

EDITORS' NOTE

In Kelsey Shimasaki's writer's history essay, she describes her struggles to overcome the discouraging experiences of Ms. Firestone's freshman English class. Shimasaki decides to attend writing tutoring sessions at her high school where she learns about "showing rather than telling, revision, and incorporating details and a personal touch" into her works. How does she show rather than tell in this essay? What details does she provide, and how does she add a personal touch to this essay? What writing strategies have you learned and how do they continue to help you succeed as a writer? Shimasaki's essay offers readers a lesson: sometimes a negative experience can push us towards improving our writing. What lessons have you gained from your past experiences as a student, and how have those lessons informed the ways you view yourself as a writer?

Becoming a Writer

Kelsey Shimasaki

"It's okay, some people just aren't writers."

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. These were not the words of encouragement I was expecting to hear when I went in to see my freshman English teacher, Ms. Firestone, about the "C" I had received on my first high school essay. I watched the bright red "C" on the top of my paper blur as my eyes began to water and I fought back tears. How could she be so discouraging?

For as long as I can remember I have always enjoyed writing. Out of all the subjects in school, it was the one that came the most naturally to me. I loved being able to express myself creatively with words, whether it was through poems, short stories, or even essays for school.

Throughout junior high I had become accustomed to receiving effortless "A's" on nearly all my writing assignments. I just stuck to the five paragraph format my teachers expected me to, and eventually essay writing became like a basic math equation. Simply start with a short introduction, add a few paragraphs worth of supporting details, top it off with a brief conclusion, and the desired product of a high score would be achieved. My consistently good grades led me to consider myself to be a pretty good writer, but my confidence began to falter after Ms. Firestone's comment.

At first I just wanted to give up on writing. What was the point of trying to improve if my own teacher didn't seem to believe I'd ever get much better? Each morning as I sat in class Ms. Firestone's words would play over and over in my head like a broken record. I couldn't concentrate and my grade in the class began to slip. Then one day, a couple of weeks after my meeting with Ms. Firestone, as I tuned out her lecture on transitions or persuasive writing or whatever it was she was droning on about, I realized that I had given into what she said. I had become someone who was not a writer. I hated Ms. Firestone for what she said to me and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of being correct. It took me a few minutes of searching through the hairbands, pencils, and handouts cluttering my backpack before I finally uncovered my "C" essay. I uncrumpled the paper that had been balled up and stuffed into a corner on the bottom of my backpack, smoothed it out, and placed it on my desk. Once again, my eyes were immediately drawn to the "C" at the top. But I no longer felt discouraged by the grade or even Ms. Firestone's comment. Staring at the "C," and its sharp, nearly pointed semicircular curve,

motivated me to improve. From that moment on I decided I would prove Ms. Firestone wrong. I was determined to do whatever it took to become the best writer I could possibly be.

After conferencing with Ms. Firestone about another essay on which I had received a “C+,” I realized that going to her for help was frustrating and pointless. Our entire meeting consisted of her drawing unidentifiable red marks on my paper. Whenever I asked how I could improve or what I should change in my essay, her response was always the same. She would point at a sentence or paragraph with her long, bright red fingernail and say, “Just look at what I circled.” I knew I was doing something wrong, otherwise my grades wouldn’t have been so low. I just didn’t know how to fix the weak points of my writing and Ms. Firestone’s suggestions were not very helpful. It didn’t take me long to realize that if I wanted to become a good writer, it was not going to be easy.

Over the next few months, I spent countless hours pounding on my keyboard as I produced one writing assignment after another. However, these writing assignments were very different from the ones I hastily wrote in junior high without putting in much thought. By attending writing tutoring sessions at my high school, I learned about the importance of skills such as showing rather than telling, revision, and incorporating details and a personal touch in my writing.

As I wrote, I’d watch the hands on the clock repeat their familiar pattern of gliding from the twelve to the six and then back to the twelve again as the hours passed by. There were nights when I would spend so much time writing or revising my papers that I would run out of time to complete my homework for other classes. Sometimes it felt like I spent more time sitting at my desk, staring at the glow of my computer screen, as the tips of my index fingers rested on the bumps of the “f” and “j” keys and I thought desperately of a topic to write about or how to phrase a certain section of an essay so that it would be perfect, than I did actually writing.

By the end of the semester, my hard work paid off and I managed to earn an “A” on my final paper. While Ms. Firestone was probably the worst teacher I ever had, I managed to learn more from being in her class than I did in a lot of my other classes. It was because of Ms. Firestone that I became a better writer. Of course, it would have been much easier if she had offered me useful suggestions rather than discouraging words, but if that had been the case I doubt I would have had so much of a desire to improve. I learned that sometimes it’s necessary to take matters into your own hands and that anything is possible with determination. Receiving a “C” didn’t mean that I was not a writer, but that I could be a better writer. Most importantly, I realized that the only way to become a good writer is by being dedicated and knowing that there is always room for improvement.

KELSEY SHIMASAKI is a journalism major.