

WRITERS' HISTORIES

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**Editor's Note**

*Using metaphors in his essay, "A Writer Before and After," Colin Whaley composes a history of his experiences as a writer. His transformations become stuffy sweaters, math problems, and a mess of ropes. He finds himself "stuffed" into a "claustrophobic" way of writing throughout high school, and yet also recalls freer moments in his earlier writing. Ultimately, his focus lies in his inability to decipher or define good writing: Is it merely concision, a methodical equation with only one right answer, or is it creativity and beauty, never a wrong path to a final product?*

*Even in this short piece, Whaley uses imagery in the form of metaphor. How does his method allow the reader to "see" the abstract images he communicates? In what ways could he have expanded or clarified his metaphors?*

**A Writer Before and After****Colin Whaley**

Now, as a "writer," I no longer understand what it is I am supposed to do, because I have been jostled to the point of confusion. My experiences throughout childhood and young adulthood have revealed that writing isn't a defined thing; it's a changing and fluid concept. Why? Because my writing has rarely if ever been consistent. Allow me to explain: Throughout grade school and high school, different teachers have influenced the way I write, and my attitude toward writing itself.

My sixth grade teacher drilled into me the importance of creativity and the beauty of what she called "showing" writing. What that is, I am not quite sure, but I know it involved making everything lacy and decorated. Nothing was "red" or "curious." Instead, everything was "crimson" and "inquisitive." At first I liked the idea because it meant that there was more originality in everyone's writing, especially mine, as I would be the avid thesaurus hunter. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought I was in the movie *Jurassic Park*. I enjoyed using fanciful, complicated words and sentence structures to describe the simplicity of my ideas. I felt unconstrained, because writing was never "wrong." It was whatever I wanted to make it, and at that level of schooling, I must admit with arrogance that I was really good. Next comes high school.

In high school, my teachers pulled me into the sweater of what I like to call stuffy writing, because it was constraining and claustrophobic. Oftentimes it drove me to breathe the same dead air into every paper, without freshness. They taught me to get to the point, to cut the bullshit, to write only what will get me what I want. At that time, I was very driven by my grades and by achievement. Cutting the crap was the way to "achieve." My Advanced Placement

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teachers trained me to write in a very concise, direct manner. For example, my writing became like a math problem: this plus this makes that, which infers that this other thing must be true. Crimsons became reds and I was no longer “inquisitive” about the beauty behind writing. At this point, I wrote mainly to practice for my AP exam essays, which enveloped formulaic approaches to writing. Timed writing forced me to state my point and move on “if I wanted to pass.” No bullshit. Other non-AP English teachers in high school encouraged me to use my creativity, to express emotion and all of that kind of thing. Unfortunately, I did not see a point to that, really. My AP teachers stressed that the real world doesn’t give a damn about my emotions. To a point, I believe that still to be true. I suppose they pulled the wool of that stuffy sweater over my eyes. Consequently, my writing developed into a methodical equation to attain a specific goal—most times, that goal was a letter grade.

So what can I conclude from this mess of ropes that has been pulling me in different directions for my entire writing career? I am not sure. I like to write with a “voice” and I also enjoy being brief and to the point, although sometimes I tend to ramble on and on, stating everything twice, three times, in different ways, using so many mini-clauses, separated only by commas, like this, and this, and this. Writing is still so ambiguous to me, because I have never been able to define what real writing, much less real good writing is supposed to be. Now you are telling me to “write” about that. I always just regurgitated what I was taught, and admired the great writers that I have read. Okay, I am cool with that, but you have a long way to go before you will reshape my view of what writing is supposed to be, because right now, this class looks like another rope, slithering, ready to strike me in the side in order to try to yank me back to sixth grade. But I feel it will be much more than that, and I like the excitement. I don’t think I want to charm this rope snake.

*Colin Whaley is an architecture major at Cal Poly.*