



The Origins of *Come to Class*

THE WRITING LESSONS IN *Come to Class* originated and have been perfected during my long career as an English teacher. Santa Monica High School in Santa Monica, California, has been a professional home for me for the past 27 years. I have been surrounded by extraordinary colleagues who put students first and never stop trying to figure out how to make this a place where no one is left behind. Our efforts are not always successful, but we refuse to give up—either on kids or on ourselves. We believe teaching is an art rather than a science and each lesson a work in progress.

Come to Class grew out of . . .

. . . a learning environment that puts students first

Most English teachers at Santa Monica High School have between 35 and 38 students in every class and meet with 150 to 170 students every day. This is a terrifying prospect for anyone responsible for teaching writing. For the past 30 years the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has recommended that no English teacher should be responsible for more than 80 students. And that doesn't mean 80 students on Mondays and Wednesdays and another 80 on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Santa Monica High School students come from a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Over 45 languages are spoken on campus. It is common for a third of my class to speak a language other than English at home. Approximately 40 percent of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Children of UCLA professors sit next to homeless students, teenage mothers rub shoulders with teenage actresses. We are a large school with 3,500 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. To address the needs of students who feel isolated and anonymous, a few years ago we divided the school into six houses. Unfortunately even our “small schools” include over 600 students. As a small-schools expert told me when we were planning to restructure, a school of 600 students is not a small school.

Still, we never stop trying to personalize the learning experience for our students. I begin this by giving a Language Survey to every student in my class early in the school year. A copy of the survey can be found on pages 26 and 27 of this guide. I am careful to assure students that this is not intended to determine if they are “ready” for the class. They are free to ignore any questions on the survey they don't want to answer.

After evaluating the responses to the survey, I schedule individual conferences with students. The survey gives me particular questions to ask and tells me much more about my students than simply their



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Language Survey

Name: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Dear Student,

I would like you to complete the survey below so that I can be a better teacher to you. Forgive me if I seem to be prying, but the more I know about you, the better I will be able to teach you. Please feel free to skip any question you don't feel comfortable answering.

Sincerely,

What languages do you speak?

What languages can you write and read?

What language do you speak at home? To parents? Grandparents? Brothers or sisters?

What language are you most comfortable in? _____
Explain. _____

Language Survey, pages 26–27

language backgrounds. It opens the door to talking about educational background, personal interests, and attitudes toward language, the grist for all writing. The survey also smoothes the way for a conversation about what I expect from them this year. I have learned from these meetings that no two students come to us with exactly the same experiences. Teachers need to be tuned in to the strengths and needs, occasionally unique needs, of individuals.

. . . and a public mandate for and personal commitment to teaching writing well.

Abraham Lincoln called writing “the great invention of the world. . . . Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, the unborn, at all distances, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions.” I had never thought of writing as an “invention,” but given the essential role writing has played in our exercise of the invention called popular democracy, I was struck by Lincoln’s observation. Democracies depend on a literate citizenry. Teaching students how to write provides them with a critical tool for participating in a democracy. Their participation strengthens our democracy.

Everyone agrees that students should learn to write well. The rub is that almost everyone wishes someone else would teach kids how. It is easy to see why. Reading student essays is much less of a chore when ideas are clearly organized and coherently expressed. And circling spelling errors and correcting misplaced modifiers is nobody’s idea of fun. At the same time, there is little chance of success in school unless students learn how to write. Students who don’t write well founder when they go to college and struggle on the job, forever hiding their poor composition skills. Teaching writing is too important to leave to somebody else.

Teaching writing has traditionally been the responsibility of middle and high school English teachers. We accept this role in theory but in practice struggle to keep up with the paper load. Look at the numbers. A teacher responsible for 150 students a day who assigns a paper every three weeks and spends 10 minutes on each essay must devote over eight hours each week (an extra work day) to reading student essays. One solution is to lower class size in classes that are writing-intensive, a practice commonly followed in college composition classes. Another is to spread the responsibility for teaching writing across the curriculum.



The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges issued a report called "The Neglected R" whose critical message was that "writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many." The commission specifically recommended that:

- The amount of time students spend writing should be at least doubled.
- Writing should be assigned across the curriculum.
- More out-of-school time should be used to encourage writing.
- Standards, curriculum, and assessment must be aligned.
- Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice items. Assessment should provide students with adequate time to write and require students to create a piece of prose.
- Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines.
- States should provide the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece of the curriculum.

I fervently hope that these recommendations will be acted upon immediately and that legislators will find the political will to make the final bullet point a reality. I'm not holding my breath. The report was issued in 2003, and I have yet to see any reduction in my class size. But using the dearth of financial resources in the public schools as an excuse for not teaching writing will only shortchange the students who need us most. I can't wait for ideal conditions.

In 2007, the National Writing Project (NWP) conducted a survey to discover what the American public thought about the state of writing instruction in our schools. While a large majority believes that writing is an important and abiding skill, many feel that high school students do not write as well as in the past. My first reaction was defensive. How could it be otherwise in a society that parses news into sound bites? When was the last time this "large majority" corrected student papers until midnight? Once I calmed down, I began to see the results as hopeful. If the public values writing, it should be something we are willing to invest in. Judge for yourself from the results of the NWP survey:

- A broad majority of Americans believes good writing skills are very important (74% say "greater need to write well to succeed than 20 years ago").
- Nearly everyone agrees writing should be introduced in school before the fifth grade (96%), and one-half say writing instruction should begin in the first grade or earlier (49%).
- More than 7 in 10 say giving all students daily writing assignments (71%) and teaching writing in all subjects (74%) are ideas that should be put into practice now.



- More than four-fifths (84%) say students should learn to write well as a requirement for high school graduation. This puts writing below reading (94%) and math (94%) and ahead of American history (73%), algebra (56%), biology (48%), and foreign language (31%).
- Americans fear our children are falling behind. Many (47%) say that today's high schools are producing students who do not write as well as students in the past. Just 20% believe today's students write better than those in the past.
- Half (50%) of the public believes students are writing less frequently today than a generation ago, and fewer than one in four (23%) believe today's students write more than when they were in school.

When asked about the importance of writing in the workplace and higher education, the survey found that:

- Americans tend to believe writing is key to succeeding in the jobs similar to the ones they themselves perform, regardless of what type of job that is. Writing is not just a skill needed by "the other guy." Both blue-collar workers (80%) and white-collar workers (93%) say writing is important to success in their careers.
- Americans say students need writing skills to succeed in college (67% "essential"), expressing a belief that writing is more essential for success in college than it is for any occupation.
- A large majority of the public (79%) understands that reading and writing go hand in hand—rejecting the view that reading skills need to come first.
- Further, learning to write well is perceived as a key ingredient for students to acquire other skills such as effective communication (66% "essential"), grammar (63%), and critical thinking (52%).

Best of all from my perspective as an English teacher, I was encouraged to see that the public understands what will be required to improve the teaching of writing.

- By a margin of two to one, the public sees more benefit in putting resources into helping teachers teach writing than in putting those resources into testing students to see how well they are learning to write.
- Americans want to see teacher-training programs include courses on teaching writing (79% "good idea") and professional development for current teachers (75% "good idea").