

## WRITERS' HISTORIES

**Editor's Note**

*In “Red Marks Don’t Always Bleed,” Ashley Heidbrink recalls the woman who taught her how to craft an essay through numerous revisions. Her casual tone and light humor belie the complexity of the writing. Look at the dashes and semi-colons in the first sentence: “I looked down at the paper in front of me—it was covered in red ink—words were crossed out; grammar was corrected; no white remained on the paper.” What does punctuation like this tell you about the author? Heidbrink also uses a variety of sentence styles and lengths in her writing. For example, she asks, “Was my paper really that horrible?” and later, “. . . what would I write about?” What effects do the questions create in this essay?*

*Heidbrink describes the process of revising in great detail. She most likely revised the essay that follows more than once before she turned it in. How does she feel about the revision process? How do you feel about revising?*

**Red Marks Don’t Always Bleed****Ashley Heidbrink**

I looked down at the paper in front of me—it was covered in red ink—words were crossed out; grammar was corrected; no white remained on the paper. The first glance took my breath away. Was my paper really that horrible? No. I realized that if the paper could not be fixed then the paper would just be handed back to me without a mark on it. With a sigh of relief, the blood rushed back to the rest of my body. All the paper needed was some tweaking! But, who was responsible for turning my paper into a sea of red? The literary genius herself: Mrs. Barbara Heimbürger. She is the woman to whom I can give most of the credit for helping me create not only one of my best essays, but also numerous others.

The summer before senior year English, I received my summer homework: write the first draft of an application essay for one of the colleges we planned on applying to. Upon reading this assignment, my heart sank. What would I write that would show my chosen universities that I was unique and that they wanted me? I was not special! I had never won any big scholarly competition; I did not get a perfect score on my SAT’s; I had never endured some traumatic experience that shaped me (in the big scope of the world). So really, what would I write about? During that summer, I started several essays, but when I showed them to my English teacher, she did not see a “college essay” in the bunch.

So I decided to take my essays to Mrs. Heimbürger, a retired English instructor who volunteered at my school. We read over my essays together, and we came across one I had written, a two-page essay about a fellow student, Caroline,

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who committed suicide the previous year. It was a very impersonal essay about what exactly happened the day I found out and about how it affected me. Mrs. Heimbürger read through it, underlined two sentences, “The next week in Yearbook we had to decide how to handle the events of the past week. Would we give her a page ad to remember her, or just a small picture with a caption saying how we would miss her,” and said to me: “Okay, now go write an essay about this.”

So that’s exactly what I did (would I really not listen to a woman who is known to have brought some of the best college application essays out of hiding?). Once, I wrote a rough draft about my job as the yearbook editor dealing with this tragic event, I took the draft to Mrs. H. again. We met at least once a week as we polished this essay: working out the problems then turning it into a truly original piece of writing that no one besides me could have written. It showed how I learned to love my life and appreciate it, and I think this essay was really the best remedy for helping me fully get over Caroline’s death as well. It had my own flair that did not confine me to the rules that I had learned in eighth grade English. I learned how to pull the images out of my head and into words:

Caroline’s suicide was a *carpe-diem* experience, one that made me appreciate the beauty of the sun on the mountains, the feeling of hitting a perfect ‘kill’ during a volleyball game, the taste of ice cold water after a hundred-plus-degree day in the desert, the rush of hearing my favorite song on the radio, the embrace of a loved one on a bad day, and a smile from the guy I like.

I was so proud of this essay and truly felt my skills as a writer showed through. I would not have captured my personal reaction to a tragic event without the help and guidance of Mrs. Heimbürger.

Because I finished my essay after a long, tedious process of revisions, I learned the importance of revising and editing. I also discovered that putting in a little extra time and really making an effort produced a worthwhile essay that I can be proud of. Before I wrote my college application essay, I would write essays, but only half-heartedly. Now, when I write, I do not just write to get it over with, but instead, write to express myself, and usually, if I spend the time to revise and go over it, I am not just done with an assignment but I have created a piece of work to be proud of.

From the day I first met with Mrs. Heimbürger, I learned that the infamous “red pen” should never intimidate me. The red pen was not there to mock me or diminish my talents, but instead to help me improve and create a clear, concise, on-target essay. After the eight revisions that I went through to write my college application essay, I created a piece of writing that impressed the

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numerous universities, but Cal Poly was not one of them. The place I truly fit in did not even require an essay, but I know that my college application essay helped me find my inner writer, which is more important than any college acceptance.

*Ashley Heidbrink is a business administration major at Cal Poly.*