**Chapter A1: How I Learned to Write** *by Richard Jewell*

Ch. A1 of [www.*WritingforCollege*.org](http://www.WritingforCollege.org) (page URL: [www.tc.umn.edu/~jewel001/CollegeWriting/START/How%20I.htm](http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jewel001/CollegeWriting/START/How%20I.htm))

(Note to faculty: These stories help my students remember and develop their own narratives of becoming a writer.)

I would like to start the first chapter of this website by telling you several of my most important stories as a developing writer.  They range from writing about a chicken, when I was a child, to writing in college and, later, to being a freelance (professional) writer.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Charlie the Chicken (Writing for Pleasure)** | C:\Users\Richard\Documents\My Webs\CWI-OLD\images\j0233118p.gif |

My first memorable experience with writing came when I was in kindergarten and we were assigned to make a book.  "Wow!" I thought, in whatever passes for the thinking of a kindergartener.  "How can I write a whole book?"  So, I asked the nearest expert, Mom, and she explained to me that all I had to do was choose some pictures, paste them onto some sheets, and staple them together.  And then I could write some words to go with each picture.  She'd help.  I figured I could handle that.

Still, it seemed such a big challenge, and the feeling I remember having while working on that project was a tongue-between-teeth kind of thing--effort and concentration.  I loved my next door neighbor's baby chicks (we lived in the country but only had cattle and pigs), and so I asked if I could make a story about a baby chick.  "What do you want to call him?" my mom asked.  "Charlie," I said.  So we hunted for pictures in farm magazines, cut, and pasted.  I dictated lengthy, intelligent sentences to my mom like "This is Charlie" and Charlie is a chick," and she wrote them down.  Then I copied them in my own block-letter handwriting under the pictures.

By the time I was done, I was stunned at what I (with a little help from the expert, Mom) had accomplished.  I became convinced that I could be a writer if I wanted.  I got a big star on the assignment and the praise of my kindergarten teacher.  The feeling that I can be a writer has stuck with me.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The** **Temple of Dr. Doom (Writing for An Audience)** |  | **C:\Users\Richard\Documents\My Webs\CWI-OLD\images\1greeting4-thumb.gif** |

However, I almost lost it as a budding academic writer when I met my dreaded nemesis in my first-year college English class, Literature I.  Let's call him Dr. Doom.  Dr. Doom mostly lectured on how to interpret our literature readings.  When he did encourage discussion, he would finish it not only by telling people why they were wrong, but also by doing so in such a way that it made each speaker sound rather stupid.  The man not only had no real social graces but also seemed a bit cruel—determined to depress everyone, himself included, because of we students’ seeming incompetence.  I had no idea what he wanted, and he offered no clues.  This should have been a clue in itself that I might need more help than I was getting, but I didn't notice it.

        Instead, when he assigned us our first of four graded papers, I determined to work harder than most and turn in an impressive intellectual commentary.  We were applying a reading from Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychology, to one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, *Hamlet*, and I not only read both carefully but also spent twenty-nine hours working on it.  Most other people, I learned (by asking around), spent an average of fifteen hours on the assignment.  Little did I understand, then, that spending a lot of time was not sufficient if I did not know, in the first place, just what the teacher wanted.

        To make a long story short, when I received my first paper back, there were almost no marks on it except at the end.  There, he had given me a big D-.  And he wrote a short sentence: "This is bullshit."

        I was so taken aback that I had no idea what to do or say.  After class, I walked up to him and asked him, trying to hide the tremble in my voice, "What does this mean?"  I couldn't even say the word "bullshit" to him out loud, for I had been brought up in a small country school where one never, ever used such words in writing, let alone aloud, to a teacher.  Did I also mention that he was a minister and wore a clergyman's collar to class every day?

        Instead of speaking, I showed him what he wrote.  He waved his hand in the air.  "It's obvious you didn't read the material," he said.

        "I read it," I said.  "I read all of it, some of it twice."

        "Well, he said, "you didn't read it carefully."

        I had no idea what to say.  So I simply walked away.  What was wrong with my material?  Today, I still have that old paper, and whenever I look at it now, many years later, I understand exactly what I did wrong.  First, I had written my paper in what today we might call "freewriting" or spontaneous writing, with as many ideas and reflections packed into it as possible: in other words, I didn't organize it carefully around a few major ideas.  Second, I did not support my ideas with a number of quotations (and paraphrases) from the materials we were reading: in a paper without quotes, he couldn't tell whether I had read the material and he couldn't see how my logic worked as I made my points.  Third, I had made the mistake of not using his own theory of literature.  He had a very specific theory, and I never had been taught that theory in high school.

        Unfortunately, I had no idea at the time what I had done wrong.  Before the second graded paper was due, I looked at the papers of several people who had received B's on the first paper (I could find no one who had received an A).  Then I tried to write papers that were more like theirs.  I managed to get my grade up to a C on this second paper.  And I still didn't know what he wanted.

        Then all the English teachers in the department handed out a set of five sample A level papers to us.  Dr. Doom told us all that he wouldn't have handed out these sample papers at all if he weren't required to do so: he didn't believe in sample papers, and these weren't very good samples, he said.  In fact, he only liked two of the five.  I didn't care how many he liked or didn't like; I was mightily relieved, for here were two clear examples of what he expected.  I personally didn't like either of the samples very much at all; however, the two of them gave me a road map to follow in writing papers for him.

        It worked.  On the third graded paper, I worked hard to offer a central idea like the samples did, organize what I was writing into a distinct pattern that I now understand is a particular type of literary analysis (an *explicacion de texte* or explication of text), and use plenty of quotations and paraphrases.  My grade on this third paper was a B.  Dr. Doom seemed reluctant to give me the B, but he grumpily--in his comments--allowed that I had performed most of the intellectual functions that he wanted.

        So, my grade for the course hung in the balance as I started my fourth paper.  I knew that if I could just get an A on the final paper, I would receive a B for the entire course.  If not, I would receive a C (and another D- on this final paper might give me a D for the course).  So I worked very, very hard to give him exactly the kind of paper he wanted.  I examined the two sample papers even more carefully and discovered that in my previous papers, I had been too general and broad, so in my fourth paper I chose what I felt was the most important one-half page of the entire novel we had read, and I critiqued it in great detail, showing how it was an example of everything else that happened in the novel. I organized my paper very well, analyzing step by step, and used lots of quotations.

        In the end, I received an A- on this final paper.  At first, however, Dr. Doom lost my paper and was convinced I had never turned it in.  Three days later he found it, and my grade for the semester was secure.

        Of course, Dr. Doom made a lot of mistakes that good modern teachers do not.  He didn't really teach writing, but rather expected us to automatically understand how to write.  He also expected us to think exactly like he did.  And he expected that he did not have to teach us how to understand literature using his method: either we knew how or we didn't.  He was a very tough teacher, but that was okay because some of my best teachers have been tough.  Unfortunately, he also was cold and, arguably, cruel and impatient if he didn't like you (as he seemed not to like me).

        However, **no matter how bad or good he was,** I learned a great lesson from having to work with him: audience.  He was my audience, he wanted a certain kind of writing, and that was the kind of writing I needed to give him in order to do well.  I wish he could have taught this lesson to me; instead, I had to learn it the hard way, on my own, in spite of him.    
 However, it is one of the most important lessons to learn in writing: audience.  I have returned to it time and again over the years, and I still do: in writing for other instructors, in writing for popular magazines and scholarly journals, in writing for other teachers, and even in writing personal letters to friends and loved ones.  You don't need to lose your own identity, but you do need to **write using words and patterns that your audience understands.**   It's a little like learning a foreign language, or even learning to talk like a chemist, a football coach, a dance instructor, or a business person.  Each academic discipline and each profession has its own language for talking, and each--when papers must be written--has its own words and patterns for how these papers need to be written so that they make sense to everyone in that discipline or business.  **Audience** is one of the most important considerations to make in any writing task.

        I learned this lesson the hard way in my second semester of college.  I could write a very good *explicacion de texte* by the time I was finished with Dr. Doom's class.  I couldn't write other types of college papers.  However, at least I knew, then, that each teacher would expect something different, and it was my job to find out just what he or she wanted.  In a way, each time we enter a class in which there is a paper (or a speech, laboratory experiment, or other activity) to be completed, we make a contract with that instructor to learn how he or she wants us to write or communicate.  This is true whether the instructor is good or bad at explaining it to us.  It is our job to reach out and learn to "speak as she speaks," whether she helps or not.

        Ideally, when we are a student, our expectations of our own academic learning must be higher than they are of our instructor's ability to teach.  If we just happen to also be blessed with an instructor who teaches well, that is all the better.  However, the responsibility for learning always is ours.  We must make the first effort, no matter what, reaching out to learn whatever is in the instructor's head.  As a student, I like to be able to shake hands with an instructor after a course, as a sign of my respect for what I have learned.  And I may have to work hard to learn anything from an instructor if she is not a very good teacher.  However, she almost always does have something for me to learn, and if I work hard, ask a lot of questions, and get help when I need it, I usually can give that handshake of respect.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The Light Dawns (Learning to Organize)** | C:\Users\Richard\Documents\My Webs\CWI-OLD\images\na01062_.gif |

            This next story is about what most people in college need to learn in order to to move from being a beginning to an intermediate college writer.  Your first-year college writing classes are supposed to help you accomplish this.  Here's how I did it.

            As I mentioned above, I didn't really learn much about how to write from my Literature I teacher in my first year of college.  I was still really a beginning college writer.  The experience that changed me from a beginning to an intermediate writer happened in the last half of my second year of college.  I was taking my third course in a row from Mr. Golding, a boyish-looking guy in his thirties who acted very formal in and out of the classroom.  The class was Literature III.  However formal his behavior was, he really opened our eyes about literature.

            Mr. Golding often started our class hour by reading to us.  Our books included some of the finest in literature, from Greek plays by Euripides and Aristophanes to contemporary works by T.S. Eliot, Lawrence Durrell, and others.  Mr. Golding read in a richly modulated low-tenor voice, inflecting words for both drama and meaning.  When he was reading, he looked at each of us in turn, his eyes shining with the steel of confident revelation and worlds springing from his words.  I could have listened for hours, but he gave us ten minutes here, fifteen there.  Then he would lecture a bit, and finally he would turn us toward discussion.  At first during discussion times we felt unsure, unsafe, wondering if our sophomoric attempts at judging this great literature before this great teacher would lead him to rain down scorn on us.  However, the bravest (or most foolhardy) of us led the way.  Mr. Golding listened, nodded, and simply asked if anyone would like to agree or disagree.  Soon, under his fair and tolerant gaze, all were eager to hear each other's arguments and lend our own.

            We had three papers to write for him.  You have to understand something about learning how to write when I was in school: whether it was junior high, high school, or college, most teachers figured that either you could write well or you couldn't.  Few of them actually bothered trying to teach writing.  "Writing" in those days meant "grammar."  I had lots of grammar lessons throughout elementary, junior high, and high school.  That was "writing lessons," and though I learned a lot about grammar, I didn't really learn how to write much more than a correct sentence from it.

            When it came to Mr. Golding, I very badly wanted to write well, partly because I admired him so much and wanted to show him I was really learning, and partly because I did not want to look stupid to him.  My first paper was not bad, a "B" effort, if I remember, which helped me relax somewhat.  Apparently others did not fare as well, for I recall him trying to coach us to do better on the second paper.  "It's not that hard," he told us, in those or similar words.  He held up his fingers, one by one.  "First you have an introduction in which you describe your thesis.  Then you have several sections in which you detail it.  Use quotations so I know what you mean.  Then provide a conclusion.  Don't write it all at once," he said.  "Take your time."  He looked off in the distance.  "When I write," he said, "I spend a little time at it, then lay it down.  The next day, I do some more, and so forth, each day, until I am done.  Sometimes I have to rewrite parts of it."

            He made it sound so simple.  The part about having a thesis with several points sounded familiar, and I was relieved that he didn't want the much more difficult explication of text, a complicated form of literary analysis I had learned (the hard way--on my own--without any help from our rather difficult, unfriendly teacher) the year before.

            Most important, Mr. Golding's casual mention of his own, personal writing process was a revelation to me.  I was surprised that he didn't sit down and create a paper miraculously in an afternoon--I could visualize him drinking fine wine and eating chocolates as he did so.  I was equally surprised that he actually took several days or more to write thoughtfully, section by section.  And "sometimes I have to rewrite parts" amazed me.  I had been struggling toward just such a realization in my own writing of college papers: I needed to take more time, and I usually needed to rewrite.  I had thought this might mean I was mediocre at best: perhaps only dull, plodding people could not write a masterful paper in one sitting.  That a literary scholar of his caliber needed several periods for writing--and actually had to revise--confirmed in me that this method of writing was useful, acceptable, even praised.

            From that day on, I developed what I now think of as my "intermediate" stage of development as a writer: working with a plan that included several important steps in my writing, just as Mr. Golding had revealed.  My plan certainly worked on Mr. Golding: he gave my last two papers in his class "A's."  The next year, I decided to major in philosophy.  Talk about writing papers!  I was constantly writing, and as I did so, I perfected my version of Mr. Golding's system.  I usually started my papers on a Monday or Tuesday, allowing about two to three hours per afternoon in which to write and research.  I would do this during the weekdays--or for two sets of weekdays if the paper was a larger one.  Then, on Friday, before going out for the night, I would lay out all the pieces and parts of my handwritten papers (this was before computers) on the floor of my one-room apartment.  I would walk over and between them gingerly when I came home so that they were there all night.  If I was stuck, I often would do the same thing on Saturday night.  Two or three times a day, I would find myself looking at them and wondering about the order I wanted to use for the different thoughts and ideas.  I would then experimentally--and briefly--shuffle the papers into a new order, sometimes using scissors to cut sheets into half or quarter sheets with ideas I wanted to place in a different location on the floor.

            I can remember a number of times when, upon hearing a knock on my door, I would take a great leap over my papers, simultaneously yelling "Wait!" and landing against the door to keep it from opening.  The problem was that when people would open my door, the wind would come in behind them and blow away my carefully crafted order.  This upset both my girlfriend and a couple of close friends until I eventually learned to start locking my door whenever my floor was in "paper mode."

            Finally, on Sunday, I would get serious, make a few final adjustments to the order, if necessary, and then pick up the papers and write my introduction.  I always wrote my introduction last because, by the time I was done with everything else, I finally knew exactly what I was trying to say.  Then I would revise the papers in their new order, making connecting transitions, sentences, and paragraphs.  I would then edit and, finally, type it.

            And I got A's.  Throughout that year and my next--my junior and senior years--I got A's on papers in almost all my classes.  I have continued to use this pattern throughout my adulthood for any type of writing assignment that is new or the conclusion of which I am unsure until I am done writing, whether for freelance magazine writing, professional proposal writing, or for papers for graduate schools, conference presentations, and academic journals.  It wasn't until I returned to graduate school again, fifteen years after Mr. Golding's lessons, that I discovered a whole new method of writing had sprung forth in colleges across the country.  This method is called "process writing."  And it is pretty much what Mr. Golding helped me figure out on my own: writing often is best done in a series of times and steps with revision not only okay but normal.  These lessons now are taught throughout the country in colleges, high schools, and even in some middle and elementary schools.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The** **Joyful Dread of a Phone Call from my Editor** (The Value of Thorough Revision) | C:\Users\Richard\Documents\My Webs\CWI-OLD\images\1manwoman2-thumb.gif |

            I have many stories, but one more is among the most important.  It occurred several years after I was done with school, in my job.  It was (and still is) an experience that mixed joy with pain, and it really helped me very much as a writer.  I was a freelance writer for six years after college, and during that time I rose from selling articles and stories for just a few dollars to selling them for quite a bit.  One of the editors who helped me the most along the way was a guy I'll call "Harvey."  I first came into contact with Harvey when I sent his magazine an idea for an article, he sent a note back asking to see the it.  I then wrote the article and sent it to him.

            Now the way these things normally work, at least when you're starting out as a writer and have sent in a manuscript, is that the magazine editor then will do one of three things: (1) accept it, (2) reject it, or (3) ask for a revision before deciding.  Usually at the lower levels, where you might get anything from $2 to $200 for an article, you interact with the editors completely by mail or email.

            Now Harvey's magazine was one that paid more than this, and to my surprise, Harvey called me.  I was stunned, having never talked with an editor by phone.  He told me cheerfully that he was interested in buying my article, but if so, I would have to be willing to revise it.  Even then, if he didn't like the revision, he would retain the right to reject the article.  Then he asked me very nicely if I was interested in revising for him.  I held back the urge to shout "Yes"--for I had never written for a magazine that paid so well--and, my voice sounding calm, I allowed that I would be glad to revise.  He then said, "Do you have a pen?  I'd like to give you a few notes about what I'd like changed."

            "A few notes."  He tlake for another fifteen or twenty minutes in rapid-fire English, and I took two dense pages of notes on what to change.  I thought I was going to die with all that he expected.  Then he said, "Oh, and by the way, I need you to cut the length by one third."  Inside, my heart sank--how could I delete 33% of an article I already felt was jam packed with everything I wanted to say?  He finished by saying, "I also made a few notes on the manuscript you sent me.  I'll put it in the mail right now.  Good luck, and I'll look forward to seeing your revision.  Is three weeks time enough?"

            By the time I got off the phone, my heart lay beating slowly, painfully, somewhere about six feet under my shoes.  Several days later, the manuscript revised, and it was filled with about three times as many penned notes for revision than any paper I had received back from a teacher in school.

            However, I also recognized that he was giving my paper more attention than even my best professors had given me in my highest-level graduate school seminars.  This was, I knew, a tremendous learning opportunity.  I knew that if I could succeed in revising this manuscript, then I had a chance to move a big step up in selling articles, and he probably would take more from me.  During the next two weeks I spent every spare minute I had trying to do exactly what he asked me to do.

            I started with what I felt was one of the hardest parts of all: deleting one third of my words.  I cut paragraphs, read, cut sentences, read more, and cut words.  When I was done, I had only cut about half as much as I needed to.  I read more and began cutting severely: I started tossing anything that was not absolutely necessary.  Wherever one word would work as well as two, I used just one word.  Even if a story or a phrase was really excellent, if it in any way repeated what I already had said, I got rid of it.  And I was amazed at the result.  I thought my paper would become choppy and lose a lot of its interesting phrases and thoughts.  Instead, it became a powerful, streamlined statement of what I wanted to say, with immediately relevant and always interesting thoughts, quotations, and stories.  In short, it was one of the best articles I ever had written.

            After that, all of Harvey's other suggestions were easy.  They took a large amount of time, and I was very short on sleep for the next two weeks.  However, I worked with a kind of joy in my heart, for I knew that even if Harvey would not take the final result, I had learned a powerful lesson as a writer, and the rest was just icing on the cake.  His other suggestions, though minor and numerous, were in many cases helpful, too, as it turned out.  I learned how to better polish my paper because of his many suggestions.

            I sent the manuscript back to him, both dreading and and looking forward to his response.  A week later, I received another call from him.  "Hi, Richard!" he greeted me.  "About this manuscript you sent me, do you have a pen?  I have a few more revisions to make."  My heart dropping once again, in despair I took more notes.  When he was done five minutes later, I asked, "Does this mean you probably won't publish my article?"  "What?" he asked?  "Well of course we'll publish it.  It's very good.  All it needs is these few final changes.  You did a great job with it."

            I was almost too exhausted and nervous to thank him, but thank him I did, as heartily as I could.  And that was the beginning of a good, strong editor-writer relationship with Harvey that lasted over a year, until he moved on to another magazine that did not use freelance writers.  Every time I would send him a new article, he would call me and give me voluminous notes on changes to make, and he always added that I should cut the size of the article by one third.  One day, at the end of such a call, I remember commenting, "Harvey, you forgot to tell me something."

            "What?" he asked.  "I did?  What's that?"

            "Cut the article by one third."

            "What do you mean?  It's just fine as it is.  Don't cut it!"

            On that day, I felt I had reached a milestone.  I was consistently writing strong, lively articles in which every phrase and every word counted.  In fact, the very last article I wrote for Harvey was so good that when he told me he was leaving the magazine, I decided to try to sell it elsewhere.  And I did, for about twice what Harvey's old magazine paid.  His work with me helped me move up another significant step, and I always will be grateful to him.  He taught me how to revise and edit like a professional.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conclusion--Getting Ahead with Writing** | C:\Users\Richard\Documents\My Webs\CWI-OLD\images\write.s.gif |

            These are four of my most important stories about learning how to write well.  The first, "Charlie the Chicken," shows my first encounter with really writing something that was exciting and meaningful to me.  This can happen to anyone at any age.  The second, "The Temple of Dr. Doom," shows how in spite of my poor teacher, I learned how to write to satisfy his needs and expectations.  This story shows the great importance of learning to write for your audience, whether that audience is an instructor, a loved one, or a boss.  The third story, "The Light Dawns," shows how I discovered a basic method of putting papers together that works well for me--the steps of my own, personal process of writing--something each of us needs to discover for himself or herself.  And the fourth, "The Joyful Dread," describes how I seized an opportunity to become a much better writer when an editor pushed me almost beyond what I could tolerate; and this story also illustrates how important it is to do thorough, complete, thoughtful revising and editing so that everything counts in our papers and the stories and ideas in them leap out to the readers with importance and relevance.

            I have been writing for quite awhile, now, and I have had many dozens of my articles and essays published.  I also have had a couple of handfuls of my stories, poems, and photography published.  In recent years, I have had a number of academic essays published in scholarly journals and magazines.  It must be clear that I like to write.  I still would be a professional writer if I didn't love teaching more.  However, what I like and love is beside the point.  What is to the point is that writing is necessary--large amounts of writing, oftentimes--for many professionals.  Writing well often is one of the keys to success and advancement.  And the great majority of people who need to learn how to write well will go through experiences similar to mine.

           So, I wish you luck with your own versions of chickens, Dr. Dooms, dawning lights, and joyful dreads.  If you accept and meet their challenges, rather than avoid them, you can become an ever better writer, too.

-------------

Most recent update of this page: 5-14-04

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***WritingforCollege.org*** is at [www.WritingforCollege.org](http://www.WritingforCollege.org) and  [www.CollegeWriting.info](http://www.collegewriting.info/).  First publication: 1 Jan. 2004 (unless stated otherwise above).  Contents and Page Design © 2002-2012 by [Richard Jewell](http://www.richard.jewell.net/).  Nonprofit copying for education is allowed without permission.  Images courtesy of [Barry's Clip Art](http://www.barrysclipart.com/), [Clip Art Warehouse](http://www.clipart.co.uk/), [The Clip Art Universe](http://www.nzwwa.com/mirror/clipart.com), [Clipart Collection](http://www.clipartconnection.com/), Microsoft Clip Art Gallery and [Design Gallery Live](http://dgl.microsoft.comdefault.asp/), [School Discovery](http://schooldiscovery.com/), and [Web Clip Art](http://webclipart.about.com/).  Click here to contact the author: [Richard Jewell](http://www.richard.jewell.net/contactRichard.htm).  I welcome questions, suggestions, and notes about links. | [http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jewel001/CollegeWriting/images/1man82-thumb.gif](http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jewel001/CollegeWriting/home.htm) |