

# NCTE Writing Achievement Awards

**JeanMarie Z. Burtness**

*Minnesota Coordinator*

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Achievement Awards in Writing recognizes excellence in two types of writing produced by high school juniors. Students are nominated by English teachers from their own high schools in the late fall of their junior year. Individual high schools may nominate from one to six students depending upon the school's enrollment. Some English departments use the previous year's impromptu topics in a "write-off" contest to assist in the nomination process.

The application forms are available from NCTE in October; previously participating high schools are automatically sent the forms. In April the nominated students have two hours to write on one of two impromptu nonfiction topics they also submit up to ten pages of their best revised and typed writing which may be a combination of fictional prose, poetry, dramatic scripts, personal narratives, or literary analysis papers.

These papers are evaluated and ranked by teams of judges in each state, usually a college writing professor and a high school composition teacher. The highest ranking papers are sent to the National Council of Teachers of English for recognition. The results are announced in the fall of the students' senior year by NCTE. The top ranked writers are listed in a booklet entitled "High School Seniors Recommended for College Scholarships" which each commended student receives. The number of students per state is based on the number of legislative districts; Minnesota may select up to 16 students if their combined rankings on the two types of writing meet the judging criteria.

Please contact the National Council of Teachers of English, Achievement Awards in Writing, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801 or go to the NCTE website [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org) to receive more information.

These were the two topics for the Spring 2000 impromptu essays:

## Topic A—Violence in the Schools

With the continued concern about school violence in America during the past years, educators, parents, and students themselves are left in a quandary. As a result, many districts have considered and taken steps toward increased school safety.

*Imagine that you have been invited to be a member of a panel of educators, students, and community leaders to address the problem of school safety. Each panel member has been asked to discuss his or her views on safe schools. Write a letter to the group in which you explain your suggestions for making schools safer.*

## Topic B—Media Influence

During the past few years, there has been growing interest in the media exposure young people receive. Many believe that teen behavior is shaped by what young people see on television, videos, or in the movies. Some argue that teens model their behavior, dress, or speech after media figures and movie stars.

*As a roving reporter for your community newspaper, write an opinion column in which you explore your observations on whether the media has a positive or negative effect on young people.*

# Topic A

**Mike Ethier**

*Armstrong High School, grade 11*

Dear Panel,

There have been many other "solutions" from politicians and leaders to the "problems" they feel exist in schools today. Many of these people have no children, or send their children to private schools to escape the "dangers" of public school. In reality, these people have little or no idea of what goes on every day in high school, and what they see on the news only reinforces their misguided ideas. Their suggested solutions include: distributing clear backpacks to keep students from concealing weapons; banning hats, jackets, scarves, bandannas, or even the wearing of similar clothing among groups, as it may signify gang alliance; and the addition of metal detectors and cameras, random drug testing, and even random searching of students.

While I am more liberal than most and don't take offense to these as invasions of privacy (even though that is what they are), I just don't feel they are realistic and would solve any problems. Schools need to realize that silly, unenforceable, or overbearing rules only breed mistrust and discontent among students, making things worse. If suggested rules and changes do not serve a clear and useful purpose, they should not happen. Making schools a better place through means such as increased funding for teachers, equipment and activities should be a politician's priority, as having a school students take pride in will in turn make the school a safer place.

As a member of a panel on school violence, you need to realize that you are merely addressing the symptoms of a deeper social problem. Kids don't just get up one morning and say, "Ah, what the hell, I think I'll blow up the school today." There are many reasons why kids are driven to kill other classmates, and unfortunately, most are beyond the reach of the school. I have a wide variety of friends, ranging from straight A nerds, to hard drinking jocks, to failing druggies. And in all their cases, their attitudes seem to be a direct response to their relationship

with their parents. One old friend comes to mind, as he as gone through a drastic change. When I first met him, he was a happy, B-average student, but he had just transferred to the district and had few friends. At that time his mom and dad were going through a divorce, and he was desperate for anyone he could grab on to. He got in with the wrong crowd, and now he smokes too much pot, drinks too much beer, and has sex with too many girls. He is headed down the wrong road, and it all goes back to the collapse of his family. While he may not be a threat to cause violence at school, it is kids like him, kids who slip through the cracks, that do tend toward violence. And they need our help.

So in reality, there are few easy solutions to this problem. And it is a problem that is much deeper than it looks on the surface. It has roots in all the social problems of our time, and makes us face issues that we may not want to face. Many of our leaders have been guilty of mistakes in the past (or when it comes to The Leader, the mistakes have happened in office) and consequently, they have a hard time facing these challenges. It's easy to clamor for cameras and metal detectors, clear backpacks and drug tests. These may help, but they do not solve the problem. These solutions just push the deeper issues aside, making them flare up again down the road. The most important thing you can do to prevent school violence is to follow the advice of an old adage, "When you are on your deathbed, the amount you had in your savings account won't matter. What will matter is that you made a difference in the life of a child." Panel members, go home, and take a closer look at your own kids. Hug them. Kiss them. Make them know they are loved and cared for. This may seem an odd way to reduce school violence, but if everyone would do that, the world would be a better place.

# Topic A

**Aaron Kashtan**

*St. Louis Park High School, grade 11*

To Whom It May Concern:

A year ago today, we bore witness to the most notorious episode of school violence in American history. Although they were hardly the first such incident, the shootings at Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado, had by far the most staggering effect on the nation's consciousness. Not only did this tragedy shock the nation, it also brought the issue of school safety to the forefront of American public discourse. Much blame was laid and many remedies proposed, but obviously, there was no easy resolution to what many saw as a national crisis. The first anniversary of Columbine is thus a particularly appropriate time to address the issue that grew out of its aftermath, and to make recommendations for school safety in the future. But before doing so, we should analyze the background of the tragedy itself and its effect on America's students.

To many students like myself, the most profoundly felt effect of the Columbine massacre was the backlash it produced against students everywhere. This tragedy produced a public drive to protect students from themselves, and to take drastic measures to ensure that no student would ever again have either the motive or the opportunity to commit such acts. In many cases, this lead to an outright crackdown on students' rights and civil liberties, both in school and out. Administrators preached a Big Brother-like mentality to students, declaring that each student had a duty to report any threats or even hints of violence made by fellow students. Censorship reigned, and worse, a drive for conformity: the ACLU is currently involved in the case of a high school student who was suspended from school under a post-Columbine policy banning "unusual hair colors." But this incident pales in comparison to the virtual police states some schools have become. All over the country, metal detectors and closed-campus policies proliferate and security staffs grow in size.

Certain schools now greatly resemble prisons, except that prisons have better food.

This "post-Columbine hysteria" came not only from administrators but from students, parents, and the media as well. Due to misconceptions that the killer, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, had belonged to a "Trenchcoat Mafia," "goth" students around the country found themselves persecuted for their lifestyles and their tastes in music and clothes. Marilyn Manson, self-proclaimed "Antichrist Superstar," quickly became a scapegoat. This reaction also occurred in reverse. The nation's collective heartstrings were tugged by the story of a student (misidentified as Cassie Bernall) who had been shot by Klebold and Harris after admitting that she believed in God. This student soon became a martyr and a symbol of religious faith in the face of imminent death. And of course, everything from media violence to heavy metal music to working mothers was blamed for pushing Klebold and Harris, and others like them to murder. Even the government got into the act of preventing another Columbine, as the U.S. House of Representatives passed an absurd bill to post the Ten Commandments on public school walls. The Columbine blame game went beyond school walls to cause public outcry and even hysteria.

In a way, the repression and hysteria that Columbine caused was almost worse than the tragedy itself. It is paramount that we avoid turning our schools into prisons, or infringing on the civil liberties students deserve as American citizens. Yet at the same time, the need to prevent a second coming of Columbine is self-evident. Our policy on school violence must take both these concerns into account, striking a balance between protection and repression. With this in mind, I recommend that we must, first, retain our faith in students; and, second, refrain from abridging their rights.



To begin with, we must have faith in students. In the wake of Columbine, many students have been judged guilty until proven innocent. It is widely assumed that every high school student—or at least all at-risk students and the “goth” crowd—is a potential Dylan Klebold, while elementary students are seen a little Kip Kinkels. Every once in a while these assumptions are made to seem valid, most recently when a 6-year-old first-grader shot a classmate. But these cases are the exception, not the rule. The vast majority of America’s high school students are intelligent, caring young people, not violent, bloodthirsty sociopaths; and for every student who does shoot a classmate, there are literally millions who don’t. In fact, school shootings like Columbine receive so much publicity precisely because they are rare. Thus, the violent reaction to Columbine is an example of a practice nearly every student has learned to hate: punishing the whole group, including the “good” kids, for the crimes of only a few. Even worse than the actual post-Columbine repression, perhaps, is the loss of faith it implies. By repressing and punishing students through censorship, harsh security, and public backlash, we forget why they are there in the first place. Children and teenagers go to school not just so that adults can keep an eye on them, but so they can learn the skills necessary for good citizenship and adult life. In order for them to do so, they must be given the respect they deserve.

We must, of course, be vigilant against future killings; even one killer in a million students is one too many. But in accordance with our faith in students, our efforts to prevent school violence should come from students themselves. This current conference, taking input from students as well as parents and administrators, is a definite step in the right direction. Or again, a group in my school recently staged a “Peace Week” in which they surveyed students on their own ideas of promoting peace in schools and on how violence had affected them personally. Although the effect of this was uncertain, it did manage to gather many diverse student views on the issue of school safety, and attempted to involve students in the

issue. With more support from administrators and students themselves, such a response would be much more effective than repression imposed from above. These are the kind of efforts we should promote; because in the last analysis, the people most affected by school violence are students themselves. Schools exist for the express purpose of educating students and keeping them safe, and it is students who are most directly affected both by school violence and by efforts for the prevention thereof. Thus, it is fitting that students should have a role in shaping our policy to prevent school violence.

The best response to the widespread problem of school violence is neither repression nor loss of faith in students. Rather, we should treat students as what they are: the future of a free society. We must remember their humanity and their intrinsic value and act accordingly. Avoiding the same hysteria that characterized the post-Columbine era, we should allow students to shape our response to school violence and ensure that they get the faith and respect that they, in the great majority, have earned. With such a policy we will honor the memory of the victims of Columbine by acknowledging that, on the anniversary of their deaths, the Columbine tragedy has finally taught us the right lesson.

## Topic B

**Bitta Fynskov**

*Rochester John Marshall High School, grade 11*

In a society where almost every family has a television and some have several, the media has a great ability to shape opinions. Teens, who have a high level of exposure to television and movies, are in line to be the group that is most affected. Separate from their parents for the first time, they respond to the media’s messages not only because of how often they receive these messages, but also because they are just beginning to form opinions of their own. The media influences today’s youth through the content of TV, movies, and newspapers, and through the frequency of these ideas.

First, media shows its influence in the new type of program becoming popular on TV right now: the adult cartoon. Usually very funny, these shows seem harmless. Unfortunately, this is because the message sent is harder to see in these beguiling programs and therefore is harder to refute. *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* are favorites of teens across the nation. These shows appear to be a little crude, but for the most part, parents deem them appropriate. However, the bad language is only the most obvious reason to be concerned. The dysfunctional families portrayed in these cartoons are hardly the laughing matter that the authors make them out to be. The media makes poor relationships look normal to teens. When there is no one to teach otherwise, the cartoons leave teens strangely complacent about how they treat the other members of their families.

Not only does TV confuse teens about relationships, so do movies. Almost all of the movies recently produced have one thing in common: there is a romance. Not all start out as romantic films, but in many, two people who begin the movie as good friends end it by sleeping together. In many high schools, abstinence is taught during one class of one semester. For the rest of the four years, the same teens who learned that abstinence is the only way to “practice safe sex” watch characters sleep around in movies and on television with no consequences. Often, sex in movies is purely recreational,

shown as a common occurrence between two good friends. This devalues friendship and ultimately romance as well. Because of the constant exposure to sex on TV and in movies, teens often feel uncertain about which theory is correct: that of their teachers, parents, and religion, or that of the society that lives in a box—the one that is ready to entertain at the flick of a switch.

Finally, relationships at schools are jeopardized as well. Columbine High School, when traumatized by student gunmen on April 20, 1999, was not allowed to be a lesson, was not allowed to have the opportunity to heal by helping other schools avoid the same situation. Instead, due to extreme amounts of attention by media, the school had to deal with a second (and far worse) situation. Columbine has become a model, a pattern for other misguided youth to follow. This hurt must be one that is hardest for the victims of that tragedy to bear. If the media had broadcast the news for only one week, one month, instead of one year, maybe these other teens would have been less likely to copycat. This vicious cycle has occurred only because the media refused to believe that it was a part of the problem, that it must be more responsible about its coverage.

The media, although sometimes beneficial, damages our society by its excess. While perhaps not everyone who watches TV, movies, or reads the newspaper will be affected by this abuse of power, many will and are. It is hard enough for teens to become adults without the extra strain of determining which information is true, relevant, and applicable and which information should be deemed irresponsible and unnecessary. The media needs to realize its role in the shaping of our country and our youth and use it wisely. We want a media that leads with discretion.



# Topic B

**Joshua Helmin**

*Hopkins High School, grade 11*

## Our Killer Media

Josh Helmin, Senior Editorial Staff Writer

April 11, 2000

Jonathan sat in a corner by himself. He was playing with a set of Jenga building blocks, fashioning a structure which resembled the Eiffel Tower. Suddenly another little boy rushed up to Jonathan's miniature Eiffel Tower and smashed the tower. Jonathan's quiet exterior disappeared as his face reddened. Jonathan stood up, kicked the boy in the face with a surprisingly smooth karate move, and proceeded to use his little fingers as mock guns to "shoot" the terrified young boy who had destroyed Jonathan's building block creation. I stood shocked, a teenage volunteer at this seemingly peaceful underprivileged daycare center, and quickly stopped the situation. I scooped Jonathan up and carried him outside.

"Why did you do that?" I questioned Jonathan patiently when we got outside the daycare center.

"He messed my thing up," Jonathan said defiantly, refusing to make eye contact with me.

"Jonathan, how old are you?"

"I'm seven," Jonathan declared with childish pride.

"Jonathan, you hurt that little boy a lot."

"He's gonna be just fine," Jonathan muttered, brushing off any guilt.

"Why did you kick him and then pretend to shoot him?" I asked patiently.

"I wanted him dead."

"You wanted him *dead*?"

"That's what the guy did in the *Basketball Diaries*. And Neo kicked that black guy like that in *The Matrix*."

Suddenly what happened in that daycare center became much clearer. Jonathan had simply imitated what he had seen done in movies. I had seen both movies Jonathan was referencing, and shuddered to think that this little seven-year-old boy had seen both of those violent, dark, rated 'R' movies.

*The Basketball Diaries*, one of the movies Jonathan said he was imitating, features a scene in which Leonardo DiCaprio enters his school wearing a long black trench coat, toting an enormous gun. DiCaprio angrily storms into a classroom, the soundtrack blasting angry heavy metal music, and shoots his classmates and his teacher. After killing his teachers and classmates in cold blood, DiCaprio laughs and feels relief.

*The Matrix* was a movie filled with cyber crime, guns, and karate moves. Jonathan later told me that he had enrolled in karate classes after seeing *Matrix* because he "wanted to be just like Neo," the lead character in *Matrix* played by Keanu Reeves. Jonathan had replicated one of the kicks Reeves used in the film almost perfectly to give the little boy who ruined his building block structure a bloody nose.

Children throughout the country are doing the same thing Jonathan did. They see television shows like *The Power Rangers* or any of the *Batman*, *Spiderman*, or *Superman* television programs. Many youngsters, just like Jonathan, have parents who permit their children to see violent, gory, rated 'R' movies which have ample amounts of sex and violence.

The worst part is that children cannot separate reality from fantasy. Jonathan didn't understand that if he killed the little boy who messed up his building blocks, that little boy would never get up again. Jonathan didn't understand that dead means never walking, talking, or playing again. Jonathan also didn't understand how much pain his swift kicks caused. Children in general see big, burly actors get punched, kicked, and even shot in television and movies, and then the actors stand up again to keep on fighting through stab wounds, bullet holes, blood, and bruises. Children have no realization about the pain and damage

that those stab wounds, bullets, and bruises cause. They assume that, like little characters on *Looney Toons*, that people can be hit and shot and beat and then come back in the next scene to keep on playing.

Girls are affected much differently by media than boys. Boys tend to be far more interested in violence and cartoon superheroes. Girls tend to be far less interested in television shows like *Power Rangers* and *Batman* and instead usually prefer life melodramas like *Dawson's Creek*, *Party of Five*, or *Popular*. These television shows seem to teach girls how they should act and how they should look. *Popular*, a newer addition to the WB network, features a lead female character who is a fifteen-year-old girl dealing with high school life. The character, however, is played by an actress who is twenty-two years old. Her body has matured completely and in interviews with *Seventeen* magazine the actress discusses how her trainer and her nutritionist keep her fit and trim for the show. Average teen girls watching *Popular* can't compete with a twenty-two year old's body and can't achieve a body which has been molded through years of work with a professional physical fitness trainer and registered dietitian.

Female sex symbols in America have changed drastically, and it's no wonder that American girls have an extremely high incidence of bulimia and anorexia. Marilyn Monroe, one of the most famous sex symbols of all time, wore a size 14 dress when she was America's favorite beauty in the 1950s. Now, some fifty years later, we have stars like Calista Flockhart who starts in *Ally McBeal*, wearing a size zero dress. We also have Teri Hatcher, former star of *Lois and Clark*, and *The Practice*'s Lara Flynn Boyle who wear size one dresses. The height and weight proportions of some of Hollywood's biggest stars are extremely similar to the emaciated bodies of Holocaust survivors from the 1940s. Our young girls are presented with beautiful, successful, extremely thin actresses who many times serve as role models. It's no wonder that eating disorders are commonplace among American high school girls.

Comments by anybody that media doesn't actually affect our children are absurd. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our boys see violence and hate and our girls see extremely thin actresses who have sex with other television characters to get ahead in life. Children naturally have a tendency to reenact what they consistently view. If we continue to allow our children to see

these television shows and movies filled with skinny models, sex, and extreme violence, we are going to have a nation with more incidents like the Columbine High School shoot-out, and more and more deaths attributed to self-destructive eating disorders.

The choice is yours next time you let your daughter pick up an issue of *Elle* or *Seventeen*, and the choice is yours next time your child wants to see *The Basketball Diaries*, *The Matrix*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. You hold the future of a nation in your hands because, as Aristotle pointed out thousands of years ago, we become what we consistently see and do. Unless we want a nation filled with violent, angry boys and extremely thin, passive girls, we must stop the problem where it starts: our killer media.

### Josh's Reflection:

*When I received the prompt for the essay, I decided I wanted to create something original and thought-provoking. Instead of writing a normal, standard essay, I decided to use a bit of creativity. I imagined writing a newspaper article from the point of view of a seasoned, opinionated journalist. With that mindset, I wrote a piece which I felt proud of, believing it was original, creative, and fresh — something I imagined to be much appreciated in an essay contest.*

# NCTE Scoring Guide

Content	
<i>Strengths:</i> Independence of thought Writer's engagement with topic Fresh insights	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Preponderance of obvious statements Writer uninvolved with topic Subject treated perfunctorily
Purpose/Audience/Tone	
<i>Strengths:</i> Focus and intent clear and consistent Language and tone appropriate to purpose and audience	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Purpose unclear or unrealized
Words: Choice and Arrangement	
<i>Strengths:</i> Concern for expressiveness as well as clear communication Apt choice of words Readable, unambiguous sentences	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Limited vocabulary or misuse of words Indulgence in clichés Awkward or faulty sentences
Organization and Development	
<i>Strengths:</i> Logical progression, easy to follow Adequate support and elaboration Sense of completeness and closure Meaningful paragraphing	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Little sense of direction or organizational pattern Few particulars or examples offered as support Fragmentary thoughts, lacking cohesion Intent of paragraphing unclear
Style	
<i>Strengths:</i> Fluent, readable prose Sentence structure treated flexibly Appropriate use of metaphor, analogy, parallelism, and similar rhetorical devices Occasional willingness to be daring in thought or word; signs of inventiveness	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Prose either effusive or cramped Unvaried sentence structure General absence of rhetorical devices Tendency to play safe with words & ideas
Applicable to Fiction, Drama, and Poetry	
<i>Strengths:</i> Keen observation and reflection Imaginative insight Sensitivity to the nuances of words Control of formal elements: point of view, chronology, metrics, etc. Effective use of figurative language	<i>Weaknesses:</i> Absence of meaningful detail Unimaginativeness Use of hackneyed words and phrases Failure to accomplish desired effect

The judges and state coordinators rate each piece of writing on a six-point scale, with 6 as the highest rating and 1 as the lowest. The written selections are judged in terms of their total effect using these general guidelines:

- 6 Potential in writing fully developed for the grade level, with distinguishing characteristics that give the writing an identity
- 5 Potential realized, showing competence with language and control in the development of the topic
- 4 Potential evident, but unevenness suggests that the writer is not yet in full command of the composing process
- 3 Potential partially indicated, but limited by shortcomings that call undue attention to themselves
- 2 Potential obscured by major flaws in the thought and development of the writing
- 1 Potential in writing undeveloped

# NCTE Writing Awards - 2000

## Writing Achievement Awards

Andrew Browsers, Cloquet Senior High Sponsoring Teacher: Daniel Naslund	
Mike Ethier, Armstrong High School Sponsoring Teacher: Sharon Eddleston	
Elizabeth Fynskov, John Marshall HS, Rochester Sponsoring Teacher: Mary Place	
Samsher Gill, Edina High School Sponsoring Teacher: Martha Leistikow	
Breanne Goodell, Champlin Park High School Sponsoring Teacher: JeanMarie Burtness	
Danielle Hagen, Edina High School Sponsoring Teacher: Martha Leistikow	
Mark Hanson, Eastview High School, Eagan Sponsoring Teacher: Patty Strandquist	
Joshua Helmin, Hopkins High School Sponsoring Teacher: Myrna Klobuchar	
Aaron Kashtan, St. Louis Park High School Sponsoring Teacher: David Ring	
Anna Kegler, Eagan High School Sponsoring Teacher: Robert Strandquist	
Erin Lindgren, Eagan High School Sponsoring Teacher: Robert Strandquist	
Jaidyn Martin, Champlin Park High School Sponsoring Teacher: JeanMarie Burtness	
Julianne Nelson, Minnetonka High School Sponsoring Teacher: Barbara Van Pilsum	
Melissa Ny, John Marshall HS, Rochester Sponsoring Teacher: Mary Place	
Sara Podensi, John Marshall HS, Rochester Sponsoring Teacher: Mary Place	
Kristin Ritter, Eagan High School Sponsoring Teacher: Robert Strandquist	

## Promising Young Writers

Alex Andrews Scott Highlands Middle School, Apple Valley Sponsoring Teacher: Susan King	
Allison Bond Willow Creek MS, Rochester Sponsoring Teacher: Karen Admussen	
Phillip Carter South View MS, Edina Sponsoring Teacher: Michael Postma	
Connie Cheng Capitol Hill Magnet School, St. Paul Sponsoring Teacher: Alexandria Auck	
Mikaela Hagen Willow Creek MS, Rochester Sponsoring Teacher: Karen Admussen	
Amy Heinzerling Valley View Middle School, Edina Sponsoring Teacher: Galene Erickson	
Marta Shaffer South View Middle School, Edina Sponsoring Teacher: Michael Postma	
Sarah Waldrop Wayzata West Junior High School Sponsoring Teacher: Sarah Gohman	



# Choices

Allison Bond

Willow Creek Middle School, Rochester, grade 8

Robert Frost once said, "Of all I've learned about life, I can sum it up in three words: it goes on."

These wise words have helped me to get through times I didn't think I would survive; problematic times such as a time of grief, including the loss of a friend's brother, or anxiety. Each fall as I prepare to return to school, I feel sadness, excitement, and uncertainty. All three are normal for the beginning of a school year, and as I lie in bed after the first day, I reflect on my feelings and discover that though I may, and will, have to face numerous challenges in the coming nine months, they can't affect me negatively unless I allow them to. With every conceivably negative situation, we have two options: to accept the problem as a learning experience that will change us positively, or to let it take its toll on our emotional and/or social well-being. To be sure, every cloud has a silver lining if we can only allow it to show itself.

Eighth grade can be a tumultuous year of insecurity and unhappiness. People are unsure of themselves and are trying to figure out who they really are; by ninth grade it's acceptable to be an individual, but in eighth grade, it's unthinkable.

When choosing friends and making other notable decisions, remember that in order to avoid all criticism, you must do nothing, say nothing, and therefore be nothing. Like many good propositions, this is easy to say but very, very difficult to act upon. Choose your friends for who they are, not how popular or 'cool' they are. The trick is to find friends that you enjoy being with and that accept you for who you truly are.

Remember, your friends influence you in many ways; select ones that won't affect you negatively. People that do things that you find beneath your morals or unacceptable are not worthy of your friendship.

I have searched near and far and 'tried out' many a friend only to find that my 'buddy' is only a social climber or something of that sort. Though it may seem unlikely at this point at your life, a loyal friend is better than a dozen 'cool' ones. I wouldn't trade some of my closest, dearest friends for anything on earth, including a higher rung on the social ladder.

Though it has been said an infinite number of times, the simplest motto that can help you get out of eighth grade with confidence and sanity (just kidding) intact is to be yourself. In a world where you can be anything, be yourself. Don't try to be somebody you're not; it doesn't work and sooner or later people will find out you're a fake. Through being myself, I have gained the respect of my classmates; they accept me for who I truly am.

Throughout eighth grade, you will come across definite boulders that block your way on the highway of life. Though these may be painful and difficult at times, later on they will seem to be merely pebbles. Like these speed bumps, eighth grade will prepare you in ways you may never realize until you reach high school, college... and beyond.

Promising Young Writers is NCTE's writing contest for 8th graders. Like the Writing Achievement Awards, students submit pieces of their best work and sit for a timed impromptu essay. Teams of two independent judges score the samples and the essays.

Information about the contest is available in November. There is a mid-January deadline. Details each year can be found at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).

In these examples of the impromptu essays of the Promising Young Writers contest of 2000, students were to give advice about 8th grade to in-coming 7th graders.

# Reach

Mikaela Hagen

Willow Creek Middle School, Rochester, grade 8

*Eighth grade is a time of complex, emotional fireworks; each person wanting the whole world to understand them, yet wanting the secrets of their soul for their own. These years of adolescence are years that complicate your fairy tale, adding characters that cannot be defeated by a mere kind word, challenges that you cannot face, and countless illusions to dissuade you. Each day is a mystery, do you search for what you want? Do you really know what you want? Your heart thrashes as your head tries to maintain calm. It is a game that you did not get the instruction manual to, but yet you must play along.*

*For me, eighth grade has been a year of profound opposites. From the highs of success to the pits of sorrow, I have seen much. The understanding of the harsh words and actions flung about has become almost a curse, disarming my ability to be truly angry. Anger is a safe feeling, you can pour your spirit into fire, your blood runs hot, and you can hate the world. But what comes after the anger, what is truly there, deep inside, is the most complicated, frightening thing in the world. The fear, worry, and insecurity that must be faced is an enemy that will never go away. If in this year of trial, regret, frustration and sorrow, you can find something to hold on to, then you will truly hold the key to life.*

Every person, in their search for this "handhold" reaches out in the dark. Some find comfort in conformity, feeling secure and "the same," a haven for their floundering sense of self. Others, in a desperate cry to preserve who they are, rebel from the societal labels placed on them, defying any stereotypes possible. Still others react in anger, their feelings stirred into wrath. Countless analyses of teen behavior have been published, each lending their five cents of wisdom, trying to understand what they them-

selves struggled through. Even so, no one has all the answers, it is possible? The world moving at a blinding speed, there is no steady ground, it is all a great ocean of emotion, we must do our best to develop "sea legs."

Possibly the most simple and true instructions on life come from General Colin Powell: "Have a dream, remain kind, do not take council to your fears." I happened upon this quote one Monday morning when I could have sworn my world was an irreversible mess. I circled it in red pen, and throughout the day, I kept repeating it to myself. By the end of the day, I had begun to put it into action. Slowly those twelve words have made a profound difference in my life.

"Have a dream" You cannot live without a dream, an ultimate goal. Every day no matter the situation, there will always be a candle in your heart, to warm your shivering spirit. When you have your sight on a place so much higher than you are, you can begin building foundations to this castle in the sky. You must also accept the reality of your goals, you must take the steps. You cannot be afraid to stand up again, for it is only when you do not try that you truly die. The thought of some day reaching my dream, my utopia, has kept me from underrating what I can do, shying away from challenge, or even giving up. Reach for the stars.

"Remain kind" This part spoke to me, in a gentle but guilty way. I understood the kindness and compassion, but the sadness and betrayal I felt against those who had hurt me was so strong. I could not forgive, I wanted them to know how many nights I cried, how many hours I wasted trying to right a doomed situation. How, I asked myself could I remain kind when the whole world was cruel and cold? This was a colossal change for me. They were the only emotions that I felt keenly, the despair was becoming my obsession, everything was crashing. Ultimately, because I felt so terrible inside, I could not extend joy to my close friends, my family; it was too much of a responsibility to support others when I felt I could not support myself. Slowly, I have removed myself from this feeling, faking a smile, feigning confidence, until slowly,

these borrowed emotions became my own. Talking to someone I didn't like, creating a tolerance of the ways that everyone else's emotions were flowing out were each antidotes to my damaged spirit. This is a continuing struggle, and I could not do it without my journal which releases my negative energy, leaving me with the good. I try every day to surround myself with people that make me laugh, people that listen, people that care. And when there are days when there is nothing, I rely on love alone, of my God, and the family that will always be there for me.

"Don't take council to your fears" Everything in my world was a thought, a worry. Worries grew like parasites on my brain, sapping my happiness as I subconsciously convinced myself of terrible things. I lay awake at night my mind conjuring up thought after thought, each more terrible than the last. My greatest fears had become controlling forces in my life. Every action every word, had become a source of analysis. I worried day and night, nightmares filled my sleep. This has been my final battle. As the other two aspects of my life have turned around, this is acting more slowly. My writing releases worries, and each day I begin with sayings, self talk. This hurdle which I must clear is something I will always struggle with. It is a part of who I am, a tendency I cannot ever entirely stop. My writing has helped me release these horrors from my mind to a page. I rely on the love that surrounds me for comfort. In changing the other two parts of me, they have taken worries along with them. This is an everyday battle very real, very imminent, and I continue to fight.

Not every day will be a picnic, your good intentions, strategies, and hopes will not always go according to plan. The world around you which you cannot control will spin on. These trials have existed since the beginning of time, and will continue until the end. I give you now the power of these words, during this time, this rite of passage, keep them close to your heart, a single candle to urge you on. There will come tests and heartbreaks, but never, ever, give up.

## The Substitute

As I sit in the classroom  
Listening to the giggles  
Of kids playing games  
Ignoring, the teacher trying  
To create order in disorder  
It isn't working  
He spends his voice  
Yelling be quiet.  
(how ironic)  
The kids know  
(somehow by instinct)  
That he won't enforce his command  
Separate discussions  
Springing up  
That have absolutely  
Nothing  
To do with the subject  
The teacher is a sub  
And he doesn't know  
The rhythm of teaching & learning  
He doesn't know  
How to control the class  
How to make them want to learn  
The kids yearn  
For their teacher to return  
So the natural order of things  
Can be restored  
Once again

Melody Rose

Crosswinds Middle School, St. Paul, grade 8

## Dear Friend,

I hear that you are going to be starting eighth grade this year. Nervous at all? Well, you shouldn't be. I know you probably feel like you are about to enter a new world, where everything is not what you expect it to be, but the truth is, eighth grade is just about the same as seventh grade without the training wheels. However, if you are still not convinced that your experience will be enjoyable, the following tips may help you to take full advantage of eighth grade.

First of all, keep an open mind. Meet new people, try different things, and be creative in everything you do. By doing so, you will make your experience in eighth grade more interesting. Every new day holds thousands of opportunities, and with an open mind, you can be sure to discover every one of them.

Secondly, make sure you are organized. This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how many students have trouble with it. I have seen many a locker in total disarray, papers and books strewn about in utter chaos as though a hurricane had taken place within. Some individuals will tell you organization is unnecessary, but do not listen to them, for they are the ones who cannot find anything they need to conduct their studies. Always write every assignment in your organizer. Keep your locker neat and orderly. You may even want to organize your notes and assignments into a system well suited to your own study routine. By staying organized, you will ensure yourself easy access to everything you need.

Another tip, and I am sure you have heard this a lot, is to always give your best work. I cannot emphasize how important it is to constantly be giving life your best effort. You may not think that what you are learning is relevant to your future. In some cases you may be right, but there are certain lessons to be learned in eighth grade, important not just toward becoming a good student, but becoming a good person as well. It is these lessons that will remain with you for the rest of your life, helping you to paint the picture of your future.

Perseverance is yet another quality that you will require to ensure an enjoyable, successful experience in eighth grade. It may seem difficult at times to complete your homework while maintaining a social life, in addition to pursuing any athletic or musical opportunities. You may think there simply aren't enough hours in the day to do everything you wish to do, but do not give up. It may not be easy, but you can follow each and every one of your dreams if you put your mind to it. Just remember that schoolwork comes first.

This brings me to my next tip, which involves sleep. You may find, as I have, that by staying up late every night you enable yourself to accomplish more every day. Sounds like a great idea, right? Don't do it! For the first few weeks it may appear to be helpful, but believe me, it will catch up with you fast. By getting a good night's rest every evening, you will be able to concentrate better in class and on the playing field. You will find that doing everything after a long night of rest will be much more satisfying than trying to accomplish more than you should on six hours of sleep.

Finally, and most importantly, try to have fun. Eighth grade does not have to be all work and no play. Talk with your friends, take classes you will enjoy, and a few harmless pranks every once in a while will keep things exciting during those long, tedious school days. Just don't get caught!

Well, I hope my advice has been helpful to you in some way. As I am writing this letter to you near the end of August, I am sure you have nothing better to do anyway. Don't worry, kid. I am sure you are going to do just fine. If you ever need anything, I will be just down the hall, most likely sleeping in Spanish class. Good luck, kid, and try to smile will you? Eighth grade will be great!

Your friend,

Phil Carter

Southview Middle School, grade 8

# A Piece of Advice

**Connie Cheng**

*Capitol Hill Magnet, St. Paul, grade 8*

We are silent as the echoing hallways as we stand by my locker. I bend over my lock, listening to it whirl and click as I spin my combination one last time. It opens as usual — with a hard tug. I reach over and open my locker with a clang.

She stands behind me as I pull various notebooks and binders out. “So, this is the last day of this school for you,” she says hesitantly, not sure how to start a conversation. She has a lot to learn.

“Yeah,” I reply nonchalantly, but it’s hard to believe that I’m leaving forever. I feel my eyes sting, a sign of coming tears, but I hold them back. Crying isn’t something you do in front of seventh graders.

Her neat brown hair swishes into my vision as she bends over to examine my math binder, fallen open to a place filled with complicated formulas. “Eighth grade seems hard,” she says. “Look at all this work you had to do! I have no idea how I’m going to survive next year.” She tries to end on a cheerful note by laughing weakly and tucking her hair back behind her ears.

I dump my last binder on the ground. “It’s hard, but you’ll live.”

I see her biting her lip nervously as I turn to grab my backpack. “I’m not sure,” she replies slowly. “I mean, this year was really a difficult year for me. I nearly flunked math and science — and so much homework. . .”

Her voice trails off, and she sighs in a hopeless manner. I’m not sure what to say, so I just shove my math binder in my backpack.

She picks up my social studies notebook and skims through it briefly before she hands it to me. “How about if you give me your phone number, and I’ll call you whenever I need help?”

I envision myself sitting knee-deep in unfinished homework, trying to explain over the phone what the quadratic formula is, and I shudder. “Maybe,” I say, “but I have a better idea.”

She perks up instantly, and I feel her hope radiating from her like light from the sun. “What is it?”

“A piece of advice,” I answer as I zip up my now bulging backpack.

“Oh.” Her face falls, but she quickly makes a joke to cover it up. “What, beat up every seventh grader in sight? Suck up to the teachers?”

“God, no!” I feel a grin spread across my face as I remember my own experiences with seventh graders and teachers. “It can be fun to tease seventh graders, but it’s not going to help you much.”

“Then what?” She flops down beside me, serious again. “Tell me, please.”

My mind flashes back to the beginning of my eighth grade year, so near, yet so long ago. What did I do when I had just received my worst grade ever? What did I do when I failed a test I had stayed up all night to study for? When I felt I could never finish all my homework? When I felt like a failure?

The answer dawns upon me, and I snap out of my trance. I know,” I say. “Never give up.”

“What?” She frowns, like I’m joking. “That’s what they teach you in kindergarten. You know, the story of the little engine who thought he could. You know, ‘never say never.’”

“There is a lot of wisdom in ‘Never give up,’” I reply, slowly pondering my piece of advice and choosing my words carefully.

“Yeah, right!” she scoffs, turning away.

“No, listen to me!” I raise my voice, and she looks at me, wide-eyed, unsure of what to do. “When you feel you can’t finish your work, don’t give up. Rush to finish it, and it’ll happen. When you fail a test, look through it, see what and why you got something wrong. Don’t say ‘I can’t do this,’ because if you do, then you can’t do it.”

She is still skeptical. “It might happen for you, but never for me.”

I look her in the eye. “It will happen for you. If you think you will fail, then you will fail. You will be cheating yourself. If you keep pushing for success, it’ll pay off. Really. I know.”

She looks down, but I know she believes me at last. I stand up, shouldering my backpack.

“I’ve got to go,” I say. “Just remember what I said, and it’ll happen.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she says quietly. We hug one last time.

As I leave, I sneak a glance back. She stands up, resolute, and walks off with a glint of determination in her eye. She’s already half way there.