

### Editor's Note

"I Finally Got It" author William Conner explores his process of losing and then finding "it" again through writing. As you read, ask yourself what getting "it" in writing means. What happens if you don't get "it"? Does the ambiguity of the word "it" distract the author's message?

Conner asks his audience to consider how rubrics or guidelines that emphasize the importance of an essay's structure over its content affect writing; for example, he writes, "I was able to be successful by concentrating on organization because teachers were more concerned that I followed the rules they had set forth, rather than what my writing actually said." Should form drive content in writing? What do you think?

The essay concludes by discussing how writing has become "fun" again because the author can focus on proving his thesis—and its development—before he concentrates on the essay's structure. How is Conner's new writing process similar or different from your own?

## I Finally Got It

William Conner

“...midway through my junior year, I just got it, writing made sense to me, it became more like a game, it was fun...it was a challenge, but it was fun,” Mr. Quinn, my British Literature teacher, said while returning our first essay of junior year. Mr. Quinn probably said this to make the class feel better about the dismal grades we were about to receive, somehow trying to keep our spirits up while delivering a blow to our confidence. However, I was skeptical of a statement that described writing as fun regardless of its motives. I had not found writing fun since my early elementary school years, and I could not believe that the analytical essays we were writing could ever be fun. *I just have to get it; that seems simple enough*, I joked sarcastically with myself. Shockingly, I did get “it” during my junior year.

What had kept me from getting “it” all those years? There was a time during first and second grade when writing was easy and fun. I wrote an entire mystery series all starting with two words, “The Missing,” followed by something I thought would be intriguing, pencil, brother, and book to name a few. At that time, I was free to write how I wanted to, there were no guidelines or rules, and everything I did was praised for creativity. Looking back at how much I enjoyed writing during those early years, it is hard to believe that I lost “it” so quickly.

I began to lose “it” during the third grade with the introduction of the “hamburger” paragraph. I understood that the top bun was the intro, the lettuce, tomato, and patty were sentences that went under the topic sentence, followed by the bottom bun, which was the same as the topic sentence, except reworked a little bit. Being a math guy, this was an easy formula for me to use to create paragraphs. For the rest of my elementary school years, writing became standardized. I knew what to do when answering a question in paragraph form; I would just use the hamburger formula. Yes, I lost “it,” but I was consistently successful, so not having fun while writing was not a big deal.

Junior high brought about the introduction of the five-paragraph essay and a reworked paragraph structure. Having something quantitative to measure against created a goal in my mind while writing. I only had to write five paragraphs, and then I knew that some part of my essay would be correct. Organization of paragraphs moved beyond the “hamburger” style to something more analytical. A paragraph now followed the pattern of: topic, to lead-in, to data, to warrant, to conclusion. To me, this new pattern was just another formula to memorize. Very robotic, I know, but I was able to be successful by concentrating on organization because teachers were more concerned that I followed the rules they had set forth, rather than what my writing actually said.

The rubrics my teachers used for grading essays in junior high exemplify how quantitative grading was. For example, in order to receive full credit for a thesis in a comparison essay, all I needed to do was name two people, the title of the book, the author, and the three supporting points of my essay. The rubric did not even acknowledge the importance of having a thesis that is controversial or worth writing about. The rubric also gave full credit for a conclusion that only restates the thesis and three supporting points. It did not matter if the conclusion did not add anything of worth to the essay; as long as there was a conclusion paragraph to fulfill the five-paragraph requirement, I would get full credit. In another essay, I was supposed to define respect, and my definition was, “Respect is to be respectful towards others.” Looking back at that definition, it makes no sense. The word that is being defined should not be included in the definition. Even with that flawed statement, which my entire essay was based on, I managed to get an “A” because I followed the rules my teacher had set forth for that essay. Being graded on such quantitative measures, rather than on actual thought, reinforced my belief that it did not matter what I wrote as long as it fulfilled the guidelines set forth by the teacher.

No earth-shattering developments occurred during my first two years of high school. Teachers essentially gave us the topics we were supposed to write about, and since we would discuss those topics in class, there was not much development of my

own opinion in my work. By continuing to concentrate on organization, I was able to get by without any major failures, missteps, or accidents. Junior year then hit; the year that is often associated with a student's future success in education. I thought I was ready for my British Literature class; I knew I wasn't going to thrive, but I was going to do fine. I wanted to get a "B", and I thought I could do that by using my tried and true method of focusing on the five-paragraph essay structure that had been hammered into my head for the previous four years. I was proven wrong when Mr. Quinn handed back that first essay.

A "C", I knew I could not have any more essays returned with that grade if I wanted to reach my goal. His comments at the end of my essay could be summed up in one word, underdeveloped. I did not understand how that could be, it was fully developed. I had an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs (all of which followed the proper structure I had learned), and a conclusion paragraph. Add those up, and that is a five-paragraph essay, exactly what I was told to do to write a complete essay.

After accepting the grade that I received, I met with him to sort out what he wanted me to do. Apparently, he was no longer concerned about the number of paragraphs, or if my paragraphs followed a certain structure. No, he wanted me to develop my paper. He wanted me to concentrate only on what my thesis was trying to prove. He related writing an essay to presenting a case before a jury. I had to prove to the jury that my thesis was correct. It did not matter how long the essay was, sometimes, the case is simple, and the essay will be short. Other times, the thesis will be difficult to prove, and consequently, the essay will be longer.

Once writing an essay was put into the terms of trying to prove a case, I stopped getting comments of "underdeveloped" on my papers. While writing, I try to picture myself as a jury member listening to my case to see if it is persuasive enough. I would like to blame my years of not having "it" on all my teachers from the third to tenth grade, however, that would not be accurate. Their focus on structure for so long has made it second nature, allowing me to focus on proving my thesis in the best way possible. Mr. Quinn, however, has had the greatest impact on my writing career. Writing became fun again my last two years in high school, there were many challenges along the way, but having the big idea of what I was trying to accomplish with my paper helped me through those challenging times. Because of Mr. Quinn, I have gotten "it" back, and I hope that I do not lose it again.

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