

A-B-D-C-E

**A REVOLUTIONARY NEW
YET AGE-OLD SOLUTION
RE: SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING
(RE)WRITING**

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PART I
AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COLLEGE BOARD'S
COMMISSION ON WRITING
IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

THE LONG STEWING FRUSTRATION over entering college freshmen's inability to write became front page news yet again when the College Board announced the formation of The Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges on Tues., 27 Aug., 2002. You, the sixteen-member cross-section of US college administrators, would be issuing your findings in six to nine months' time, according to the College Board. It was an announcement that came just one day after the College Board's rival testing agency, ACT (American College Testing) announced that it was adding an optional writing section to its test, and two months after the College Board itself announced its plan to graft an SAT2-like writing section onto the SAT1. The "new" writing component, the College Board said, will require students to compose a logical, cohesive piece of prose on a pre-selected topic within a thirty-minute time frame. Now, at last, the report is out.

Writing—how to do it meaningfully and how to teach others how to do it—will continue to be a national topic for redefinition and debate between now and March, 2005, when the new SAT1 is slated to debut—and well into the future.

It is a subject I've been following closely as more than a bystander. I know how to teach writing. Successfully. Day in day out. Real writing. Not Potemkin Village-five paragraph essay writing. Epiphany generating writing. I have discovered that there is an invisible layer of steps in the writing process. If you ignore its existence, and even more importantly, if you yourself have never experienced it, you will fail at teaching writing.

Put simply, said often, and rarely understood: real writing is rewriting. In my experience, a finished, crafted piece of writing that reveals a universal truth takes five distinct steps, each with a day of downtime in between to allow each draft room to breathe. *Real* writing cannot possibly take place in thirty minutes.

Altruism played no role in the College Board’s “decision” to radically overhaul the SAT1. It had no choice. At a keynote address at a November 2001 conference on “Rethinking the SAT: The Future of Standardized Testing in University Admissions,” Richard C. Atkinson, Chancellor of the University of California, released the findings of a four-year long research study which, for the first time, correlated test scores with freshmen’s actual academic performance at eight of its undergraduate universities—UC Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz. Summed up succinctly: There was no correlation. Zero. The system-wide University of California study irrefutably documented that the SAT1’s long-standing claim to be the preeminent pre-indicator of student academic success in college is in fact completely baseless.

Furthermore, the UC Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) report specified the following other areas in which the SAT1 failed to meet its needs: all UC-approved standardized admission tests must be content based; fair to all test-takers; diagnostic; and include a writing sample to provide an alternative to exclusively multiple choice responses. “No currently available test meets this specification...” it stated pointedly in February, 2002. [See Appendix B]

What sort of writing sample the University of California might be looking for it did not specify, but the entire country has a long way to go before it comes anywhere near to meeting UC’s rubric for how to pen a model college entrance essay. The elite statewide system has long considered its mandatory two-page personal statement second in importance only to an applicant’s GPA. Each UC application packet contains an excellent, step-by-step 5,000-word “how-to” manual, “Characteristics of a Good Personal Statement,” which unambiguously guides prospective students through each stage of the essay-writing and rewriting process. [See Appendix D]

Here are just two excerpts, which illustrate the degree of interactive time and energy the UC Regents obviously know is involved in writing anything first rate.

FROM “CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PERSONAL STATEMENT”

Benefits from several drafts and feedback from others. Revision allows an essay to grow. Revising is not editing; revising is the act of “re-seeing” and of looking for those parts of the essay that would benefit from more explication, more (or less) vivid language, or even deleting parts that simply don’t work to move your primary theme forward. Similarly, feedback from others can help you identify those parts of the essay that work well—and those that don’t....a poorly written essay signals a reader that you...simply did not put enough time into composing your essay...(T)here will be other applications whose essays are very polished, so don’t disadvantage yourself. [See Appendix D]

Getting Feedback on Your Personal Statement. It is very important that your essay be your own creation and be conveyed in your own words, but it is okay (and even encouraged) to get feedback from others....After receiving feedback, and before revising, write down the comments you receive and look for patterns....Ask your readers to comment on grammar or syntax last (problems which often disappear in a second draft, so commenting extensively on grammar in the first draft is often a waste of your reader's time.) [See Appendix D]

Surely, one might reasonably think, the College Board intends to adopt these solid tenets of good writing into its new test? But no. Even as the College Board was regaling the press with its proactive-sounding new focus for SAT2005, it was posting these self-serving responses to "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQs) on its website (www.collegeboard.com.) The *EDITORIAL COMMENTS* are mine:

FAQ: What is the difference between critical reading and verbal reasoning?

...A shift to "critical reading" indicates more of a shift in how the test is described rather than a true construct shift... *TRANSLATION: SO, UM, NOTHING'S CHANGED EXCEPT THE NAME???*

...The term "verbal reasoning" is confusing and difficult to explain to students... *TRANSLATION: EXPLAINING COMPLEX STUFF IS REALLY, REALLY HARD, SO EVEN IF WE WERE TO WRITE DRAFT AFTER DRAFT TO EXPLAIN OURSELVES CLEARLY AND CONCISELY, THE KIDS WHOSE FUTURES ARE RIDING ON THE TEST'S RESULTS PROBABLY WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND IT ANYWAY. ERGO, WE'RE OPTING FOR THE NAME CHANGE...*

...While analogical reasoning is important, this construct has become rather artificial... **"RATHER ???"** *IS IT POSSIBLE THE ETS ITSELF HASN'T MASTERED THE RUDIMENTARY CANONS OF WRITING, WHICH IT MAKES OTHER PEOPLE AGONIZE OVER? RULE 8, SECTION V, Strunk & White's THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE: "AVOID THE USE OF QUALIFIERS: RATHER, VERY, LITTLE, PRETTY..."*

FAQ: What can such a short test tell you about a student's writing ability? ...Research has shown that increasing the time allocated for the writing sample does not substantially affect validity or reliability... *WHAT???*

FAQ: How will this writing test find and assess creative writing talent?

...This test will not assess creative writing. It is intended to identify the basic writing skills required for writing college papers and answering essay questions for students in all disciplines ranging from education to science. *THINK LONG AND HARD ABOUT THE COLLEGE BOARD'S EQUIVOCAL WORDING OF THE QUESTION. COUCHED IN IT ARE CRUCIAL ISSUES TO WHICH WE WILL BE RETURNING.* [See Appendix C.]

Let's say, for argument's sake, that requiring students to write a lucid, well-organized essay in thirty minutes flat is actually a serious goal of educators. Then permit me to contribute a free-of-charge, effective, even fun-filled scenario for how to go about it. Here, with an irony that evidently escaped the College Board, is an actual SAT₂WRI topic:

Novelty is too often mistaken for progress. The statement suggests that what is new and different is often confused with advancement. Consider writing an essay in which you relate this statement to...

I know...THE SAT₁'S IMPENDING REVISION!

So, OK, it's test day. You have thirty minutes to fill two lined 8 1/2 x 11 pages. If you stop to think about the question, you'll run out of time by the bottom of the first page. But this is a five-paragraph essay you're being asked to cough up; therefore the actual question is irrelevant.

Before you do anything else, for your first paragraph, write:

¶ 1: I agree/disagree with the statement (*Repeat the aphorism in its entirety. Now restate it in your own words. This frees you to set up your answer your way.*) Examples from literature, history and my own experience bear me out...

Then, at the bottom of the second page, say:

¶ 5: Clearly then, based on these examples in literature, history, and my own experience, a solid case can be built that supports/opposes/synthesizes my belief...
(*Repeat the original aphorism in its entirety.*)

There! That takes care of your thesis statement and your conclusion.

Worried about how to fill all that space in between? Don't be. Under your already written thesis paragraph, write the beginning of your topic sentence for your Lit paragraph:

¶ 2: An example from literature that bolsters/opposes my position is...

One-third of the way down the remaining space, write the beginning of your topic sentence for your History paragraph:

¶ 3: An example from history that bolsters/opposes my position is...

Now, two-thirds of the way down, write: evenly spacing down the two pages:

¶ 4: An example from my personal experience that bolsters my position...

Now back up to the top to fill in the blanks. For Lit, pick anything by Shakespeare you've read recently: title, author's full name. Use characters names and as many supporting details as you can cram into three or more hastily constructed sentences)...

For History, plug in, oh, say, the Civil War, including its dates, some key figures, its main issue, and as many other details tangentially related to the topic as you can possibly cram into three or more hastily constructed supporting sentences...

For your personal experience? If you've already written your college essay, apply it here. Otherwise, cite your most important activity.

Be sure to throw in some "hence"s, "heretofore"s, "conversely"s, and the ever-popular "ironically" on your way to a best possible score of 200 points.

I will leave it to you, the members of the College Board-appointed Committee of 16, to determine whether this robotic exercise in any way constitutes writing, "creative" or otherwise.

FAR MORE TROUBLING TO ME is that this test's true purpose is entrapment. To colleges it's a 'given' that high school kids today can't write. But what if one of these kids turns in a killer personal statement on his college entrance application? Flags go up around the admission committee's table. "No way in Hell he/she wrote this! Pull out his/her file! Let's just see how he/she fared on the SAT₂WRI," as if the only recourse when unaccountably confronted with stellar student writing was to administer the linguistic equivalent of a drug test.

There are indeed on the Internet at present at least 250 websites that invite students to download pre-written themes and essays (up from thirty-five just three years ago.) But if the obvious solution to plagiarism does not automatically occur to any educator reading this, then consider yourself part of the problem. Teachers can sidestep the entire icky issue simply by framing assignments which can only be written through the point of view of each individual student, on a subject or an issue he or she has chosen, and so has stakes in. Yes, that is a tall order for a teacher. Yes, it is much easier to download off the Internet another teacher's previously taught topics.

That teaching writing is viewed by teachers as a burden to be avoided, has been amply documented—Professor Child, with whom we opened, being but the first example. Geraldine Joncich Clifford's 1987 National Writing Project Technical Report, *A Sisyphean Task: Historical Perspectives on the Relationship Between Writing and Reading Instruction* is full of many other citations. To put a

dollar figure on the short shrift writing has historically received, when one calculates all public school spending on textbooks, personnel, and materials related to writing and reading, Clifford reports, “for every \$3000 spent on children’s ability to receive information, \$1.00 is spent on conveying it—less than 1/10 of 1% of all educational research dollars.”

Part of the reason teachers avoid the subject is that neither of the two current prevailing approaches to teaching writing ever quite delivers. “Process Writing,” which emanated from the Dartmouth Conference forty years ago, welcomed freewriting into the classroom, but, to date, teachers remain fundamentally unable to help students translate its raw creative power into disciplined completed compositions.

Likewise, teachers who take the opposite tack: calling for students to write to a traditional rhetorical design, never quite tap the fluidity that comes from a good old Peter Elbow-y spew.

As for arming high school students with the college level skills to “write across the disciplines,” which the College Board states it “hopes” will happen simply by adding a writing segment to the SAT1, David R. Russell in this abstract of his book, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*, wryly keeps our attention trained on that pesky deeper issue as it manifests itself at the college level:

In a long flirtation with writing instruction in the disciplines, universities have begun hundreds of programs to teach writing across the curriculum in the twentieth century, all of which became marginalized. Writing is not integrated in content learning, and professors continue to resist teaching writing and reading papers. These failures reflect the persistent attitude that writing is a skill, a form of recorded speech, that writing instruction is remediation, and that the academy is a single discourse community. They also reflect the myth of transience, the belief that students’ inability to write is a problem that will soon, or eventually, be solved.

The structure of the university makes cross-disciplinary conversation unproductive, hence the fantasy that the academy is a single discourse community, for to acknowledge the diversity of discourse conventions would require more attention to one’s own conventions and present a clear necessity to teach them. General education reforms reinforce this delusion, as well as the myth of transience, by calling for a unified society and explicitly remedial writing courses. Writing in the disciplines is much more difficult to learn under these conditions, which contributes to the perceived high status of the disciplines, but also opposes social equity by creating a hurdle that many students cannot vault.

Community college English teacher, William S. Robinson, in his award-winning article, "On Teaching Organization: Patterns, Process and the Nature of Writing," finds no panacea in that customarily prescribed antidote, the 5-paragraph essay:

Quickly conceived and easily remembered, (it) allow(s) for high output of words; facile logical compartments can be plumped with examples and detail....(But) the tendency of teachers to prefer the unrealistically simple has disturbing implications. Composition teachers seem to ignore the interrelationship between the cognitive development of their students and their rhetorical development. In looking for simplistic, highly signaled organizational patterns in their students' writing, the teachers ignore content.

More importantly, in what they teach and what they value, as indicated by their grading, they send the message that it is better to define the writing task simplistically...than to define the task complexly and run the risk of getting a poor grade...Does this mean that we should never teach such elementary organizational formulas as the 5-paragraph essay and the rest? Yes, in my view, it does.

So ingrained, however, is the paradigm of the 5-paragraph essay that not only is it the College Board's sole solution to testing writing on the SAT 2005, but the College Board's own official handbook, *The College Application Essay* by Sarah Myers McGinty, also falls straight into the same familiar trap. The first half of her book is a stilted, off-the-mark account of how to write a 5-paragraph essay, to which the confident and creative examples of actual students' college entrance essays bear not a particle of resemblance.

Finally, Rachel Toor, late a member of Duke's admissions committee, and author of *Admissions Confidential: An Insider's Account of the Elite College Selection Process*, (St. Martin's, 2001) gets the last word on the state of educators' own personal discomfort about writing:

A few years ago, the *Journal of College Admission* started a column asking admissions deans to contribute essays answering the questions on their own applications. They asked me to write one. "I'm not a dean," I said. "Ask a dean." "I have," said the dean who began the column. "No one will do it." That response, he said, bespoke a silence more embarrassing than any essay written by an applicant.

The fallout? Taught writing by teachers who themselves do not know how to write, students, whose thoughts are still fragily evolving, find their returned papers covered with exhortations that demoralize without providing concrete guidance—"Awkward!" "Fix!" "Unclear" and, worst of all, with humiliating sarcasm. In their ignorance, teachers daily lose the opportunity to locate an essay's frequently buried real first sentence; lack the proactivity to route content that prematurely summarizes down to the last paragraph where it logically belongs. Gone as well: the chance to show students that a

parenthetical observation needs to be explored, because in all likelihood, it contains the true mandate of the essay. They themselves have never learned how blocks of text can literally be lifted up and rearranged in a series of exploratory groupings.

Failing to understand the process, teachers also lack the flexibility to connect with the spontaneous, offbeat originality of an exceptional category of students. I routinely work with students diagnosed with ADD/LD. If, as freewriting gets underway, it becomes clear too much will be lost by having a student struggle with the mechanics of gripping a pen or grappling with a keyboard, I begin transcribing a student's spoken responses to my focused questions, handing the printout to them at the end of our session as a take-home assignment to expand upon for next time. Time after time, the essay that painstakingly but lovingly results, irrefutably puts to rout that obsession among admissions officers: how there can indeed be a disparity between the piece of writing a passionately engaged student submits, and one which is in response to a desultory academic exercise. And should anyone harrumph "I hardly think having students 'merely' articulate their thoughts and feelings amounts to writing," I feistily retort, "Take that up with Homer."

EXAMPLE OF STUDENT WRITING THAT EVOLVED FROM A COMBINATION OF WRITTEN DRAFTS AND ORAL TRANSCRIPTS

I'm manning the lifeguard chair at the shallow end. The sun is beating down on my shoulders; my back feels like it's on fire; the sweat that's streaming down my forehead stings my eyes. To top it off, Scott, my nemesis who's twelve, has made his customary entrance.

First he waves at me to make sure he's got my full attention. Then he dives into the pool where it says "No Diving." He emerges, grinning, and begins to splash me. He does this every day, just as, right now, he's straddling the lane lines, which he's not supposed to do.

"Off," I beg, once, twice, a third time...until, inevitably, Scott succeeds in getting me to lose the little cool I have, gets me to blow my whistle, call for the senior lifeguard, to exile Scott to the deep end, beyond my jurisdiction.

There, for the next hour, it'll be a raucous game of Marco Polo with other kids his age. Then he'll break for a snack bar lunch, followed by an afternoon spent down on the beach tormenting the lifeguards there by messing with the rafts. But he'll be back at four o'clock to bug me.

Suddenly it occurs to me why I know Scott's routine by heart. When I was his age: too old for the beach club's day camp, too young to have a job, this is how I spent *my* summers. There even was a lifeguard whom I used to pester!

His name was Shark. He'd been a lifeguard for at least five years. The spiky way he styled his hair set him apart from the other lifeguards; but he was also older, cooler, wiser. I longed to have him see me as an individual, not just another kid.

One day I chanced to see a side of Shark I never dreamed existed. I saw him arrive for work. Emerging from his just parked car, his hair conservatively combed and parted, he wore a suit and tie. "I'm a law student," he'd explained.

Until that very moment I'd thought of Shark as a fixture at the pool who, at the end of each day, at the end of each season, got packed away with the blue and white umbrellas and the deck chairs. That day, for the first time, I'd glimpsed a wider world beyond "no running on the deck... no diving in the

shallow end... and “no leaning on the lane lines;” grasped with a budding, new-found maturity, that there were other ways, such as conversation, to relate to him than lamely straining to impress him. For the first time, I’d comprehended that when I reached the next stage of my life, I would not become some stranger known as an adult.

...Like clockwork, Scott is back, but try as he might, since my recent insight, this afternoon his customary antics don’t provoke me. Instead, I’m looking at a boy who merely longs for someone older he can talk to. I see myself as a role model with maturity, coolness, wisdom to impart. “You’re old enough to understand that pool rules are meant to keep you safe,” I say. “Behaving like a kid is not the way to gain my friendship.”

I survey the pool and the people in it who are my responsibility. I see a group of campers, eight years old or so, in identical blue tee-shirts, pass by—on their way to ‘arts and crafts, just as I’d done once. Over in the deep end, I see the perpetual game of Marco Polo. No doubt Scott will rile me in the future. But not for very long. Today, in this place, where day after day, year after year, summer and its rituals are timeless and unchanging, for a long satisfying moment I can read Scott’s future. When I head off to college and thence into the realm of suits and ties, *Scott* will be the lifeguard with someone who is twelve—someone who was just like him (and me)—to bug him. —Griffin Boucher

How have I come to have such an authoritative “take” on the subject that appears to have the majority of educators buffaloed? Gotta sec...?

(FOR THE CONCLUSION TO THE OPEN LETTER, SEE CHAPTER 6 ON ENCLOSED CD-R)