newspapers, had fiction and nonfiction published, published two books, and edited two literary magazines. I have tinkered with song and film writing, and I wrote a play that was produced in Boston. And there is more, much more writing that I wish and intend to do, sandwiched in between my day job. So I am speaking here as a writer.

Between writing articles for the newspaper, I had many writing assignments to do in my classes. I always poured myself into them, often exceeding expectations (and length requirements). While writing, in my mind, I would picture my professors reading my work, imagining their surprise, their shock, their delight at my observations, my analyses, my language. In the end, however, I dug into my writing with energy and gusto because I loved writing, and I loved the work that I produced. I took pride in the work, and I earned the good grades I received.

During the second semester of my first year, after having fallen in love with college and the classroom, I decided to pursue a career teaching college writing instead of journalism. My story isn't unusual. Those of us who love reading and writing go into

teaching writing to share our love and joy of writing, and to share our knowledge of a valuable skill.

The other half of my story, sadly, isn't unusual either. After six years of college teacher preparation, I found myself readily and immediately hired at multiple campuses as an adjunct, and I have stayed there. I wanted to teach college writing, and boy have I been able to do that. I wanted a career as a teacher, and I guess I've had one.

As a career adjunct, I have been praised by my supervisors, had outstanding course evaluations and glowing classroom observations, and I have worked steadily every semester, usually being offered more work than I can accept. During searches for full-time faculty positions, I, like other adjuncts, have been called in for token interviews. Ultimately, most of us are passed over for the sparkling stranger from Shangri-la, Antarctica, Transylvania. Afterwards, I am handed my adjunct assignments, patted on the head, and sent off to work.

I have finally realized that it doesn't, and will probably never, matter what I do, how well, or for how long. I will never be awarded the lofty full-time, tenure track job. I will never be allowed to cross the great divide. Personally, I am much happier since I accepted this. But still the resentment grinds when I listen to administrators in their satin robes tell graduating students that hard work will always pay off. That's when I remember the self-deluded promises and/or deliberate dishonesties of my own faculty mentors in graduate school on how good teachers get jobs.

This is the perspective I am writing from. My observations are based on my experiences as an adjunct teacher in a multitude of different school situations. For the most part, I have worked in the Massachusetts community college system, and working at a community college was what I wanted to do because of my own initial college experience. Each community college is a universe unto itself, with different student demographics and different student skills. I have also worked at several universities, both public and private, and a couple of places that were so hideous, they don't even deserve to be called colleges.

The Student Paper Trail

After fifteen years of teaching developmental writing and first-year composition, I have come to believe that most students don't especially care about the work they do for their college writing courses. This makes a mockery of the idealism teachers bring with them into college classrooms, as well as making a farce of what a college writing course is supposed to be.

College writing courses are supposed to give students experience in writing. In doing so, they should become familiar with the various stages one has to go through to write, the generalized process that we all experience, as well as learning and understanding more about their own working habits and the working mechanisms of their own minds. In the process, we teach them how to write different kinds of projects—the descriptive, the expository, the narrative, the argument-persuasive, the analysis, the dreaded research paper. All of this to strengthen their sentence skills, their composition skills, their thinking skills—which will help them in their other coursework and in the real world.

Of course, some skill level may improve if students simply do what is asked of them, over and over, semester after semester, year after year. But how much more improvement would there be if as many students as possible could be more involved in their own process as much as possible, if there was a real investment in the work for as many students as possible, true claim of and true pride in the product produced? Like the person cramming for an exam, the necessary material may be in the person's head when going into the exam. But when the bluebook is closed and the exam is finished, what happens? All that was crammed for furiously flies away, forgotten. A student writing a paper with minimal interest or ownership may experience the composition equivalent of an exam cram.

I think there are many factors that come together to alienate students from the work they do in all their college classes, especially the undergraduate core curriculum courses. That alienation is present in the college writing class, but because of the kind of skill and experience writing is, that alienation is more problematic. Some of the causes of this distance come from the students

themselves, some from the teachers, some from the institutions, and some from our larger real-world society.

Student Attitudes about Writing and Writers

Students come into writing classes with some pretty deeply ingrained attitudes about writers and writing. Students who are least likely to embrace the work they do, and who are consequently getting less out of the writing class experience, are students who are likely going to dislike writing, fear it, or not understand it. These students may have had minimal writing experiences in their own lives and have had unpleasant, often error-oriented writing instruction through elementary and secondary school.

Writing is personal, emotional, visceral. To dig into one's own mind and pull up memories, values, experiences, and ideas and put them out there is a very brave and sometimes frightening act, even for experienced writers. Inexperienced and unconfident writers may be more sensitive to this than experienced or exhibitionistic writers because their sense of vulnerability, of embarrassment, of fear of failure or rejection may be much higher. No student comes in with a failing grade from another course and says, "I got an F on *my* math," or "I got an F on *my* history." The distance between those fields of study and the work done is obvious. But they do say, "I got an F on *my* paper, on *my* writing." The relationship between this work and the worker is much more intertwined. It is, therefore, natural that they will put some emotional distance between themselves and the work they do, doing work they may emotionally disown.

Students with negative attitudes or ideas about their own writing are probably going to be much more obsessed with the cultural stereotypes of the writer as a *nerd* or a *dweeb*. Only the writer of the trashiest romance novels is ever deemed *hot* by the popular culture. Students in late or early postadolescence may resent or fear such labels being attached to them by their peers, particularly if they do not enjoy writing enough to risk it. Those of us who love writing and reading realize, sooner or later, that we are complex individuals with a variety of interests and are

not especially bothered by stigmatizing and minimizing labels such as *nerd*.

Another phenomenon that affects student attitudes about and ability in writing is the image-heavy/text-light world most of our students have come of age in. Many have read less and written less than generations before them, and therefore have lower entry-level skills at every stage in their education. Many have been weaned on the revolting five-paragraph essay in high school.

When they get to college and are asked to write sustained discourse on a variety of issues, many of their models of serious discourse have been the shallow snippets on the evening network news passed off as “in-depth information you need to know” and the sensationalistic dysfunction of talk and reality shows—noise without analysis. Writing is a difficult process, as generation and revision pirouette around the tension between writer agenda and audience awareness. And if there are any grammar problems, known or unknown, forget it. Consequently, when students come into college writing courses, all of these beliefs and experiences may come between them and the writing that we ask them to do.

Finally, for students who dislike or fear writing, there may be a grudging respect for the successful writer, whether hot or nerd, a fellow student or a successful professional, because they believe that such a person has *talent*. If someone comes into writing class thinking writing is a talent they do not have, a cloud hangs above everything we ask them to do. They think their work is of little value because they aren't talented, or they may think that being asked to write is a waste of time. Our job, of course, is to show them that writing is a skill, a craft that can be acquired, developed, and perfected by anyone. We can do that by acknowledging that some people will develop the craft faster than others, and some will have a greater interest and aptitude in it than others. But nevertheless, the idea that writing is a skill that everyone can develop and improve upon may take more time to sink in than the relatively few weeks students spend in first-year composition courses, in the same way that long-standing writing problems take more than a few semesters to be permanently eradicated.

Student Baggage

And if this wasn't enough . . .

Other forces put upon students, more directly related to their college experience, lead to a greater distance between them and the work they do for their college writing courses. One of them is our cultural attitude about going to college.

Today's economic market is flooded with those special savings programs for parents who want to be sure their three-year-old will be able to attend college in fifteen years. The pressure on parents to send their children to college has probably never been greater, ironically at a time when tuition has never been higher and government support and financial aid have become much tighter. Before the social movements of the 1960s opened the doors to many previously disenfranchised students, most people who went to college were the well-to-do and/or those with high grade point averages. And back in the day, as my students say, reasonable employment could be obtained without a college degree. Economic and social shifts have changed the face of colleges, making college education an economic necessity. Declining population trends have made many of the schools, which were founded to accommodate the baby boomers, desperate for their survival (though that trend is reversing somewhat as the baby boom echo hits college age).

Most of today's high school graduates are simply expected to go to college. Others who might wish to take some time off or do something else are pressured or forced to go by parents legitimately concerned about their children's future or, grotesquely, about how this looks to friends and neighbors. Other people proudly become the first generation to attend college, seeing the entire experience as the ticket to the good life, an unrealistic expectation fostered by ignorance about the kinds of jobs and careers the basic college degree can initially lead to. The marketing techniques colleges use—promises of bright futures and successful lives, all of which will occur *after* graduation—are not only misleading, they negate the value of the college experience as it occurs.

In addition, there are often personal or cultural judgments made about the intellectual capacity of the person who does not go to college. Getting into college is seen as a marker of intelligence, of potential, of not being a dummy.

Great Cultural Irony #1

Students don't want to be identified as nerds, dweebs, or book-worms, but at the same time, they don't want to be seen as dumb. Being a successful college student suggests the former; not going to college at all suggests the latter. So those who go to college want to be in the middle of these two points, which means they go to college, they want to be considered smart, but they are careful not to put too much effort into their work so they won't be labeled nerds.

Consequently, college becomes a necessary evil, something students have to get through in order to get to the other side where all the glory is. The work that students do then becomes a means to an end, something not of intrinsic value unto itself but for what it leads to. Students take classes in order to get a good grade, to get a degree, to get a job or a career. In classes with subjective measurements of achievement, as the grading of student writing often is, the significance of the work becomes even more unclear because it cannot be quantified in an easy to understand formula, as a math test can be.

Attitudes about going to college and the work done in college often mirror our cultural attitudes about work in general. Students go to school to pursue careers, but the conventional cultural message is, sadly, that work is something undesirable to do. It is something we have to do to survive, or to afford things, but something so disagreeable and unpleasant, we yawn our way through or escape from it every chance we get. Those messages are embodied in much of the advertising that students have been saturated with since they first opened their eyes, whether it's advertising for beer, travel agencies, or what's new on Cinemax.

The parallels are frightening. Class work, unpleasant but necessary, equals grade, equals degree, equals job. In the best of

all possible student fantasy worlds, that means the best grade, the best degree, and the best job for the least amount of work. Then, job equals work (albeit often undesirable), equals paycheck, equals paying the electric bill and buying the new car and the \$150 concert tickets. The best situation to be in is to do the least amount of work for the most amount of money.

In both cases, it seems that the experience gained or the service performed is not seen as valuable per se, but only for what the return is. When we ask students who already have issues with writing to write, we ask them to jump through hoops to get grades in the grade book, which leads to the *final grade* at the end of the term. The writing they do is something that they are not going to necessarily embrace with open arms. They will do it because they have to, not because they want to. This attitude puts a distance between the writer and his or her work. Merely doing what they are told to do without any innate or internal interest in the work is going to prohibit or seriously compromise the kind of learning and growth that we want to encourage.

Cultural Irony #2

Students go through college with hostile attitudes about their college work because it is a means to an end in terms of getting a good job. After they get the job because of their college degree, their attitude about their work often continues to be negative.

Faculty Attitudes and Agendas

This is what I believe we see when our students file into our college writing classes on that happy first day. And what most of us do builds on the disenfranchisement of the students and their writing. It's not completely our fault, but I think we need to be aware of what's going on.

When students come into our classes with preexisting attitudes about writing and a mindset about the work they will do in college, they sit in writing classes with a fair amount of hostility toward the whole process, and often, initially, the teacher. In

theory, a bunch of strangers, who may remain for the most part strangers, are going to be led to literary achievement by another stranger. And how do we do that?

With contrived writing assignments that represent *our* interests and *our* values. Textbooks are marketed to us. We pick the texts we want, we choose the readings we like, but all that may mean very little or nothing to the students. Even worse, many composition teachers communicate, with or without words, what is and what is not the appropriate response the student should deliver. One English teacher I knew, for example, said she would not read papers that disagreed with her position on certain political issues, particularly abortion. In an environment like this, how can we expect our students to own the writing they do for our college writing classes?

“What do you want?” is a question I’m often asked. My answer is that I want them to take my assignment and make it their own and care about what they have to say. For some students, who have been trained to give teachers what they want, that may be very difficult, if not impossible.

Of course, our assignments are designed to make students *think* about an issue, and our goals may be lofty and valuable. Nevertheless, if students are put off by an assignment, or uninterested in it, many do all the deadly things that inhibit successful thinking, writing, and learning: procrastinate, bullshit, or both. Ultimately, they will not take pride in or ownership of the work produced, and if they take a hit in the grade book, it will put further distance between themselves and their writing.

If a student has written five pages of empty air on a serious topic, it may be because the student did not put the time or energy in. But it may also be that they just could not find a way into the assignment in order to claim it as their own. We might say they should have, in the same way a boss might say an employee should care about doing his or her work. Or we might remind them that they will have to do things they aren’t especially interested in or thrilled about in the working world. But what do we want our college writing classes to be? Places where the sheep bend mindlessly to the will of the shepherd, or places where students embrace writing in general, and their own in particular? If

what we return to the student is something they never cared about before, during, or after its creation, then what does it matter?

The alternative may be open-ended, write-what-you-want assignments. Those have a great deal of appeal to the self-motivated student, but those who already have issues with writing may find these assignments problematic. Such students, forced to think of and, by necessity, claim a topic, may procrastinate or blow the assignment off all together. Others may fill up pages with baloney passing off as discourse. Still others may resort to less scrupulous ways around it: inadvertent or deliberate plagiarism, or outright dishonesty—a bought paper. This is easier for our Internet-savvy students to do than ever before. We can issue moral platitudes against the student who plagiarizes until dehydration sets in, along with threats of course failure and college expulsion, threats that most likely ring hollow in a world where scoundrels, liars, and hypocrites of all stripes continue to rise to positions of prominence and hold on to them even after public scandal. But behind all the judgmental epithets of *cheater*, *liar*, *incompetent* is a student who clearly does not embrace the writing assignment, does not feel engaged in the work of writing, does not care about his or her own writing, does not feel capable of doing it.

And then there's us, the red pen people. Unfortunately, the teacher-student relationship is fundamentally adversarial in many ways. We have the right, the responsibility to judge, censor, criticize, and evaluate student writing in order to, theoretically, help them improve. The perspectives of teacher and student are very different. From our perspective, we are helping students improve. From their perspective, we appear to be judging and criticizing their work, often covering it with comments and observations and marking errors. When they get their homework back, it can look violated, a violation that can sting even more if the final grade is a big fat red F or D. Students, expecting a marked-up paper, may distance themselves before the assignment is returned—just because they aren't emotionally or intellectually prepared to deal with and understand this evaluation.

Teacher comments may be cryptic or obtuse, sometimes illegible, and are often read at a point in time too far removed

from the writing of the paper to be fully effective. A margin comment or question about a passage in the paper will not mean anything if the student can't remember what the passage was about. What percentage of first-year composition students are going to reread the entire paper to get a holistic sense of the essay in order to fully understand the comments?

The attitude students often take is that teachers *correct* their papers—an idea that implies both an already flawed product and one that only the teacher can fix. A flawed product, particularly something someone doesn't have a clue about how to fix, is not something they are going to embrace, and a marked up essay is going to be even more alienating.

Our own attitudes about students and student skills are not going to help this process, and if we have negative attitudes about them, we will communicate this to them one way or another, whether in our grading comments, our classroom attitude, or our pre- or postessay discussions. But we've all heard these comments, and we may have said them ourselves: laments at faculty meetings about the distressing levels of error in student writing, the bellyaching about student work in adjunct faculty ghettos. If we feel hostile about their work in any way, students are going to pick up on this one way or another.

I've seen the reverse of this as well, in assessment exam readings, where student writing is fussed over and picked at, and the gap between a developmental writing course and college-level course appears to grow wider than the gap between kindergarten and graduate school. The graders seem to forget that First-Year Composition is not a senior honors English course. This attitude is not going to help the students embrace their writing, or the writing they do in our classes if it comes back to them with our baggage.

The negative attitudes many in academia have about First-Year Composition are clearly reflected in who ends up teaching it. In the four-year colleges and universities, what I've seen is that full-time tenured faculty prefer and usually get specialized courses that they particularly like, and if required by their institution to teach First-Year Composition, teach as few sections as possible, one a semester or one a year. In the community colleges, the full-time faculty may teach more sections of the first-year writing

courses, but they also have their pet courses they turn to, as well as the ever-popular course release for committee work (or whatever) to keep the workload down. By and large, teaching first-year writing is seen as a dreary, undesirable task that many established faculty avoid.

Consequently, first-year writing is farmed out to the least powerful, the most disenfranchised, the most exploited members of the academic community—adjuncts, teaching assistants, graduate students. Adjuncts may be teaching for fun, or on the side of a regular job or career, or they may be *career adjuncts*—colleagues making a living at teaching and hoping for that great big *full-time job* break.

I have been a member of this group, and I have known many teachers who work at multiple campuses teaching courses in numbers that would send the average, complacent, full-time faculty member reeling right into a retirement home, choking on their own sense of entitlement. Because of workload issues, it is often just not possible to give each student the individual attention they deserve, no matter how much we might want to.

Full-time faculty do not necessarily have the time to do it either. Although they, ironically, may teach fewer classes and have an office, there are always other time-consuming duties to attend to, and institutional policies and regulations continue to interfere with how much faculty can do for each student. Complacency, arrogance, and laziness also become factors with some tenured faculty.

Graduate students and teaching assistants may have more optimism and energy that more seasoned faculty lack, but they also lack the experience, and in between designing assignments and reading essays, they have their own work to do. In the end, the students lose out, and in the end, the distance between themselves and the writing they do for school grows.

Cultural Irony #3

First-Year Composition is considered a fundamental course needed by all students to lay some kind of foundation that will help them in all the other classes they will take, and in their working and

personal lives as well. And yet, teaching this course is seen as undesirable, and the conditions under which it is taught are such that they create more harm than good. In addition, academic institutions as a rule treat very poorly the majority of the people who perform this most profound, fundamental work.

Institutional Inconsistencies

Many things colleges are doing now are part of the reason students find themselves distanced from their writing. Assessments that are used to determine placement in an appropriate class end up putting a menagerie of students in one single class that they choose to take based on schedule convenience. Little or no attention is paid to attitudes about writing, fear or dislike of writing, or writing history and experience when making placement decisions.

Consequently, many students who would rather go white water rafting backwards in the dark than write find themselves in classes with people who love to write. The poorly skilled may find themselves in the same classes with the highly skilled. This can be useful because there is something to be learned in this situation, but it can also be intimidating. But what about those times when students who don't like writing or fear writing or are poorly skilled at writing all end up in classes together?

Either way, the results are problematic. The teacher can either teach to the lowest or the highest denominator. And what happens to those students who don't fit into the group?

One of the biggest issues in writing classes is class size. The number of students increases a teacher's workload. The more students, the more impersonal and factory-like the faculty member's response must be. The less time and attention per student, the greater the chance that the student will remain disengaged from the writing they do for their class.

At the schools I have worked at, maximum class size ranges from place to place. In some schools, it's twenty-two. At others, it's twenty-five. Some schools have a double standard in terms of maximum enrollment for full-time faculty versus adjunct. For example, at one school, full-time faculty, who have the time, office space, and institutional engagement, have a class size maximum of twenty-two. For adjuncts, it's thirty. Most of the schools,

bless their hearts, tend to give adjunct courses the same enrollment maximum that full-time faculty receive.

I used to work at one little diploma mill that offered affordable tuition because it had no academic standards. They did not believe in enrollment limits. I have to give credit where credit is due and admit that this greasy spoon gave me my first postgraduate “professional” job. I was hired over the telephone after I sent a cover letter and resume. Being too naive to know any better, I was thrilled with the opportunity.

How clearly I can still remember those first few days of my brand new English 101 semester as new students rolled in every day until add/drop was over. Thirty, thirty-five, forty students—in a writing class! At one point, I had to send the students out to look for other chairs, which they had to force into the room. Even in my naiveté, I knew better than to send those students back to the registration desk. That would have ended my first job before it had even started.

How was I supposed to respond intelligently and personally to the work of all these students? Even though I was still idealistic from graduate school, I knew this wasn’t going to work. But that didn’t stop the school from collecting all those nice, juicy tuition dollars. And I didn’t have to worry about grading all those assignments. By midterm, half the students had dropped.

Was it because I was a lousy teacher? Was it because they were immature and irresponsible? Or was it because, lost in a sea of strangers where one teacher could not possibly give them the personalized attention they deserved, all the factors added up and made dropping out (and having to enroll in and pay for the class) again the lesser of two evils? All those delicious tuition dollars—but at whose expense?

The problem with colleges is the robber baron mindset they have adopted, perhaps in response to political and economic changes and declining support for higher education by corporate society. Too often the goal is to get the students in, get their tuition dollars, and then let academic Darwinism take over. Whether they sink or swim, it’s their fault, or it’s the teacher’s fault—especially if the teacher is an adjunct. In the end, in the college writing class, the potential growth that could occur in the writing assignments of the maximum number of students doesn’t happen.

Cultural Irony #4

Though everyone must go to college to receive an education, the institutions that mandate this, including corporations and governments, are often less than willing to support those institutions, and then blame colleges when students graduate without appropriate writing skills.

Solutions?

My suggestions for improving the situation aren't especially realistic in the political and economic climate of today's real world, but so what? What is life without an impossible dream?

Obviously, the best way to deal with student writing is to help *each and every student* find and develop their own ideas, ideas we know are their own, and to work closely and individually with each student to develop a piece of writing through its various stages, pointing out error without marking up a paper, offering suggestions for development and revision without there being midnight comments scrawled illegibly in the margins. This means more than lectures on how to write a paper, forced class discussions or small group work on textbook selections, and more than a five-minute paper conference. And it means more than fifteen minutes reading, or five minutes scanning, student papers and scrawling comments. Yet most likely, this vision wouldn't get anything more than a chuckle from the standard academic dean. Aren't we supposed to be able to do it all now?

If close, semester-long individual attention could be the experience of all students in college writing classes, more students would emerge with stronger skills and a sense of pride and ownership of their work. But, unfortunately, this will cost money. More significantly, it calls for a revision in the paradigm of how most of us envision college. In today's political climate, where the cost of college is higher than ever and government support for it lower than ever, when unions, administrators, and entrenched full-time faculty are frequently resistant to change, the college world will go on as it is. Teachers will make assignments, students will hop through the ring of fire to do them, the papers

will be graded and returned a week or two later, and maybe some writing skill or personal growth will occur for some students.

Failing any major changes in the system, what can we do? As a teacher, I intend to talk about the value of thinking, the importance of being curious, the type of work that can be done for its own sake as well as for external and ultimate gain, and for good writing being of value above and beyond a grade.

But I also know there's always the garbage dumpster at the end of the semester, eagerly awaiting all those essays students didn't care enough about to save.