
The

English Teacher's

Companion

THIRD EDITION

The

English Teacher's

Companion

A Complete Guide to Classroom,
Curriculum, and the Profession

THIRD EDITION

JIM BURKE

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For all English teachers—past,
present, and future

And for my colleagues in the
Burlingame High School English
Department

It appears to me natural that you should tell me, as a companion, what you decide, in order that I may not be caught unprepared, for I also have to travel.

—Father Fablo Font to Juan Bautista de Anza,
while visiting California in 1776

Without companions, the world is a sea of stories with no one to listen.

—Kelsey Parker, student, Burlingame High School

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Introduction

Teaching English in the Twenty-first Century

The great teachers fill you up with hope and shower you with a thousand reasons to embrace all aspects of life. I wanted to follow Mr. Monte around for the rest of my life, learning everything he wished to share or impart, but I didn't know how to ask. All I knew was, I was not the same boy who walked into Gonzaga that previous fall.

—PAT CONROY, *MY LOSING SEASON*

We begin as the teachers we are then strive to become the teachers we want to be. We want to be the great English teacher Pat Conroy remembers in his memoir—the teacher whose words were “oxygen, water, and fire” (2003, 63) to him. English teachers like Conroy’s Mr. Monte or those teachers who inspired us to become teachers are “the seed people of the world,” those who “prepare the ground and plant the seeds of the future” (Delpit 2003, 14). It is the voices of such teachers as these who have called us to teach, for teaching *is* a vocation—one practiced by teachers who, according to Delpit’s research, see their jobs as “caring, believing, demanding the best, and providing the discipline to succeed in life” (2003, 20). Delpit’s description sums up the role I hope this book will play in your work as an English teacher because I do care about and believe in you; however, I also know that society demands the best. Here I do my *best* to provide a guide for teaching the discipline of English, which I hope will help you achieve professional success. This guidance comes from my daily experiences in the classroom and from the research of others to help you become the teacher you want to be, the teacher society expects you to be, and the teacher your students *need* you to be.

TRENDS IN ADOLESCENT LITERACY AND ENGLISH INSTRUCTION

Students remain at the heart of this book and my work for a very simple reason: I am a public high school English teacher whose most pressing question is not what is the subject of my next book but what am I going to do in my next *class*. On a more personal level, my two sons are currently attending public urban middle and high schools; thus I am confronted daily by the challenges of issues related to urban education and gender and how these play out in English classrooms. In my classes, I

teach the extremes—AP Literature and Academic Success classes, working with kids who read at a college level and those who read at an elementary school level—and every level in between. The classes are made up of as many as thirty-five unique kids, each of them trying to figure out not just what they want to do, but who they are—and want to be. Who those students are, though, has changed in recent years for most of us. Many schools, mine included, now have open enrollment policies for advanced classes; in such schools anyone willing to do the work can enroll in Honors or even Advanced Placement classes. As noted in Strauss (2006), the latest U.S. Department of Education “Condition of Education” report (see also <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe>) highlights other changes those of us in the classroom know all too well.

- Between 1972 and 2004, the percentage of racial or ethnic minority students enrolled in the nation’s public schools increased from 22 to 43 percent, primarily because of growth in Hispanic enrollment. In 2004, Hispanic students made up 19 percent of public school enrollment, up from 6 percent in 1972.
- The distribution of minority students in public schools differed across regions of the country. For example, minority public school enrollment in 2004 exceeded white enrollment in the West (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming) 57 percent to 43 percent.
- The number of children ages 5 to 17 who spoke a language other than English at home more than doubled between 1979 and 2004, from 3.8 million to 9.9 million.
- From 1972 to 2004, the rate at which high school graduates enrolled in college in the fall immediately after high school increased from 49 to 67 percent.
- The number of bachelor's degrees awarded from academic years 1989–1990 through 2003–2004 increased by 33 percent; the number of associate's degrees increased by 46 percent.
- The average reading scores of fourth and eighth graders evaluated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—a standardized test sometimes called the nation’s report card—increased two points between 1992 and 2005.
- The percentage of fourth graders performing at or above proficient (meaning solid academic achievement) on the national assessment increased between 1992 and 2002 from 29 to 31 percent and has remained steady since. In 2005, 31 percent of eighth graders performed at or above proficient.

- NAEP results indicate that the achievement gaps in reading, from the first assessment in 1992 to the next in 2005, between white and black and white and Hispanic fourth and eighth graders have shown little measurable change.

The English teacher is always at the heart of such trends, which means we are always at the center of the most contentious debates about education. Adolescent literacy has become the focus of these efforts given that “three of ten U.S. eighth graders are proficient readers and almost 40 percent of high school graduates lack the reading and writing skills that employers seek” (Johnston 2005; National Governors Association 2005). Universities are no less concerned: roughly 50 percent of the high school graduates in 2005 have the reading skills needed to succeed in college (Lewin 2005); moreover, for every 100 ninth graders, 68 graduate on time, 40 of whom will enroll directly in college, but only 27 will enroll again the following year. Only 18 out of that original 100 will actually graduate from college within six years (Hunt and Tierney 2006).

The National Adolescent Literacy Coalition (NALC) roundtable, working to address these concerns, sought to answer one question: “In order to ensure a twenty-first century literate society for all, what does middle and high school education need to be and how [can] that [be] accomplished in light of existing tensions?” (NALC 2006). The “tensions” stem from the demands of the workplace for a world-class competitive workforce (National Center on Education and the Economy 2007; Friedman 2006), which has the requisite traditional and technological literacies (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2003). But these tensions also derive from the unrelenting assessments intended to measure the performance of students, schools, states, and of course teachers. Since the last edition of this book was published, the SAT has added a writing component and new content aligned with the English curriculum; more states have instituted state exit exams, some of which use demanding college exams such as the ACT; and enrollment in AP classes has risen dramatically because of previously mentioned open enrollment movement. Responding to this trend to test, Lisa Delpit says: “Never mind the development of the human beings in our charge—the integrity, the artistic expressiveness, the ingenuity, the persistence, or the kindness of those who will inherit the earth. The conversation in education has been reduced to a conversation about one number” (2003, 14).

This is the world in which we find ourselves working, in which we find ourselves trying to teach. Such periods of conflict between skills-centered and child-centered instruction are cyclical, the last one beginning in the 1950s, which culminated in a focus on testing (Squire 2003). I wanted to situate this book in the midst of these tensions, these

challenges, these realities, as they account for the pressures teachers feel—pressures to raise scores, to prepare workers, to make our country competitive in the global economy. Despite the pressures, I think it is still possible to be the teacher we wanted to be when we entered the profession. This book is based on the belief that we can all be effective teachers, whose “instruction is constant, rigorous, integrated across disciplines, connected to students’ lived cultures, connected to their intellectual legacies, engaging, and designed for critical thinking and problem solving that is useful beyond the classroom” (Delpit 2003, 18).

PUBLIC AND PROFESSIONAL CHANGES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Despite serious challenges, it is a remarkable time to be an English teacher for the world is changing rapidly and in ways that require our help. These changes, many driven by technology, are reflected in the diagram shown in Figure 1, which I created to represent what English Language Arts teachers are called on to teach as the twenty-first century picks up speed.

This diagram complements the *Learning for the Twenty-first Century* report (Partnership 2003), which identifies three distinct types of “learning skills” and their related abilities.

1. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- *Information and media literacy skills*: Analyzing, accessing, managing, integrating, evaluating, and creating information in a variety of forms and media; understanding the role of media in society.
- *Communication skills*: Understanding, managing, and creating effective oral, written, and multimedia communication in a variety of forms and contexts.

2. THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

- *Critical thinking and systems thinking*: Exercising sound reasoning in understanding and making complex choices, understanding the interconnectedness among systems.
- *Problem identification, formulation, and solution*: Ability to frame, analyze, and solve problems.
- *Creativity and intellectual curiosity*: Developing, implementing, and communicating new ideas to others; staying open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives.

- *Accountability and adaptability*: Exercising personal responsibility and flexibility in personal, workplace, and community contexts; setting and meeting high standards and goals for one's self and others; tolerating ambiguity.
- *Social responsibility*: Acting responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind; demonstrating ethical behavior in personal, workplace, and community contexts. (9)

THE PLACE OF LITERATURE: BOOKS AS BOTH WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

All this talk about literacy and learning skills no doubt leaves you wondering where the *literature* fits into the big picture. Indeed, some leading figures in the field of English have begun to question whether, given all the competing academic demands on students, we can justify our claim to four years of students' time to study literature. Of course, as Figure 1 shows, we teach much more than literature. Francine Prose, in a provocative essay titled "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read" (1999), insists that "American high school students learn to loathe literature" because the texts they read are not "serious literature" or "works of art," but books about themselves that focus on issues and problems about which they find it hard to care. Stotsky (2004) suggests that literature is getting squeezed out as more states "imply that students should learn how to read a bus schedule, not *Julius Caesar* in their English classes."

Others argue that textbooks, the weighty, "teacher-proof" collections of canonical stories and poems, should be traded in for real novels and collections of short stories and poems by not only classic but also contemporary authors (Welsh 2005). In documenting literary trends, the National Endowment for the Arts found that fewer than 43 percent of young adults reported reading literature, a loss between 1982 and 2002 amounting to 20 million potential readers (Bauerlein and Jago 2004). Despite these trends and tensions, Bauerlein and Jago offer a compelling argument for the role of literature in students' lives:

Books provide young readers with windows to other worlds, other times, other cultures. Few teenagers think they have much in common with Odysseus until an artful teacher helps them see how we are all on a journey toward self-discovery and self-overcoming. Few relate to Pip until they walk for a while in Dickens' fictional world and begin to consider their own great expectations. Of course, students need help looking through these windows. The books seem full of incomprehensible references and unfamiliar language. Artful teachers clear the pane so that students can peer through.

Students also need books that serve as mirrors. Just as Oprah Winfrey's first book club offered stories that reflected the troubles and triumphs of women caught up in impossible dilemmas, good teachers offer students books that reflect adolescent experiences: broken promises, false friends, temptations. It isn't a matter of classics versus contemporary books. Young people need both. But in order to have both, students have to develop a lust for reading.

TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

I focus on these complex realities not to scare or inspire despair; rather, I do so to emphasize how crucial our field is to students' lives and the country's success. To look at Figure 1 is to realize how fundamental our subject is to success in school, in society, and at work. Thus we are called to find some way to use all the available means and media, every texts and techniques—books and blogs, Web sites and wikis, films and photographs—to reach and teach students, to develop not only their “textual intelligence” (Burke 2001) but also their social intelligence (Goleman 2006), cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang 2003), and their multiple intelligences (Gardner 2006). Students need a “whole new mind” (Pink 2006), the kind that comes from classes like Bill Stroud's where students “examine news reports, websites, propaganda, history books, blogs, even pop songs . . . [where] the goal is to teach kids to be discerning consumers of information and to research, formulate and defend their own views” (Wallis and Steptoe 2006).

As Stroud's class shows, these changes are already under way in the classes of engaged, creative teachers around the country; such demanding, critical instruction will inevitably prepare students for any state test they might face along the way. This edition of *The English Teacher's Companion* marks not a departure from the past but an invitation to the future we must create together. I know things are changing when I walk down the hall and see my colleague, Tim Larkin, connected to the National Archives via his laptop, projecting footage of old television ads on the wall to teach students the elements of propaganda and persuasion. I know things are changing when my colleague Diane McClain, as part of her American Culture Project, has a group of students delivering a multimedia presentation on the history of denim as told through film, advertising, music, art, and literature—all set to a soundtrack and all of which combine into a deep exploration of not only a topic but also the texts they used to investigate it. I know things are changing when I walk into the Apple store at the mall and see a poster of verbs, none of which describe things we typically ask kids to do in school but rather describe

their personal literacy outside of school. As former NCTE president, Jerry Harste said, “When the cultural antecedents of America are changing, our school curriculum in English must also be prepared to change” (1999).

PORTRAIT OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER AS A PRACTICE AND THEORY ARTIST

The English teacher remains central to the enterprise of American education and success. Returning for a moment to the beginning of this introduction, there is within us a voice that called us to this work. Sometimes that voice grows weak amid the political noise or the culture of complaint, and we question it, only to be reminded by a student’s words or one of those classes when they are tuned in and fired up (Intrator 2003) that teaching not only matters but can also, at times, be magical. Ours is a legacy that lives on through the lives of students whose stories thus become the story of our country. As English teachers, we are not mere characters, but through our best work, are some of the authors of the story our nation is trying to tell about itself, as the following article about Alan Sitomer, one of our own, shows. Alan embodies the passion and intelligence, the wisdom and patience we all need if we are to be the great teacher students need.

When Alan Sitomer asks his students to compare the metaphorical fences in their own lives with those in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Fences*, it opens a floodgate of emotions. One after another, students describe the antithesis of white picket fences that have come to represent happy middle-class families.

Students describe parents who have built fences to keep “out” reminders of failed marriages, murdered children, addictions to drugs and alcohol and temptations of running with gangs. Some students say their families have built fences to keep “in” feelings of failure and despair.

“I try to keep in my feelings of trust,” says one Latino young man. “I don’t trust many people. I try to keep ‘in’ how I feel about my messed up life since I was forced to leave my dad. I was forced into maturity and never got to be a kid.”

Soon the students are deep in a discussion of how the characters in the play have built similar psychological barriers and are quoting passages from the book that they find to be the most meaningful. Before the bell rings, their teacher reminds them to read the next chapter and be prepared for a test the following day.

It's a sophomore English class, but it is also so much more. It is a place where poor and minority students *choose* to make a deep personal connection to literature by sharing their own personal and family issues. It is a place where books are not just an assignment to "get through" for a passing grade, but a gateway for students to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. Like the characters in the books they read, students become vulnerable and transparent for a brief moment in time.

His ability to make students connect with literature earned Lynwood High School teacher Alan Sitomer the Teacher of the Year award for Los Angeles County in September. But nothing is more rewarding, he says, than seeing his students' faces light up with understanding.

Sitomer, a teacher at the Title I high school for seven years, will do anything to build a bridge from the curriculum to his students. And he is best known for using hip-hop music to do that. The story goes that a few years ago he was up in the middle of the night working on a lesson plan on English poet Dylan Thomas. While focusing on the line, "Do not go gentle into that good night," he began to think about Tupac Shakur, a rap artist beloved by his students who was shot to death. He saw that the rapper's lyrics were not all about violence and negativity; there were also messages about hope and rising up against adversity.

He worked all night building a bridge from Tupac to Thomas, finding commonalities in their words, metaphors and themes. The next day he was tired, but his students were electrified by his lesson and left his class begging for more.

"Essentially if the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed must come to the mountain," says the youngish-looking member of the Lynwood Teachers Association, who turns 40 in February. "I realized that I needed to build a bridge of relevance and accessibility or my own students were not going to 'get it.' From the moment I said, 'Who wants to study hip-hop today?' there was 100 percent engagement from 100 percent of my students. It has been tremendously effective. My rates for sophomores passing the California High School Exit Exam for the past few years have been well over 95 percent on the very first try."

All the hip-hop music used in his classroom is clean. "There is no profanity, no homophobia and no misogyny," says Sitomer. "While hip-hop does have elements that most assuredly advocate reprehensible behavior, I don't support that at all. At its core roots, hip-hop speaks of enlightenment, education and the need to pick one's self up by his or her bootstraps. Some of the elements—violence, oppression

and materialism—are fantastic themes to engage my students. A lot of critical thinking goes on inside the walls of my classroom. And hip-hop is just another tool in my academic tool box.”

“He is a good man who has gained our respect and trust,” says Alonso Galvan. “He’s like a teacher and a psychologist. He connects what we are reading with our own perspective and it gives us a better understanding of real-life situations. He really tries to help us: He doesn’t just teach something and hope we ‘get it.’”

“We say weird stuff in class that we wouldn’t say to other people,” says Fabiola Barrera. “We may only say it in his class and that might be the only time we will ever say it in our lives.”

“He talks to us and treats us like adults,” says Antonio Montes. “That’s because he wants us to act like adults and be ready for college. And he’s tough. We have tests every other day. He challenges us and keeps us on our feet.”

Last year his students read fourteen different novels and plays in one year, including Shakespeare. “I have students that literally have never read an entire book and told me they had never done that much reading in their entire lives,” says Sitomer. “But they did it in my class.”

Sitomer says there is no conflict with having rigorous, standards-based lessons that are also engaging, enjoyable and meaningful to students. “That’s the missing element in so many classrooms today with the No Child Left Behind mandate hanging over our heads,” he says. “Where’s the fun? Where’s the life? Where’s the energy? But you can find it right here, in my classroom.” (Posnick-Goodwin 2006)

Alan is that teacher Conroy talked about at the beginning of this introduction; he’s one of the seed people Delpit mentioned. On a much more practical level, he illustrates the key findings of Arthur Applebee’s research on effective literacy instruction. Applebee (2002) found that effective teachers like Alan:

- Engage students in higher-order talk and writing about the disciplines of English
- Ensure the cohesiveness of curriculum and instruction
- Use diverse perspectives to deepen discussion and enhance learning
- Align curriculum with assessment

- Scaffold skills and strategies needed for new and difficult tasks
- Provide special help to struggling readers and writers.

These qualities, as well as the other ideas outlined in this introduction, inform this new edition of *The English Teacher's Companion*. Instead of dallying any longer here in the introduction—where we ask of good instruction, “What is it?”—let us go and make our visit to the rest of the book.

You have to remember that nobody ever wants a new writer.
You have to create your own demand.

—DORIS LESSING

If you seek well, you will find.

—GREEK PROVERB

“How would you distinguish the difference between accountability and responsibility, Jim?” This is a question from my first job interview. I sat in an antiseptic district office, cornered by two muscular administrators in crisp white shirts and power ties. They each had a mustache. It was a Good Cop–Bad Cop situation: one guy asked me these curveball questions (like the one above) and the other would lob me curricular questions. Within ten minutes, though desperate to get my first job, I realized that I could not work in this district. Never mind that I would have had to commute almost ninety minutes to get to work each day.

Interviewing is difficult. I know some teachers who have walked into interviews to find not just administrators and a department chair but also the entire English department. Such interviews were particularly difficult since the teachers knew each of the interviewers had their own biases: grammar, classroom management, writing, classics, poetry. How to answer honestly but effectively? Some of the interviews were followed by subsequent requests to teach an actual class of students; a friend of mine had to read *A Separate Peace* in one night after they called him at 8:00 P.M. to tell him what to be ready to teach!

I have interviewed many teachers and administrators for jobs at all levels and have suggestions you might find helpful.

Understand the Role English Plays in the School. Many parents feel that a school is only as strong as its English department. This is particularly true in today’s competitive society and this era of anxiety about students’ reading abilities. Another fact to keep in mind: English is always the largest department in the school since all students take English for four

years. Most administrators have a bias as to the importance of English teachers, given the different roles they often play in a school and the centrality of reading and writing in all other domains.

Know the School's Particular Situation. If it is the second week of the school year, for example, the situation is clear: They need someone desperately to fill those few classes they have. If it is May, they know they have a definite opening and are able to take the time to find the best person; if they don't find someone in this round, they can repost the position. Thus, interviews that take place between May and August are the most competitive and demand careful planning. Call the school in advance of the interview to get certain information to help you prepare—for example, the classes you would be teaching and a copy of the school's curriculum guide. Stop by the school and pick up copies of current or past school newspapers to get a sense of the school's culture. Also, consider calling the head of the English Department to ask a few questions: Why do you have this opening? How many of your kids go to four-year colleges? Are teachers encouraged to collaborate with one another within or between departments? Visit the school's Web site and then check out its profile at www.greatschools.net.

Send an Excellent, One-page Résumé. When I need to hire a teacher, I typically get a stack of résumés and slash through them, looking at each one for an average of about thirty seconds. I separate out a small pile of the most impressive and “file” the others in the recycling bin. An effective résumé is one I can glimpse and get the information from immediately; I primarily do this by reading down the left margin where previous positions are listed. Figure 23.1 is an example of the format that I find most helpful and effective.

While most districts require you to send a résumé and application to the district office, it often comes down to the department chair to do the interview as it is their department you will be joining. Send a cover letter and your résumé, too—even if the ad tells you not to. Show the school personnel how well you write; you are an English teacher, after all, and everything you do should convey your mastery of writing and speaking. Make your résumé look very professional—not flashy or gaudy with clip art. In today's world, *professional* translates to mean a résumé and cover letter both of which are nicely formatted, using a computer. Everything you do should convey your familiarity with and mastery of technology.

Send a Cover Letter and Keep in Touch. When I began to look for my second job—to get closer to home—I sent out letters long before the schools knew they had a position. The point was to get my name out there and in their minds. So I sent the following letter to all the department

Christopher Evans

1422 18th Street • Sacramento, CA 95864 • (916) 387.8923 • cevans@aol.com

EDUCATION

Credential
Certificate
MA
BA

San Francisco State University

- Professional Single Subject credentials in English and Psychology, 1995
 - Certificate in the Teaching of Written Composition, 1994
 - Secondary Education, San Francisco State University, 1995
- #### University of California, Santa Barbara, 1992
- Developmental Psychology

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

English Teacher

Rio Americano High School, 1997–present

- Teach freshman Honors and senior English classes full time
- Chair English Department
- Advise literary and assorted other clubs
- Awarded several grants to create and expand use of technology in the curriculum

English Teacher

John F. Kennedy High School, 1995–97

- Designed and implemented team-taught Basic English class for At-Risk Freshmen
- Worked with the local business community to develop educational opportunities

Teacher

Deveureux Foundation, 1990–93

- Taught developmentally disabled students in local Arabic dialect
- Established and developed comprehensive curriculum for new school for learning disabled
- Chaired the Community Involvement Task Force for school restructuring program, 1991–92

AWARDS

- Awarded the Sacramento Business and Education Learning Links (BELL) "Bell Ringer Award," May 1991, for efforts to incorporate classroom/students into the community and vice versa
- National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, 1996
- Included in Who's Who in American Education, 1997
- Selected to participate in the RJR Nabisco Education Foundation China Breaker Conference, 1997
- National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, 1999

WRITING EXPERIENCE

- See attached credits

POSTS HELD

- Board Member, Sacramento Council of Teachers of English (CATE), 1995–97
- Creator/Moderator of CATENet, an electronic roundtable linking hundreds of top leaders in English education in California and US via Internet, 1997–present

RELEVANT SKILLS

- Familiar with all Internet and technological tools
- Advanced strategic planning skills
- Write grants

FIGURE 23.1 Sample résumé

chairs at schools where I wanted to teach. Here's the first one, which I sent to them in October.

Dear Burlingame High School:

The school year is only just getting to its feet. So you ask yourself why this young teacher is already inquiring about jobs for next year. I live in San Francisco, and that is where I will stay because we have the good fortune to have a house here. I have taught now for three years in the English department at Castro Valley High School, which has twice been awarded the National Exemplary School Award. During my tenure at Castro Valley, I have distinguished myself through my teaching and contributions to the surrounding East Bay community.

I have included my résumé and a list of my publications as evidence of my commitment to the English profession. I am young and still have much to learn; I am also committed and have much to offer. Let me emphasize that there is absolutely no discontent nor desperation that urges me to leave Castro Valley High School. I like it there and am genuinely proud to be a member of the faculty. I simply wish to get closer to home and to bring to my own community the efforts and contributions that I have given to others. Please consider me should any positions become available for the next school year.

Sincerely,
Jim Burke

This letter yielded a response and encouraging words but no offer. When, a few months later, I learned through a friend that the school had an opening—always let people know you are looking so they can look for you too—I was ready to move and sent the following letter, which ultimately got me the interview and, subsequently, the job.

Dear Burlingame High School:

Schools are so busy entering into the homestretch of this school year that it hardly seems feasible to consider looking for new teachers for next year. Yet the fact is that your district has many teachers retiring and others taking yearlong leaves, so you are ready to look and interview.

I have written on several occasions already to express my interest in teaching at your school next year. Today I am writing only a brief letter to remind you of my existence and to announce that Carol Murphy at your district office has placed my application into the file for active consideration. Thus when you begin in the weeks ahead to

interview people to teach high school English—and related areas, including Psychology—please consider me.

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Jim Burke

Bring (or Send) the Interview Committee a Portfolio. Even if you are looking for your first job, you have student-taught. If you taught well enough, you should have at least *some* assignments you can feel proud enough to present. A portfolio impresses people by showing them that you are a professional, reflective, organized, and competent teacher.

Do not submit originals in your portfolio, as you might need them later. Instead, go to a copy center and get them professionally reproduced on nice paper (clean white so it's easy to read) and bound with a nice cover page that includes all the information necessary to contact you. If you have enough pages, have them put in nice laser-printed dividers ("Lesson Plans," "Student Work," "Classroom Policies") to help the reader easily navigate through your portfolio. Remember that little things often say more than you suspect: for example, by including your e-mail address on the cover you show that you are computer savvy, something that might immediately set you apart from all the others who *might* be online but didn't include their addresses. Your portfolio should include:

- A cover page with all contact information (including fax, e-mail, and URL if available)
- Your current résumé on nice paper
- A list of any publications or projects that specifically suggest distinction within the English profession
- Any copies of articles or other work you have written
- A sample handout from your classroom that gives an example of you working with writing
- A student sample that shows what you got them to do in response to the handout on writing
- A sample handout from your classroom that gives an example of how you teach reading and literature
- A student sample that shows what they did in response to your reading assignments
- Letters of recommendation from your university, colleagues, administrators, or students

As most universities depend on the master teachers at the schools to be the best teachers of their candidates, the letters of recommendations from your on-site master teachers are the most important. They are the ones who know how good you are or will be; their letters will signal whether you are ready, often by saying that they would hire you themselves if they could.

The interview for what would be my first teaching assignment was scheduled for 4:45 P.M. on a Friday at the end of May. When I arrived at the office, I was greeted by two other friends from my credential program applying for the same job. We acknowledged each other awkwardly. Soon I was shown into the principal's office, where I found the principal, the English department chair, and another English teacher, all of whom were so obviously worn out that I immediately realized I had to be careful not to talk too long.

Their concerns were typical. The principal wanted to hear what I had to say about classroom discipline; she wanted to know what else I was willing to do besides teach English full time; and she wanted to know why she should hire me above all others. These are standard questions and you should be prepared to answer each one of them. According to a guide created for teachers by Stanford University's career center, teachers are generally asked questions in the following areas (listed from most to least frequent):

- Classroom management
- Student-teaching experience
- Strengths
- Teaching philosophy
- Weaknesses
- What if . . . (hypothetical situations)
- Future plans
- Teaching style
- Coaching interests
- College courses
- Motivational theories
- Lesson design
- Employment history
- Youth-related activities
- Curriculum knowledge
- Salary

- Higher-thinking skills/strategies
- College activities
- Community activities
- GPA

My future department chair asked what have become fairly standard questions for me when I interview candidates. Here are some of the questions you should be ready to answer.

- My first question is *always*: What are you reading these days? What have you read in the last six months? What is the best book you've read in the last year? If they answer, "I just haven't had time" or "I just mostly read mysteries," the interview is, in my mind, over though, of course, we must follow through. The department head's job is to hire the best teacher available. How can I expect you to challenge kids if you don't challenge yourself?
- Tell me about writing in your class: What do you do? How much do kids write in a week? How do you have them work with that writing to improve their abilities in this area?
- What is a book you've taught successfully? Tell me what you did and why you consider this lesson/unit so successful.
- How do you help students improve their reading ability?
- What different methods of assessment do you use?
- How would kids in your class describe you as a teacher?
- Describe your grading and assessment philosophies.
- What role should/does the study of language—rhetoric, grammar, style—play in your class? How do you teach these elements?
- What is your role in the classroom? What would you compare yourself to and why?
- What can you do with computers and what, if anything, have you done with them in your classroom to integrate them into the curriculum?
- What is your responsibility when it comes to preparing students to take tests such as the SAT, exit exam, and state standardized test?
- Have you collaborated with other teachers? On what?
- What can you contribute to our department?
- What is your strength as a teacher?
- What is your weakness as a teacher?

The last two questions stall people, but I've argued strongly against hiring a couple people, at least in part, because they could not answer them. Any teacher who cannot identify those areas in which they are

strong or need improvement is not asking themselves why they are good and how they can get better. I prefer a teacher who says “You know, I’m still working on how to teach poetry—I find it hard to figure out how to get them into it” to one who says nothing or believes they are fully evolved and are, as a teacher, a final draft.

One final point merits discussion: dressing like a professional. Today’s standards for dress have become so informal it is difficult to tell who are the professionals in many work environments. Schools are no different: Often young teachers are shopping at the same stores as their students and thus coming to school with a similar look. Whether for the interview or the classroom, the young teacher needs to look like the part they want to play: the professional teacher. While standards may vary somewhat by region, this means dressing up a bit, avoiding jeans, and (for women) not wearing low-cut or revealing clothing that could compromise your authority in the class.

The issue of appropriate dress for professionals has become a serious issue in other domains too; a *New York Times* article, “When Young Doctors Strut Too Much of Their Stuff” (Marcus 2006), details a range of situations that resulted in embarrassment or diminished respect from patients who felt the doctor’s attire was unprofessional, a judgment that undermined their confidence in the doctor. Remember, you are *not* one of the kids but the leader, the authority, the mentor—the adult—in the room.

ENDNOTE: RESPONDING TO REJECTION

Periodically I receive letters from new teachers seeking jobs. They have done all I suggest, have gone out for many interviews. Yet they still do not have a job, and, of course, they are beginning to feel discouraged. It’s only natural. It’s what I felt when, after five (or was it ten?) interviews, I had yet to get a job offer (except for the one that would have meant a two-hour commute!). I include here the response to one such teacher’s e-mail in which she asked what she should do after her string of rejections. I hope it will help you, should you find yourself in a similar situation, persevere until you find the right job at the right school for you.

Hi Kathleen:

Thanks for writing. It’s important that you have faith. First of all, if you want to have a job yesterday move to Utah: I was there speaking and they need to hire 700 new teachers (yes, 700) in one district alone due to a massive state retirement exodus. I can’t imagine where they’ll find that many teachers in so short a time!

First of all, while they may not respond, you should consider writing to the schools you interviewed with and asking them what it

was that they were looking for that they did not see in you. Hard question to ask, but courageous and productive. Ask in the spirit of learning and improving as opposed to contesting. They will respect that. When I was department chair, I would have given such feedback to someone.

A lack of response is not a personal criticism but a lack of manners and decorum; don't take that personally.

Next, I would, if you have not already, jot down all the questions they asked you and revisit your responses to their questions and consider how you might answer (and rehearse to do so) more effectively. Also, if the paperwork was an issue, I would consider reevaluating your résumé with that in mind and ask what you might do to improve it (not pad it!) in form or style that might make a better impression.

You can also, thanks to e-mail, do some outreach to department chairs. Go to the Web site of a school that appeals to you and click into the link of the AP for Curriculum and Instruction or the English Department Chair, or even the principal, and write a very short but professional note inquiring what they are looking for in a teacher to hire.

You need to treat yourself, see yourself, as the teacher they want you to be and the teacher you know you can become when given the chance. Don't let rejections shake your courage; instead, let them help you refine your resolve and remind you what it is that you have to offer, why you should be hired, and why kids will be lucky to call you their teacher.

Avante a courraggio,
Jim Burke

REFLECTION

List the attributes of the job, school, department, students, teaching assignment you want. Be very thorough and specific. Pay attention to what you have to say: If you want to work with challenging students or want the kind of environment you had in your private Catholic schools while growing up, listen to that. List what else you would be willing to do if asked—for example, coach, class advisor, and so on. Finally, list what you would absolutely not be willing to teach or do.

ACTIVITY

Go to a café with a friend, ideally one who is in education (better if he already teaches at the school where you will interview). Using the ques-

tions provided here and any other, more local questions, have them grill you. Conduct a mock interview. Then get a critique of your answers: for example, "You were pretty vague about how you handle grammar in your class. What specific example can you give me about what you do in your class?"

RECOMMENDATION

With Portfolio in Hand: Validating the New Teacher Professionalism, edited by Nona Lyons (Teachers College Press 1998).



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