

“I’ve Almost Always Done What They Wanted”: A Profile of Chris

by

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We generally see our best students as tough and ready to succeed forever, but the story that Chris is about to tell us shows us that even our most successful English students are vulnerable. Chris was his school's NCTE Achievement Award nominee, and though he found out how to please his teachers, both praise and criticism took their toll on his view of himself as a writer. At the time I interviewed Chris, he was having difficulty writing. I was studying the writing experience of Chris and forty other eleventh graders through a series of three in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and written protocols. Had I interviewed Mr. Schultz, Chris's eleventh grade writing teacher, he might have described himself as many English teachers would: committed, rigorous, and uncompromising in correcting students to obtain good writing. But Chris's view of himself as a writer was formed in response to Schultz's criticism of his work rather than to Schultz's good intentions. Students like Chris yearn for praise from yet another teacher. Without learning to please themselves, they lose desire to write unless assigned.

Listening to what Chris said as we sat in a conference room in his suburban high school during the in-depth interviews helped me understand both the complexity of the dynamics that affect even our best students' writing and the strong role that teachers play as responders to writing. As responders, we need to rethink our use of praise and criticism in the writing classroom. In this profile, constructed of interwoven interview material, we can learn from Chris as he makes sense of the experience he has had with writing across the years.¹

My parents both encouraged us to read a lot. My father taught fifth grade for a couple of years before he and my mother got married, and my mother had been teaching elementary school, too. They read to us all the time. We had a giant chair. Usually my father would sit on the chair, my younger two brothers in his lap. I would sit on the back of the chair above him. And that got me really interested. I learned to read by hearing words a couple of times,

¹ If you are interested in other facets of the research with Chris, see Linda Miller Cleary, *From the Other Side of the Desk: Students Speak Out About Writing* (Boynton/Cook of Heinemann, 1991) and "Affect and Cognition in the Writing Processes" (*Written Communication*, 8[4], 1991, 473-507).

and then you look at the words and figure out the same words have the same meaning. I also read comic books, and I still like comic books. I've got to admit that.

In kindergarten they had you draw a picture and explain it, and they would write down what you wanted them to write. I don't remember the first time that they had us write ourselves. They taught us how to do our names. That was a real achievement if you could only have a few letters backwards. At the library they would give you little stars to encourage people to read. I was on the top of the list for awhile.

When I first started writing, there was a tremendous influence from the books I read. I was reading these books about a boy inventor, and so I stole one of their plots, and I just wrote it and made a cover, and I drew some pictures to go along with it. I would kind of make up the sentence as I went along, without thinking about it ahead. I had a whole string of "said the boy." It was fun. I wrote a lot of that kind of story, copies of things I had read, science fiction, giant robots, things like that.

We didn't really do much writing until fourth grade. [Then] we had little essays, and in fifth grade you had to turn in a certain amount of stories, one a month, a monthly booklet. I was turning out this high class stuff. I think part of the reason that my writing gets too wordy, too many thoughts in one line is because I'd like to make these complicated sentences even when I was in elementary school, and teachers encouraged that cause not a lot of kids were doing it.

I never had too much trouble with grammatical errors. In fourth and fifth grade we learned about nouns and things, but grammatical rules never really sunk in. I didn't make many grammatical mistakes, maybe because I had done all this reading. I knew how it was supposed to read. I knew what punctuation to use and things like that. So even now I would probably do very poorly on a test that had me diagraming sentences, but I won't make any mistakes in grammar when I write.

I get frustrated now when I am writing. It is a chore, but when you don't have much work in elementary school, and you can write about anything you want to, then it was enjoyable. I won this little contest; it was Halloween, and you were supposed to write about something supernatural. When they read it out loud, I knew it was mine, but I didn't recognize every single line. It had just kind of poured out instead of being contrived. Then it was fun to write. Now when I hear something that I have written, I have it all in mind because I agonize over it when I write it.

I remember one time that I was trying to write something for a contest, and I couldn't get off the track of this television show I had been watching. My dad kept saying, "You have just copied down what they have said." He wasn't nasty about it, but after that I enjoyed writing more when I had my own original idea. All that reading kind of directed my thoughts. I couldn't always

think of something original. I was really conscious of it. I took it really seriously.

I can get a lot of pleasure out of writing if things are going smoothly, and I know what I want to say, and I don't have to agonize over it. I do better when I am not too concerned. Last year we were supposed to write some historical story. I wrote about a boy that worked in some factory in London, and it went really well because I was really interested in it.

This might sound kind of strange, but when I was doing papers in European history, that was easier because I didn't have to come up with any original ideas. Maybe that goes back to what I was talking about before. Sometimes I get an assignment that has a lot of creativity, and that's the stumbling block. After I get the ideas, I will be all set.

In the sixth grade I wrote this story about a terrific battle. And I read it out loud to the class, and I was surprised. I had put all this intensity and emotion into it. He [the teacher] was a little surprised. I could see by his face. I had gotten so involved in the story. And it wasn't a heroic story about sacrificing your life and honor; it was pretty unpleasant. I finished and my face was all red. I wasn't blushing. My heart was beating faster, and he had this really thoughtful look in his face, and said, "That was powerful." Generally in school I behaved. I would just sort of sit and do what they told me. But I felt like I had exposed myself to the class then, that I had made myself prominent. I was nervous because all these people were staring at me all of a sudden. I would rather not have put my feelings out on the line like that for everyone to see. And then I had a sort of block that happens to everyone once in a while. On two occasions I didn't turn in a paper, and the other kids in the class did. I guess the teachers overlooked that, but I felt badly, guilty about it for a long time. Once I couldn't think of anything original. The other...they always taught you to cross things out with a line, instead of scribbling it out, and I scribbled, not hastily or in a sloppy way, but because I had changed a lot of things while I was writing. We just did one draft, and they asked me to do it over, and I ended up not doing it at all. I guess I didn't appreciate the criticism, and I was kind of afraid to deal with it after that.

In sixth grade we had to write a letter as if we were the main character, Huck Finn, in the author's style. Something about that bothered me a lot. He said, "You look really unhappy," and I said, "I don't think I can copy someone else's style." I never really figured out why it bothered me that much. Maybe it was because all that time I was worried about thinking of my own original ideas. I was not happy that someone was telling me that I had to copy someone's style. Also, I never particularly liked it when teachers told you that you had to do things in a certain way.

[In seventh grade] I worked a lot harder because we had very little homework in sixth grade. That was a wrenching transition. I found though that English teachers were still impressed by the complexity of my writing. We had to make up some stories. I was trying to be impressive in my language, and in

my depiction of events. I would describe things with too many adjectives and that kind of burdened the writing.

One time the teacher read one of them out loud, and I sat there and heard all these adjectives, and I realized that it just didn't flow at all. I was thinking that it must have been hard for her to read. It was fancy, but it wasn't really substantive. I was not pompous, but I was really more serious than some people were. I had a teacher tell me once that it was part of older child syndrome. She sat in class and said, "You are probably the oldest. They are eager to do well to show the parents, and then by extension later, become successful adults, be responsible." She was right. There are some disadvantages, too, to being the oldest.

In eighth grade the teacher told us not to use passive voice, but we really didn't understand exactly. So we'd try to avoid "have" and "was" words. In that class I remember feeling really proud because the teacher, one of the hardest teachers, had raised my grade because she liked the way I wrote. She told me I was a good writer, so that gave me a lot of confidence. Coming to your own conclusions and having the burden on you to make statements, that is difficult. That started in ninth and tenth grade.

I was always confident in my writing in school, and I always did very well. The English Department nominated me for a National Council of Teachers of English Achievement Award. Two of us submitted our entries, and they were accepted. They had to be sent to the finals. That was this fall before my problems started.

This fall I had "Masterpieces of Western Civilization" from Mr. B. You were spending a lot of time drawing your own conclusions. We had an exceedingly hard teacher, too. When I took a test, I wrote furiously on four or five pages while everyone was doing the same thing, but when I got the grade back, and I got one of the highest grades in the class, I was overjoyed. Another time when we were talking about what Plato was saying, I didn't really have any original thoughts of my own. It wasn't a spectacular piece of writing. But I had a few ideas that were what he was looking for. I did well.

At the beginning of the year I wasn't having trouble with my writing. Once I thought of something concrete, I could write about it. At the end of the term I had achieved all of my goals, all A's except in Chemistry. But the pressure had been so intense. I wasn't ready for more pressure. And then the writing block set in, and I've had trouble doing this writing second semester for Mr. Schultz.

There have been times when my self-confidence wasn't as high as it should be. When I'm gone on my confidence, that results in writing blocks, and frustration. I get to the point where everything I think of... when every word that I think is not satisfying. There's nothing I wouldn't rather be doing. I wander around, and I eat a lot. It's really serious. Sometimes it takes hours to build up to the point that I can say something. And I can't just say, "I have

to get this done, so I have to start right now." It just doesn't work. Nothing of value occurs... though that is just my interpretation because no one else gets to see it.

[My parents] were always supportive in my education. Now that I'm having trouble in school for the first time, now they're telling me I have to work. I was terrible in Math because that isn't the way my mind works. It makes me less inclined to do my work. My mother doesn't understand that I can't just study and do better. It doesn't work that way. That's my limitation, end of the line. I am going to take science and math as long as I have to and then forget it. The talent I have in language, in writing ... maybe I have that because I don't have other abilities, abstract math.

I've been a little worried because I've lost my self-confidence. It was apparent to Mr. B. that I lost confidence in my writing. He went to school with my father. He told me that my father had been one of the better students in the school. I asked my father about that, and he just brushed off his ability. He skipped a grade, and maybe he felt out of place. So he went to the university, and he dropped out and then got back in and finished. He wasn't really doing what he wanted to do. He had had a lot of different jobs. Mr. B. told me that at just about my age my father lost some of his self-confidence, too, and his direction. When I heard it, I thought maybe there's something in our background—not genetic, but like environmental—that causes this failure to happen, a failure—not as a person or human being, but as a student. Mr. B. meant it as an instructive conversation.

Now I have trouble concentrating. I don't know if it's just Mr. Schultz' fault. I can't say exactly what the problem is, or I would do something about it. It's something emotional I suppose. It's involved with academics in school. It's not an outside thing in my life that's causing the trouble. It's a real problem because it's started to crowd my other work. I'm sure Chemistry and writing aggravate each other, having two classes that weren't going well. One class requires that kind of thing that I always thought I was good at, and the other requires things that I wasn't confident about at all. Once I lost my confidence in the one, it aggravated my feelings that I was having with the writing because I was having criticism from the teacher there too.

This wasn't the first time my writing had been criticized, but for some reason it really bothered me. And then I subjected the writing myself to even greater criticism that was really devastating. My writing this year is cut into last semester and this semester. They're entirely different experiences. Part of it might be the teacher, and part of it is the pressure of the second semester, junior year, grades, and everything.

I used to write papers pretty spontaneously, and it would be fine. Before I'd get a thought [and] put it into words. Now everytime I have the thought, I can't express it the way the teacher is looking for, like non-passive, non-Victorian, non-colloquial, so that ruined the way I wanted to start on it, to build on it. It just made everything take more time, and finally I would do papers in my free periods [or get them in late].

I think my writing is as good as anyone else's. [Other students] aren't openly critical of me—probably they aren't at all. But that's just what I think about, [that they will] find out that I'm not doing well and alter their perceptions of me. That's pretty unrealistic because if they're really my friends, then that won't change their minds at all. Next Tuesday I have to take a ditto master and copy one of my papers, pass those out, say what revisions I made, and talk about the writing process. I want to pick one out that people won't mind listening to. Every person in the class wants to be witty. I thought I was good at making little puns and sarcastic remarks in my papers; now I am worried whether my writing was funny enough, good enough.

I had a 3.75 grade point average, top member of the class. My grades aren't going to come close to that this quarter, and my whole average will come down. I might even get some C's and that bothers me a lot. I've never been too wrapped in grades, but last grading period I got a C from Mr. Schultz, my first C. I just want the year to end now.

Mr. Schultz says I have to really change everything to do the way he wants. And I can't. Underlying everything [is] my writing style. He calls it: "Victorian, archaic"; "It's too cluttered"; "It's too nineteenth century." I admit that teachers have told me that before, even the ones that liked it. They say, "It's too tight; have some shorter sentences, give the reader a break every once in a while." Mr. Schultz didn't like that at all, so I was changing every thought into some other form. And it started to sound simplistic to me. But I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere with him if I kept on doing things the way I had been doing them before.

He would say to do ten revisions incorporating sensory language, [when I already had] more than enough. The idea of doing ten separate changes and setting them down on paper instead of going over the whole paper—that's like bits and pieces and really disorderly. The complaint I've had in the past was that I hadn't really said anything of value. And now I've been told the problem is the way I'm saying it. That's a real switch.

When I went into Mr. Schultz's class, the English Department had already nominated me for that award. So other teachers had told him about me. And I saw this class as really a test because it was pure writing. It was like I had to prove myself all over again to someone new. He said, "You have some talent; don't lose it. We have some things we can work on." And that didn't bother me; that's the mildest form of criticism I can possibly think of. Everyone in the class was surprised when they got back their first few things, low grades. I turned some things in late, and he thought that I was trying to talk rings around him. And the reality of the situation was I was having trouble with getting the work done. And although I didn't exactly worship him as human being, he's another teacher that I could be on good terms with. At the end of the quarter, you were supposed to put on a little slip of paper what grade you thought you deserved, and I gave some thought to it and looked over my work, and I put a B-, and I got that C+ for the term. That was a real blow to my confidence.

One of the things bothering me is that I've lost some of my creativity. Generally I try to think of something that's really exotic for a title, but the last time I passed in a paper, I couldn't think of anything for about twenty minutes, and finally I put down something I didn't like. I looked on his desk, and about twenty people had the same title.

I don't really write much on my own anymore, although I always say I'm going to. In ninth grade we started this note, and the note eventually became "The Note" and stretched to about five hundred pages. We would start stories and then give it to someone else. Most of it was really ridiculous humor, but you didn't have to please any teacher. One of my friends still has it. We would start stories and then give it to someone else. You could do whatever you wanted to do. Now I'm just not motivated to write when I have the time. I've thought of my own stories, and something different too. Now I think I'm more satisfied with the thoughts I have in my head than what it will look like when it's written.

Most important to me right now is getting out of this school for the summer, to get over all this academic trouble I'm having right now. In college, my major will be in English. Sometimes I see myself as teaching courses in English, maybe high school or college. If I do that, I'll probably have to write in my spare time, to make a living off of it, I don't know. I could end up anywhere, working on any kind of literary thing. I'll hopefully get rid of my over-crowded style of writing. I think that'll be an improvement. I think that in human situations everyone needs to be entertained. And then some writers have the serious task of examining life. Mr. B. brought in some quotes by James Baldwin who said that writers are the conscience of society, to educate the people. I thought about this for awhile. At least I'll be writing in the future, you know, for my education. You have to be able to write to really understand what you read. You have to find out whether what you're saying is true to you or not.

I've almost always done what they wanted. I was never perfect, but in terms of what the people who have control over you, like teachers, expected of you, I got used to being, to doing exactly what everyone wanted. I wasn't used to criticism. In elementary school, I just went along with the rules instead of thinking things out.

I really feel bad, being so frustrated that I can't deal with my work. I used to wonder how people could not do school work. I wondered..."that's really bad for you, damaging to you." I was mature earlier, and then I lost some of that later, I guess. I didn't like to get criticism, cause I wasn't exposed to it. But this problem worries me a little bit. I've started to wonder if I was able. I got to a point where I couldn't handle all the tensions, especially the ones that I'm imposing on myself. And I feel bad about that. After years of doing well, I've started to wonder how did I possibly do well earlier? I can't possibly do that well again. When I got my college boards back, I got a 750 on the verbal and that really made my day! But I didn't feel like I was able to do it again.

This thing is about doing so well all your life and having trouble all at once. You feel like there's something wrong with you. I still have to do the work, but I don't have the confidence to do it. And also I see these other people; they're my friends and they're doing just fine where I'm sliding down. I've had friends who have some standard classes, who still see me as this great student. "Well, Chris you're going to go to Harvard. I'm going to community college," and they are giving me this all the time. We had a little award ceremony, and they say, "Oh, you're going to win ten awards," a vicious little circle of humor that's designed to cut. They're putting more pressure on me. I never thought it [grades] made me a better person.

This year was definitely the worst year of my scholastic life. That's the way I feel. I did good work and ended up with okay grades, but it took a lot out of me. It shows even when people thrust a yearbook into my hands and say, "Write something." You try to sum up everything that they have meant to you in one paragraph. I wrote to two girls that have been a great help, just keeping my spirits up while I was having all these problems. And I ended up writing something for one that sounded a lot like what I had written to the other person. I wasn't satisfied; it was pretty lackluster. I dread yearbook signing cause it's a little too much to ask right now, and everyone else is going to read it. For the few things I have learned, like to avoid the passive and colloquial, it really doesn't match up to all the damage that had been done in terms of my self-confidence.