

# Writing For Dummies

By Kyle Cranston

My wobbly legs led me into the dimly lit room which was much smaller than I had expected it to be. I looked around and saw several small tables; each decorated in their own unique way-some with mystic table cloths others with lacey doilies. Big, silver stars hung from the low ceiling. Since I was about ten minutes early for my appointment, I sat down in the waiting area and waited impatiently for my name to be called. After fidgeting at the table for what seemed like an hour I finally heard it, “Kyle?” I looked up and a pretty woman dressed in a black vest with long blonde hair signaled for me to come over. I stood up, my pulse racing and headed over to her table with my list of questions clenched in my right hand. It was time...

Her name was Psychic Linda and she was about to tell me my fate. *Now, you may be wondering what the heck my seeing a psychic has to do with English and the writing process. And though this may seem like a crazy way to begin this personal account, I promise that this story does in fact have a point.*

The minute I sat down in front of this fortune telling genius, she took one look at me and said, “Do you like to write?” My mouth dropped open! I happen to love to write. I have been writing short stories and other creative stuff since I was old enough to hold a pen. When I told Psychic Linda that yes, I do like to write she responded, “Well honey, you’re gonna to be a writer. That’s what you’re destined to do.” My eyes got really wide and my head was spinning. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! I grinned and then I asked Linda if I was going to be a good, well known writer or just a writer who loves to write but is never really good enough to actually make it in the writing world. “Honey, I wouldn’t have told you if you weren’t going to be published. I wouldn’t even have picked up on it,” she retorted. Linda was one sassy lady and she boosted my self-confidence in the span of fifteen minutes.

*Let’s face it. Writing has never been my strongest point when it comes to the discipline of English. Yet, I plan on being an English teacher. Go figure. It’s not that I hate writing. In fact, I love it. My biggest problem was that I just never thought that I was any good at it. This poor attitude towards my abilities stemmed from my writing failures in both junior high and high school.*

Since a lot of students tend to dread the “W” word and I too remember how frustrated writing used to make me; I decided to map out my journey with writing. So, join me on a quest as I revisit the ghosts of both grade and high school past and relive the trials and tribulations I faced with writing as well as the moment of self-actualization where I discovered that I wasn’t such a bad writer after all. I present to you, my personal writing memoirs.

*Before reading any further, please note that I have changed all the names of the people I talk about in this memoir in order to protect their identities. I figured since this is about English and writing I would be sassy and rename everybody after famous writers and fictional story characters. I’m so clever!*

*To begin, let’s do the time warp and go back to my days as a student at Brookwood Jr. High School where I first began to doubt myself as a writer. Picture this*

(insert *Golden Girls* reference here) the year was 1994 and I was just a rambunctious little eighth grader with a really bad hair cut, who just wanted to get out of jr. high and start high school. However, I was not a problematic student. Even though I hated jr. high I still worked hard. I received awesome grades and always made the honor roll. In fact, I had to hide my homework on a daily basis in order to protect it from big, copying bullies.

Anyway, I had this language arts class that I absolutely hated. We were supposed to be learning grammar but it sure didn't feel like we were. The class was out of control and there was not a whole lot of learning going on. Because of the chaotic nature of my fellow classmates, my teacher, Ms. Tolkien, was often forced to compensate her teaching for dealing with discipline problems. Therefore, I feel that I did not get the grammar foundation that I truly needed for my future educational endeavors. This was my first downfall as a writer.

The tedious five-paragraph essay was engrained into our brains during the beginning of freshman year of high school. Practically every piece of writing we were assigned had to follow that structure. However, my freshman English teacher Mrs. Salinger, decided that she wanted her class to attempt a different style of writing. She was a pretty cool teacher, who liked to joke around a lot with us. She was bubbly, liked to talk about her home life, and would call us crazy names like, her little dumplings. In order to introduce Richard Wright's personal memoir Black Boy, Mrs. Salinger made us write our own autobiographies. *I figured, "Hey, the story of my own life, I can do that. It will be a piece of cake."* *Was I ever wrong!* The day Mrs. Salinger handed us back our newly graded masterpieces I looked down at my paper and my excitement came to a halt...not only did I get a big fat C on this assignment, but it was also the first time that I ever felt like I was not as smart as my peers. Being one of the top students in my eighth grade class, the concept of being the mediocre student was very new to me. Downfall number two: my confidence in the realms of writing began to wither...

I was born on a cold, snowy January day in 1980. This shocked my mom and dad a great deal because I was not due until the beginning of February. After my mother gave birth to me, she looked down and realized that I had her nose. She told me she was sorry because she knew that it would end up being rather large someday.....

Sophomore year also put a damper on my writing self-esteem. I had a really tough literature and composition teacher by the name of Mrs. Darcy. Over the summer I had made a promise to myself that I was going to work extra hard this year and prove to all of my teachers that I was in fact an above average student. I was going to get my act together and make the honor roll if it killed me. But apparently, I had set my sights too high because I don't think that I have ever been as frustrated in a writing class as I was in Mrs. Darcy's.

She was one of those young, pretty teachers that all the kids thought was cool and hip. She wore flowered hippie-like dresses, long skirts, and ruffled shirts. Her classroom was decorated with lots of posters of puppies and pictures of Europe. Most of the students thought she was cool and sweet. And I admit that I did too at first...

At the beginning of every class Mrs. Darcy would saunter straight over to the overhead and put up some question or topic that pertained to the previous night's reading assignment. She then set her little timer and gave us ten minutes to write a short essay with a strong thesis statement. This is how we began class every single day. This is also where I realized that I could not develop a thesis to save my life. I just could not grasp the concept of a *strong* thesis. Freshman year, I was able to construct five paragraph essays with little or no problem. But for some reason the process of writing a strong, single paragraph, short-answer essay with a superior thesis was incredibly difficult for me.

It also did not help that Mrs. Darcy did not enjoy my work at all. For the first part of the semester I did not receive better than a C on any assignment. This was very frustrating to me because I was trying so incredibly hard. I went in after and before school for extra help on a weekly...sometimes-daily basis. I worked as hard as I could to strive to become a better writer. It just seemed like nothing I ever turned in to Mrs. Darcy was good enough. I ended up getting a B in the class but it was the hardest B that I ever earned. Even though I did an ok job in the end, I still had very little confidence in my writing ability by the time the semester was over.

*My favorite character in Of Mice and Men is George. I like George because he is such a good-hearted person. Though I like George, one could argue that he is not a good person because he kills his friend, Lenny, in the end of the novel, I still like him anyway. George does not kill Lenny out of evilness. He does so because he is forced to and has no other choice. George knows that Lenny is a danger to the world. George also knows that Lenny is in great danger because he killed Candy. In my opinion, George is a better person for ending Lenny's life. Lenny was dangerous and also in danger of being attacked and possibly killed for his crimes. George did what he had to do and I think that he is a better person because of it.*

My junior year is when I fell off of the writing mountain and hit the ground so fast, I fell through it like the Wile E. Coyote always does after a failed Roadrunner chase. I decided that I wanted to expand my writing horizons and join our school's literary magazine. The only problem was that each student on the staff needed a recommendation from one of their English teachers. Naturally, since I spent so much time with good, old Mrs. Darcy, I went to her for a recommendation. *BIG MISTAKE!* As soon as I left her classroom, she went straight to the magazines sponsor, *behind my back might I add*, and told him that she did not feel that I should be a part of the magazine. She felt that both my interpretation and my writing skills were not advanced enough for such an elite and prestigious activity. When the sponsor gave me the news that Mrs. Darcy would not give me the recommendation and that I had to either quit or find another English teacher, who would, I struggled to blink away the tears. I could not believe that a teacher that I worked so hard for would totally discount my abilities like that. For the first time in my life I felt stupid in an area that was not math related. *And since I am absolutely retched at math, this problem was very serious.*

So, I went to see an old friend, Mrs. Salinger, and she welcomed me back with open arms. She said that she would be happy to give me a recommendation that she felt  
Cranston 4

that I was in fact competent enough to be a part of the literary magazine staff. She even volunteered to write a note to the faculty sponsor on my behalf. I was very grateful to her because she boosted my self-esteem. I was glad that at least one of my teachers believed in me.

In addition to feeling like a failure in my academic writing, I also suffered frustrations in the realms of creative writing. I was praised for having such a powerful imagination and great short stories in grade school. My teachers thought that I had a wonderful imagination. So, naturally I was always writing short stories, plays, and poetry in my little Harriet the Spy-like notebook. However, when I anonymously submitted my work to this magazine the other students on the review board tore it to shreds. They said it was juvenile and uncreative. One of my peers even laughed at my work. Of course, no one knew that the submissions were mine, but I still felt awful. I cannot even count the number of times I left our meetings fighting to hold back the tears. Once again I felt like a failure. I felt that my dream of becoming a writer was dead.

*Note: You have probably noticed that I have included some of the snippets of my writing from high school that I talk about in this piece; however, since my early creative writing is not the best, I have decided to save you the pain and not include any of work from what I refer to at "the not-so-pretty years." Please don't feel cheated. You will thank me someday for this noble effort.*

Senior year was a much different story. In order to prove my intelligence to myself and everybody else I knew, I enrolled in an honors humanities course. The teacher's name was Mr. Crutcher and he was one tough, old bird. He had to have been in his middle to late sixties and was really tall and skinny. Honestly, at times, the way he talked reminded me of Mr. Burns from the TV show *The Simpsons*. *Of course Mr. Crutcher was not creepy and did not look like he was about to drop dead at any moment like Mr. Burns does...ok, so maybe he was not like Mr. Burns after all....*

Anyway, this was one of the *hardest* classes of my life, *college courses included*. Mr. Crutcher actually had us writing real papers. Not the trite little essays the other English teachers made us do, but 4-6 page papers with topics that ranged from literary analysis to theoretical approaches in literature. Prior to this course, I had never been exposed to such aspects of writing. I was terrified that I was going to fail this class with flying colors and to top it all off ten of my classmates switched to the regular Humanities course within the first week of school.

Mr. Crutcher was the kind of teacher who belonged in a university not Homewood Flossmoor High School. He was the kind of teacher who answered a question with another question. He was the kind of teacher who referred to us as his "little humanities scholars." He was the kind of teacher who would not let us settle for anything but the best. He was the kind of teacher I want to be.

Mr. Crutcher may have been tough with us, but unlike Mrs. Darcy, he did not make me feel stupid or insecure; he did just the opposite. When we did not do our best, he made us do it again until we did. When one of us did not understand something, he explained it until he saw the light go on in our heads. This man challenged me to work

my hardest and when I did, he then pushed me to work even harder. There were many times when I still needed extra help and when I did, he was always willing to stay after  
Cranston 5

school with me. I spent many afternoons working with Mr. Crutcher and his patients with me never waned. During our brief time together, Mr. Crutcher made me believe that I was an intelligent person with a lot to offer the world and that if I worked hard enough I could be the kind of writer that I wanted to be.

As a way to end our year together, Mr. Crutcher had us create a project that I like to think of as my all time favorite. He had us construct some kind of writing project that described where we would be and what we would be doing ten years from graduation. We could be as creative as possible so I decided to pretend that I became a famous, Academy Award winning actress and wrote an article about me for People Magazine. I loved this assignment because it allowed me to be creative as well as focus on my goals for the future. Mr. Crutcher loved my project! I started to feel that there was hope for my creative writing after all.....

*The majority of the lunch time crowd at a local Beverly Hills hot spot takes notice as Kyle Cranston elegantly walks in and takes a seat across from me at a small table. She doesn't even notice the multiple pairs of eyes on her (mostly male ones) as she smiles, says hello, and picks up her menu. "The neatest part about Kyle is that she does not realize the effect she has on people." says best friend Elijah Wood, She generates a warmth that makes people flock to her. I'm so lucky to have her in my life."*

Truthfully, Mr. Crutcher is one of the reasons why I am going to be an English teacher. *I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher someday; I just did not know which subject I wanted to teach or whether or not I wanted to teach elementary or high school.* But Mr. Crutcher sealed the deal for me.

Don't get me wrong. It's not like I'm this pro/all-star writer now. I still struggle with formal writing at times. I still feel that some of my papers do not turn out the way I want them to. I also proved in this class that I am not very good with the whole grammar thing. But, now I know that I have the tools to succeed with writing. All I have to do is just use them and maybe, sometimes put a little extra effort in my work. *Besides, there is nothing wrong with working hard. My mom always says "working hard gives you character."* As frustrating as writing can be for me at times, I know in my heart that I would not be the person I am today without working hard.

*So there you have it, my writing memoir. I hope you enjoyed it. I also hope you learned something from it. Writing is not easy for all students. I am sure that there are many people who share some of the same frustrations that I do. Teachers need to take that into consideration. I know I will because I plan to strive to be a Mr. Crutcher and not a Ms. Darcy.*