

Chapter 3. Writing in Secondary School: Learning to Confront the World through Writing

My suburban school district had two structural policies that framed my secondary education. First, grades 7-9 were in a mid-sized junior high school (Jerusalem Avenue Junior High School, 1957-1960) and 10-12 in a larger high school (W. C. Mephram High School, 1960-1963). Second, all students were placed in one of three tracks: advanced, academic, and vocational. Placed in advanced throughout, I shared my schedule with the same small group of students for six years, except for gym, shop (for boys, matched with home economics for girls), and languages (required only for advanced students, but having some others). In a sense I was part of small schools embedded within larger, enjoying the benefits (in friendships, resources, attention, and self-esteem) and costs (in social relations, social attitudes, and bullying). The advanced program required regular and increasingly challenging writing throughout the six years, which gave me the chance to move beyond plodding modes of organization and to experiment with more creative alternatives. When I reached beyond the anticipated responses, the creativity and idiosyncrasy of my writing experiments were often indulged.

The advanced English classes from seventh grade onward offered literary analysis and creative writing assignments, exploring personal and social issues along with the literary. In seventh grade I was baffled by my first literary critical assignment that required knowledge of the history of literary movements, which neither I nor anyone else in the class had—but the submission written by my brother, then a senior in high school, earned high praise from my teacher. The other assignments, however, were more transparent and I soon caught on to what was expected. (My father also insisted on writing my bar mitzvah speech that year—but that was a different story, as I was completing this rite of passage only under duress, he held a political leadership position in the congregation, while my parents were in the process of separating.)

In social studies we had a thoughtful sequence of writing assignments coordinated across the years to explore our immediate, contemporary worlds as well as the richness of history, philosophy, and political movements. These, initially in seventh grade, sent us to encyclopedia articles (which I copied verbatim) to report on the lives of major historical figures. The next year we were directed to a wider range of reference books, magazines, and interviews to report on countries and careers, when I started to learn how to rephrase and integrate sources. By tenth grade we were doing annotated bibliographies and discussions of historical documents; in the eleventh and twelfth grades we were assigned critical studies of historical events and their consequences. These assignments helped us formulate

our own visions of the world, extending beyond the normalized, monologic views presented in our textbooks.

Roots of Contentiousness

I was given license to explore different ways of representing my ideas. While some teachers tried to rein me in to conventionality, others would indulge me in transgressive experiments (as long as I met basic standards of correctness and accuracy). I remember in eighth grade social studies being shown a classic film from the nineteen-thirties on the Johnstown flood, with a poetic narration consisting of overflowing Whitmanesque lines—I myself was reading Whitman at the time. I have in my files one paper from my English class at this time where I examine the contradictions and paradoxes in Whitman's poetic juxtapositions of the concrete and earthly with the sublime and idealistic in his word choice, styles, and perspectives. Though the phrasing in the five-page hand-written paper is a bit stilted, it is syntactically complex (I seemed especially to like conjoining clauses by semi-colons). The analysis is attentive to poetic line phrasing, lexis, and style. So when asked on a mid-term exam to write about the effect of the Johnstown flood, I spontaneously fell into tumbling, additive lines imitating the flood and the film narration. As far as I remember, I was not marked down for this strange response on an exam for which we were primed (as on all such exams) to write five-paragraph essays.

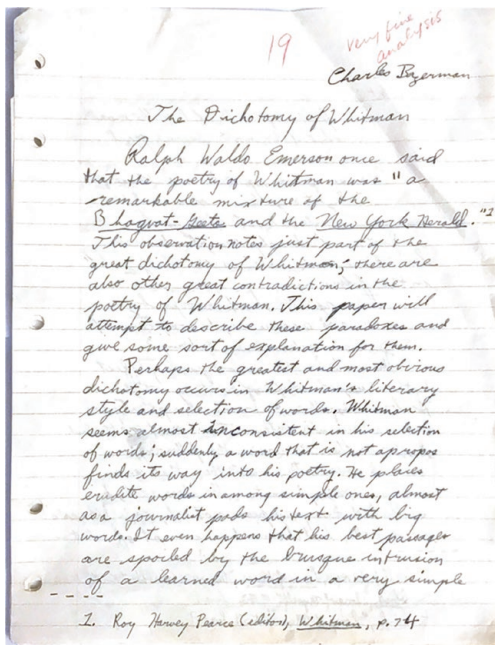


Figure 3.1. Opening page of the earliest paper I have, from Eighth-Grade English. Photo courtesy of Charles Bazerman.

Even our science classes asked us to explore topics in papers on our own, extending our knowledge as far as we were motivated. I remember in eighth grade earth science scouring popular accounts of astronomy to report on theories of the origin of the solar system, and in tenth grade biology reading articles in *Scientific American* to report on the new discoveries of interferon. After having to do frequent lab reports on dissections of formaldehyde-reeking creatures, we had to design, carry out, and report on an experiment with a lab partner. I remember a thoughtlessly cruel experiment feeding a pregnant mouse with hormones, obtained from my lab partner's pharmacist father. In other science classes, however, I remember only cookbook lab reports demonstrating principles from our textbooks, but at least we had to write them up fully, not relying on worksheets.

Teacher recognition reinforced my self-image and extended my social role as a smart student, even though I was also viewed by teachers as somewhat uncontrollable, digressive, and contentious. My report cards frequently paired academic grades of 98 or 100 with attitude grades of D or F. I found this amusing, and I joked that I guess they thought I wasn't working hard enough—though I knew it was because I called out in class, argued with teachers, expressed opinions controversial for the time and place, and was otherwise troublesome. No doubt some of my hostility and emotionality had to do with family troubles, but I was coming to see myself as an iconoclast, original, critical—highly successful but not giving into the system with all its restrictions. In retrospect I was fortunate in my schooling and particularly my writing education, especially for the time—both in the amount and range of writing experience and in the tolerance, sometimes even encouragement, for transgression.

While I was member of a number of intellectual, nerdy clubs like the international relations club, the one that most involved reading and writing was the debate club. With my debate partner and best friend Jesse, I would discuss late into the night the best way to phrase our positions or counter opposite views. I was not a member of the school newspaper, though some of my friends were, nor the literary magazine or yearbook, whose members were from circles I didn't travel in. I was a member of band (though never very good at trumpet), the chess club, and the math team (at which I was very good). I was to return to both music and chess later in life when I was already professionally committed to writing and made explicit connections between how what I learned about chess and music applied to the writing and teaching of writing. I imagine that these earlier activities formed part of my skills, consciousness, and orientations that fed into my ongoing development as a writer. Music taught me about discipline, attention to both written notes and production, organization, and the need for skills to build expression—as well as an appreciation for the rhythms of the line and the temporal unfolding of a crafted experience. Chess and math expanded my ability to calculate mentally, as well as to trust abduction and follow through on the implications of ideas. (In Chapter 16 I elaborate on how learning other arts affected how I came to teach writing.)

Taking Strong Contrarian Stands

While almost all my papers from elementary school through junior high school (except for the Whitman paper) seemed to have vanished, I did find in my files a paper from tenth grade, another from eleventh grade, and a larger group from my senior year. Now with the eye of a teacher I see them as clumsy productions of an opinionated adolescent. Cringing at their undeveloped and naïve views, I still recognize my ideas and writing skills developing. In the following description and analyses of my texts in this and following chapters, I will try to remove myself from pride and terror of ownership to describe the actual devices, organization, language, use of evidence, stances, strategies that I seemed to be learning and deploying and developing across the years.

Here are a few observations of my surviving high school papers in chronological order.

A tenth grade ten-page social studies term paper on “The Origin of Man, Science, and Religion” was highly opinionated and contentious, as the teacher noted. I opened with even-handed summaries of the contesting views, with two pages of Biblical narrative and quotation with no critical or even sarcastic comment followed by two pages of Darwin’s theories and evidence, with no evaluation except a comment on the strength of evidence. However, the next three-page section recounting how religious leaders responded to Darwin, took on a more decided evaluative stance, as I presented the histories of rejection, suppression, insult, and other bad behavior of the anti-Darwinians, with over half this section devoted to the Tennessee “monkey laws” and the Scopes trial. By the time I got to William Jennings Bryan’s arguments at the trial I began with counter-arguments and moved to contemptuous dismissal. I was equally selective and contentious in seeing Bryan’s failed case echoed in evangelists of my time (circa 1960). While towards the end I presented without comment some arguments to reconcile Darwin and religion, I didn’t grant them much credibility, quoting Bertrand Russell at length and ending with a peroration that says the future of religion, if it is to have one, would need to be free from superstition and supernaturalism. Not a ringing endorsement, but sixty years of hindsight suggest it was hardly a good prediction about the withering of supernaturalism. In terms of writing, the paper was pervaded in both structure and style by my experience in the debate club—beginning with a seemingly even-handed statement of both sides, but clearly giving the better case to my favored side, moving through increasingly judgmental dismissal of opponents, then conceding some space to a middle position, only to reject that, leaving as little space as possible to the other side. The paper, following what I learned in debate, relied on some research and represented a number of points of view. I used paraphrase and quotation to assert my own stance, such as by setting up the Biblical point of view first in its most literalist form to cast it as absurd, and then ending the main argument with an extended quotation from Russell, who stands as my favored authority. For that same teacher I wrote an analysis and defense of *The Communist Manifesto*.

The teacher I remember being kind in commenting on it, but cautioning me to be careful about presenting those views too publicly (it was 1961).

From eleventh grade I have a seven-page English paper on the symbolism of J.D. Salinger. This plodding symbol-hunting typical of a high school student did, nonetheless, mark some further advance in my organizing and developing academic arguments. I started off, as I had with Whitman, observing the heterogeneity and contrasts of the many symbols, but here I tried to reconcile them in some synthetic relationship, looking across three of Salinger's books. Examining the books in serial order (and serially within each plot) I identified particular incidents or objects as symbolic, and iconic for the meaning of each of the texts. In my penultimate paragraph I noted that eight of the twelve items I discussed as symbolic refer to the sickness or phoniness of society. While hardly a unique observation nor unexpected from a teenager, it does indicate that as a writer I am identifying a uniform theme in separate items.

By my senior year, after the transformative Telluride summer experience (described in the next chapter), my writing became more organized through reasoned arguments and more tightly elaborated evidence, as suggested in the five papers I have from the spring of my senior year, three shorter and two longer. Four of them were from elective literature courses and the last from my regular English class, even though it was on a more historical and philosophical topic, perhaps to prepare us for the anticipated college research paper.

Four literary papers (three short and one long) from an elective on tragedy all examined themes as they played out in the plots of classic texts. One considered the possibilities of individual freedom within the determinism of the gods in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, and Euripides' *Bacchae*. Another similarly pondered whether Othello was truly tragic or just evoking pathos in being duped by Iago's treachery. Events and quotations from the story supported my contentions, that unfolded in a more or less reasoned sequence, relying on plot sequence. The last short paper, on Brecht's *A Man's a Man*, argued that the play eliminated the grounds of character identity necessary for tragedy. Again, my analysis followed the plot sequence to examine events, and character identity trajectories, especially interpreting the enigmatic statements of the lead character. I also started to experiment with paradox, contradiction, and turns of phrase to pull together less straightforward conclusions, drawing inspiration and modeling from my then favorite author, Brecht. Brecht's social criticism of the corrupt power, capitalist predation, desperate poverty, and struggle for survival in post WWI Germany spoke to my growing political consciousness (see also chapter 5).

I continued with my passion for Brecht in the final longer paper for the course on tragedy, now explicitly arguing that Brecht intentionally sought anti-tragedy. I started with a two-page discussion of Brecht's theory of epic theater and his distancing effect which he explicitly set against Aristotelian catharsis which he argued dissipated the will to action by purging emotions vicariously. Brecht sought objectivity and action in life. I then followed this stance through the characters'

struggles in *The Threepenny Opera* and particularly its songs, which directly addressed the audience with pessimistic, cynical lessons about the world's evils and the difficulties of survival. After a rapid repetition of my discussion of the destruction of identity in *A Man's a Man*, I offered a two-page analysis of *Mother Courage's* self-destructive strategies of survival, which bring her further misfortune, even as she manages to endure when no other character does. The last two pages consider the more complicated case of the *Life of Galileo*, where the reputed hero of discovery is portrayed as cheating, flattering, and recanting out of fear, even as he recognizes his weakness. Morality (and thus the possibility of tragedy), collapses in the face of survival and a sumptuous meal. This paper again developed a sequential argument, but moved through different steps of reasoning within each play, looking at different kinds of evidence in each. All the analyses, however, fit within a theoretical frame I established in the opening pages.

Arguing against the premises of authors or societies was to continue throughout my college and even graduate career, and could be seen in my pattern as a scholar in seeking to move beyond current beliefs and paradigms to explore alternatives. This contrarian and exploratory disposition, as I have suggested, was grounded in personal, family-formed identity needs and desires transposed into academic identities. I built this alterity of stance through sequences of writing projects—inspired, sustained, and modeled by those authors in whom I found this disposition, whether humorists and satirists like Twain (or earlier the writers for *Mad Magazine*) or social critics, like Brecht. In high school and ever since I have enjoyed parodies. At that time Dwight MacDonald's anthology of parodies was one of my most treasured books, along with a collection of Brecht's plays. I can even see a direct line between these and my later attachment to visionary scholars in both sciences and social sciences. These authors taught me to dream big and wander far from conventional beliefs.

Finally, I wrote a twelve-page paper on German nationalism, surprisingly in my required twelfth-year English course. I do not remember the assignment, but the teacher I do remember was trying to prepare us for what she thought would be the expectation of university courses. My analysis rather ambitiously traced German political and philosophic history from Napoleonic times until World War II to consider both the impetus for unification and the rise of romantic nationalism. I drew on cultural artifacts, prominent academic histories of the time, and German sources (which I had access to at the Columbia library {see next chapter} and which I would read through my then almost six years of study of German). But I was not able to exercise historiographical critical evaluation, as I saw all sources as equivalent, whether in English or German and whether written prior to WWI, in the 1930s, or post-WWII. I did not recognize contradictions that could have clued me into the variety of views; I took all historical documents as authoritative and equivalent, such as the anti-Napoleonic sentiment in a popular folk song, and a 1936 German source that praised Napoleon's legacy of united, centralized state and bureaucratic rationality. Yet I was able to form a sequential argument moving from

the reasoning and multiple forms of evidence within each paragraph, leading to the complex argument of the next. I did not follow a simple serial sequence, a five-paragraph structure, or a preset debate structure. Within a largely chronological structure I tied shifting circumstances and ideologies to discussion of thinkers of the time, with conclusions that reflected back on the prior pieces of the argument. This seems in retrospect to be an early step in developing a more organic reasoning structure, building a logic based on the selected materials. It followed the structure of the literary essays I had done comparing themes in several works, but took it a step forward in considering a larger socio-historic ideological trajectory. This paper also adopted a deeper use of sources than my Darwin paper of two years before, and was able to adopt a more objective analytic stance. Although I clearly was not a fan of German nationalism (less than 20 years after World War II ended), I nonetheless attempted to understand it on its own terms, as much as I could understand it as a high school student. I also find the paper's dispassionate tone a testament to how much I was insulated from the reality of the holocaust.

Coda

Overall, my six years of secondary education offered many opportunities to explore writing across all the subjects, with freedom to develop my ideas, arguments, and stances towards all the materials and information I was encountering. I enthusiastically took up these invitations to learn about the world and make sense of it in my own way. Some teachers gave me the space to try different modes and organization of expression, though I do remember run-ins with a couple of others who tried to rein me in to more conventional views of morality, politics, and ways of writing. Although I was more than ready to move beyond that world, in retrospect, I see how some teachers and some clever curricular sequencing prepared me to address my future. By that point I clearly saw writing as a way to make a sense of and make a mark on the world.



Figure 3.2. *W. C. Mepham High School, Bellmore, NY.* Photo via Google Street Maps.