

How can a teacher of writing have hated writing in high school?

By Jill Swanson

What can we do to stop the hatred in our classrooms?

Writing has always been a driving force in my life. Whenever I had a problem, I'd write through it so that I could see all the details that were stuck in my brain. Talking it out didn't always get to the root of my problems, but writing sure did. When I was happy I wrote it out so that I would have a chance to go back into the situation whenever I wanted to and I could see my happiness on paper. I wanted to fully remember things, and by writing my life out, I could relive things through my own writing. I will always be the first person to say writing was an important and influential part of my entire life. I also will say with out thinking that I was always a willing participant in classroom writing assignments. When I began to look back on my school days, I realized that my memories were distorted. I was a willing and capable writer when I didn't have to write for school, but I was hesitant to be a writer within school and for assignments. As a future teacher of writing, I pondered on why I was so excited to write on my own, and yet so horrified (?) to participate in writing in class. I wondered why this split in personality and further I wondered when or if this changed and how—as a teacher of English—one could fix this dilemma.

My entire life I had loved to write. I don't know what I ever classified what I was doing as writing, though. It may sound strange, I know, but for me the word "writing" held a different connotation than what I was doing. I was "recording." I recorded my life

and what I felt, believed, wanted and dreamed. I recorded it all down on paper in a journal. So, what *did* writing connote? I think the word “writing” implies a formalistic approach, something that needs to be modified—not something free. It was something that needed to conform. Grammar and spelling were there to reign in creativity. Writing was to be judged. I didn’t want my recording of life to be judged. Writing was to be shared, recording was for me to look back and remember. Writing needed an audience, while recording needed only me. I recorded pieces of my life into journals since I was in the 4th grade. For my birthday, my godmother gave me a beautiful journal. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. The thin journal was covered with pictures of lush pink rose blossoms. The colors popped out as if the flowers were in front of me, ready to be picked. I wanted to write exquisitely about the mundane happenings in my life because this journal demanded pure exquisiteness! I recorded every detail of my life in that journal. The details of course focused on boys I liked, my school day and the occasional fight with a friend. Even more important than my everyday doings, I would concoct wild stories that were floating within my imagination. I wrote about conversations I imagined might one day happen, I planned for imaginary future events, and I began to pretend what other countries must be like. I began recording the fairytales my once 11-year-old self had hidden in her imagination. I now know this as writing, but it had nothing to do with my previous thoughts on what writing was.

In my journal, I began to record things more vividly as I grew older. I was advancing as a writer, but I never attributed it to anything except growing older. I can now see that it was my widening vocabulary and my reading more books, but more over it was writing more and seeing what worked on the page and what didn’t. Here are three

examples of my journal entries: one was from 12-years old, one was from 16-years old and one was from 21-years old:

June 1993

I played softball today. It was our first this year. It was hot. We won. I scored 2 times. I like my team. We played against Herb. His team is REALLY hard. I want to play baseball and softball, not only softball. Katie W. plays both, see its not only a boys sport like they say it is. I hate that my brothers say it's a game for only boys. I hate it. I want to be able to play both.

October 20, 1997

Walking through this space. Enjoying the wind. Just standing in the dark, enjoying the wind brush against my face. It felt magical tonight. I walked into the garden, just there, not happy or sad, just being. And as the wind picked up speed, it felt as if it were just for me. It was there to carry away or blow away any "blahness" and lift me up. I shut my eyes and just felt. Awakening my senses. My eyes heard all the sounds of a fall night, and my skin felt the chill in the air. The wind.

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I can't believe I'm nearly through with college! I feel as if I've become a true college student. When I began school, I felt like an outsider. I saw people doing all the "college things" and I didn't seem to be able to pull them off. Simple things I do daily now, I used to look at and hope I could once do. I looked at the girls with short hair wondering how they could look so grown up. I longed to be one of the English majors who sat, back against a tree, reading a novel for their class. Even now, as I do these things I still look on as an outsider. Maybe everyone feels on the outside. I look at the quad 10 till the

hour, sitting by my tree with book in hand, and look at the hustle and bustle as students rush to class. All in their own little worlds, barely glancing at one another. Never letting anyone in. Well, if that's what being an insider is, I'll be an outsider and love every minute of it.

Throughout all of my schooling, I was always an average student. I was never one of the brightest nor was I one of the dumbest (?). I was just average—so I think my story may be the story of many average students. I never really cared about doing terrific; I was satisfied with getting a B and not having to work for it. In my writing classes, I always did just enough to be an adequate grade. I did not care about the assignments we were given. Why didn't I care? I didn't care because why care about something only my teacher would see? To me, there was not a vested personal interest in what I was writing. It seemed to me that as long as I wrote a paper with all the information required (the very least), that it would be good enough. I think if I had a real audience, it would have made a difference. I never realized how the ways we were learning to write would make a difference later in life. When we learned narrative, expository and persuasive essays, I simply wrote them in the form that I needed to. I realized as I was writing that the teacher did not care about my story, my step-by-step paper and I wasn't really going to convince her/him to change their mind about something. Why were we really writing in these classes? I had always known that we were learning how to write in these genres. I also knew that we weren't accomplishing anything by just having our teacher read our essays that weren't going to change his/her

mind anyway. I believe that had we had a real audience and a real purpose for our papers, I would have done better and learned more about writing.

Another reason I didn't like writing for classroom assignments was because of social implications attributed to people who liked to write. I never wanted to do "too good" on my assignments in class because I didn't want to be titled as a nerd. If people showed any positive emotion when a writing assignment was given, it would be looked down upon within a classroom setting. When we were given an assignment, and let's say it was 6-9 pages, a student would be made fun of for caring too much if they wrote anymore than 7 pages. Why would any students put more work into a paper than the minimum necessary? It was also as if a student was trying to be a teacher's pet if they did more than adequate work. Still, it was nothing for me to write a 4-page letter to my friends throughout class. That was not a stigmatized thing because it was not a formal piece of writing to be turned in. Students don't consider notes to be "writing." Once I hit college it took me a while to realize that I should work harder and get As, and not to be satisfied with floating by and getting Bs. There are certain things I think need to be accomplished in order for these stigmas to go away. I will tell you what needs to be done, but I cannot tell you how to do it. I don't know yet on these ones. Students have to *want* to strive to get good grades. Students need to know that their writing can make a difference in the world, not only in teacher's grade books. Students need to be proud of their work. I think if these things got accomplished this would change everything in a writing course.

In high school, writing a paper and going through drafts just weren't priorities in my life. I had so much going on and so much going through my mind that I didn't want

to expend energy on something that didn't matter to me. If I had seen how much writing was really a part of my life already with no connection to school, I think I would have cared more. One reason I didn't care was that I wasn't always choosing the topics, or I was choosing a topic that I already knew so much about that there was no real reason to write it. I don't know how (as teachers) we will be able to make this change. We can let students have free rule of what they want to write about, but really if there is something they know so much about they won't learn anything throughout their writing process. I think an important aspect of picking a topic is it needs to be something you're interested in, and have a little knowledge about, but be writing after learning the new information. Although, I think that might be too much to ask of a high school student. It would make more sense in the college classroom than a high school classroom. This is an issue I think I need some experience in teaching before I can come up with a solution.

There were some times in high school that I wanted to write, it was when I knew other students would not see my work. If the pages weren't counted and the work wasn't graded then I liked to write. When we journaled in class, I really liked that we were given that time. I enjoyed when we were given time with a guided free write. I never felt like I was being judged by that writing, so I felt comfortable just being free. Can this really be the only time I enjoyed writing in the classroom? No. I also liked when everyone had to write; when it wasn't an option. I liked when teachers enforced no talking and everyone only paid attention to what they were doing. I am one of those students that cannot write if people are talking. Also, if everyone is writing, no one is pointed out because they are writing. As a teacher, we must enforce quiet writing as I would enforce quiet reading. The idea of sharing and other students knowing what the

other has done is coming into play here. I think there needs to be a strong sense of community and a classroom based on respect before students are willing to share their writing. That is one thing all teachers should work on in their classrooms.

I still write in journals pretty consistently. I still record the mundane and exciting happenings in my life the things I hope to accomplish, what is happening around me, and the occasional fairytale. Although, now I also write for school. I do not write only enough to get a B. I do not now write for a grade. I write to share what I know or what I believe. There is a purpose to my writing in school. If I am to write a persuasive paper, I will truly write to persuade. I use the forms I know about writing to help me make a paper better. The rules I now conform to make my writing freer. The rules allow for freedom by allowing me to express all I want and share my opinions, but they allow me to reach any audience. All people will be able to read all of the ideas I throw their way because of the grammatical rules I use. The people/readers can only attack my ideas and not my faulty ability to write.