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Writing for Teachers

Teachers are one of the trickiest audiences of all, yet they also illustrate the paradox that audiences sometimes help you and sometimes get in your way. I think I got much of my original deep feeling for writing because of one of my high school teachers, Bob Fisher. He took me seriously. He wanted me to write. He asked me to write about things that were important to me. He opened me out. He assumed that I could write creatively in ways I never would have thought of, and I could. He assumed I would be deeply interested in topics I had never thought of, and I was. With him as a teacher I came to like writing, to look forward to it, to feel I was doing something important when I put words on paper.

Many people have had this kind of teacher. A good teacher can be a perfect audience. Not just because he likes us or praises our writing—though that may be necessary for adolescents who lack confidence in themselves (is there any other kind?). Sometimes that good teacher's caring takes the form of fierce rigor, but he manages it so we still want to write for him.*

*I think of C. S. Lewis's description of one of his beloved teachers:

I soon came to know the differing values of his three openings. The loud cry of "Stop!" was flung in to arrest a torrent of verbiage which could not be endured a moment longer; not because it fretted his patience (he never thought of that) but because it was wasting time, darkening counsel. The hastier and quieter "Excuse!" (*i.e.*, "Excuse me") ushered in a correction or distinction merely parenthetical and betokened that, thus set right, your remark might still, without absurdity, be allowed to reach completion. The most encouraging of all was, "I hear you." This meant that your remark was significant and only required refutation; it had risen to the dignity of error. Refutation (when we

With that good teacher, whether tender or tough, we feel we can go for broke, wrestle full out. We can write about truth, about God, about right and wrong, about Being, even about fear. With everyone else, it seems as though when we start to talk passionately about these issues or whatever else is burning a hole inside us, they look at us funny or change the subject or go blank. As adolescents, especially, we are subject to the tyranny of the crowd. Worse than being caught with your pants down is being caught caring deeply, being corny, vulnerable, pure. But a special teacher gives us permission to care about honor or Dostoyevsky or relativity or irony—not just gags or girls or cars. A good teacher seems to understand us. A good teacher can hear beyond our insecure hesitation or faddish slang to the authentic voice inside and reach in and help us use it.

I can't understand, now that I'm a teacher and know more about the conditions of work, especially for primary and secondary school English teachers, how those special people were able to be as good as they were. How could they listen so deeply and care for our pimply individual selves when we were one among the one hundred to one hundred fifty students they worked with each day? But they did it and do it. Most people have had a special teacher who was this good.

But other teachers later brought me to an anxiety and fear of writing that seemed just as deep as my original caring for it.* Writing became harder and harder till I finally reached the point in graduate school where I couldn't write anything no matter how hard I tried. (Being unable to write, I had to stop being a student and take a job as teacher.)

But I am not interested here in what is special about good or bad teachers. I am interested in the problematic relationship that

got so far) always followed the same lines. Had I read this? Had I studied that? Had I any statistical evidence? Had I any evidence in my own experience? And so to the almost inevitable conclusion, "Do you not see then that you had no right, etc."

Some boys would not have liked it; to me it was red beef and strong beer. [From *Surprised by Joy*, New York, 1956, p. 136.]

*I don't mean to put all responsibility on my teachers for my feelings and actions. Long before I ever met Bob Fisher I already had a deep love of words and ideas. And long before I ever met those other teachers I already had a deeply insecure tendency to depend almost entirely upon the judgment of others for my opinion of myself. But in those two tendencies, did I really differ from most other adolescents?

exists between the student writer and the teacher reader—even when the teacher is a decent person doing a conscientious job.

Look then at the teacher engaged in being an audience. He sits at his desk reading student papers. He is half done with a batch, the unread stack neatly piled to his left, each paper tightly folded longwise; the graded pile a bit helter-skelter to his right, a bit unfolded, a bit like discarded clam shells at the end of dinner. It is late and he stops for another cup of tea, annoyed he didn't start earlier in the evening. Sitting down and setting the cup among the ring-stains on his desk, two dictionaries nearby, he picks up the next paper, reads through it, writes a few comments here or there in the margin and then writes a grade and a general comment at the end.

The papers are all on the same topic, which he chose. Sometimes he gives free-choice assignments, but when he does, more of the papers seem fruitless journeys down dead-end streets and he suspects that the students learn less about writing—though a few students take off and write something splendid. But he knows he's got to give free choice now and again just for relief to the troops. (If he is a junior or senior high school teacher he probably has one hundred to one hundred fifty students; if he is a college writing teacher he has something like fifty to one hundred students. Many, however, teach writing for only part of their load.)

If he is a conscientious teacher he assigns a paper every week to every student he has. But he also kicks himself as he sits there sipping tea because he is acutely aware of how it is *he* who brought this job down on his own head. Every time he stands up in class and assigns a paper he sees in his mind's eye that stack of papers on the corner of his desk waiting for him to grade. If he isn't so conscientious he assigns writing every few weeks but he feels guilty because he knows this doesn't give his students enough practice and it means that his comment and advice on a student's paper this time will probably have no useful effect at all on what the student writes next time. Or maybe he is one of those teachers who have simply given up on writing and don't believe that anything they do by way of assignments or comments makes any difference at all. There are probably as many teachers in each category: conscientious, middling, cynical.

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Really that brief image says it all. But I want to spell out more fully what kind of audience the teacher becomes by virtue of his role.

When you write for a teacher you are usually swimming against the stream of natural communication. The natural direction of communication is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better. You seldom feel you are writing because *you* want to tell someone something. More often you feel you are being examined as to whether you can say well what *he* wants you to say. Even if you are invited to write on a subject you know better than the teacher, the teacher's knowledge turns out to be the standard for judging whether you really do know it. There's nothing wrong with this as a testing or evaluative relationship, but it's peculiar as a communicative or audience relationship.

The result of this wrong-way communication is a pervasive weakness that infects much student writing—and persists in many people's writing for the rest of their lives: a faint aura of questioning which lurks behind assertions. The student writes "This is so and that is so," but somehow between the lines he is also saying "Is this so? Will you buy that?"

If it is a story or poem rather than an essay you are writing, it's hard to feel that you are doing what is most natural for someone writing a story or poem, that is, trying to give pleasure or enlightenment. It feels as though your task is to *satisfy* or *get criticism* from a teacher who must read from 25 to 50 such pieces in one sitting. Instead of *giving* the reader something with a definite gesture, hand thrust firmly outward, students usually hand in their stories or poems with a bent and hoping arm. Instead of a statement—"Here is something for you, here is a piece of me, take it"—the student often implies a question: "Is this ok? I hope I didn't do something wrong?" It's striking how often students actually say those words to you as they give you their papers: "I hope this is what you wanted?"

This subliminal question mark lurks in the writing even of some very skilled students, but skilled students more often risk a different infection. A student who wants to be a good student cannot

be content just to satisfy teachers. He must write a paper that will wake the teacher up and give him some relief when he is groggy from reading those twenty-five to fifty papers on the same topic. Such students must do something different, striking, unique with the same old ingredients. The school setting has rewarded generation after generation of good students *not* for saying clearly what is important and what they want to convey, but for doing some kind of better cartwheel or handstand. Good students often write not to communicate but to impress. Over and over again I have seen good students knocked off balance when they get out of school and try to write for an audience other than teachers and discover how unsuccessful those shenanigans are which used to win good grades. Real readers are different from teachers.

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But that's the point. Teachers are not the real audience. You don't write *to* teachers, you write for them. You can feel the difference vividly if you write a regular essay assigned by your teacher and then go on to write something directly *to* him: write him a letter asking him to change your grade or to contribute money to your political campaign. You will find these writing tasks refreshing and satisfying compared to regular assignments—even if harder. It's a relief to put words down on paper for the sake of *results*—not just for the sake of getting a *judgment*. “Getting an A is results,” you may say, but see how you feel if you write your teacher for a contribution and get an “A” instead of a check. The grade or comment says “good persuasion,” but you know your words failed if there is no check in the envelope.

As teachers we come closest, perhaps, to being the real audience when we ask you to write an essay that persuades us on some issue. But in most cases there is something *make-believe* about the task, given our conditions as readers. If as a teacher I am reading a stack of papers all on the same topic I know I can't use completely realistic standards and only give a good grade to papers that actually change my mind. That would be unfair—too hard—especially since I probably know more about the topic than the student. I give good grades and comments to papers which seem “well argued” but which don't happen to budge my position at all. (And some papers, of course, are trying to persuade me of what I already believe. How can I measure success there?) For the most

part then my feedback is not really a measure of how much change the words actually produce in me but rather my guess about how much change they *would* produce on some (ill-defined) hypothetical reader. Occasionally a teacher says, “Your job is actually to change *my* mind,” and really carries through—but more often he says, “Your job is to write as though you were trying to change my mind.” Those two words, “as though,” turn up often in writing assignments.

If you do write directly *to* your teacher on a persuasive or informative essay he will usually feel something wrong. If, for example, you write “I disagree with what you said last week in class about why Hamlet delays so long. Here are some difficulties with your readings of the play . . .,” the teacher will probably say, “You are not supposed to write a letter to me, you are supposed to write an essay.” In short there is usually something fictional about the transaction between reader and writer in most school writing—a mismatch between what's actually going on between student and teacher and what's allegedly going on between “the writer” and “the reader”: the student pretends to explain something to someone who doesn't understand it; the teacher pretends to be this general reader reading for enlightenment.

(In most exams, by the way, the relationship between writer and reader more nearly matches the actual human transaction between parties. The teacher/reader is saying fairly openly, “Tell me what you know about the Incas—about why Hamlet delays—so I can see if you know what I think you should know,” and the student/writer is saying just as openly, “I'm going to explain to you what you already know in order to show you that I know it, too.”)

Pretending, in itself, is not a problem. All children are good at it and if a college student is not he needs to learn again. “Write to the Longshoremens Union about manual versus desk labor,” “Write to the third-grade student council about how to deal with bullies in the playground,” “Write to Robert Redford about how he could best handle this scene from *Hamlet*.” I doubt that there would be much problem with engaging in the fiction of writing to those audiences and then handing in your paper to an entirely different sort of reader, namely your teacher. Perhaps there's not enough pretending in school and college essay writing.

Or at least the problem lies in the slipperiness of a situation in which students must simultaneously pretend and not pretend

when they write to the audience for most school and college writing: the general reader. This “general reader” is a tricky character. Teachers seldom define explicitly who he is, but common practice in the educational and academic world is based on the assumption that he is a creature blessed by intelligence, a certain amount of education (“general”), and an open mind. Someone much more reasonable and *general* than those longshoremen or third graders or even Robert Redford; someone, in short, much more like—guess who?—the teacher. Except this reader is general, not particular like the teacher, and is not meant to be an authority on the topic or someone in a position of authority over the writer.

In short, the audience situation is confusing because of the tricky combination of make believe and no make believe. The student is writing *for* a teacher and *to* a general reader. But this general reader does not exist. He is a construct. He is not a particular person like the teacher who reads the words. And yet one of the main things about him is that he reads in a peculiar way that no one else but teachers try to read: not because he has a special interest or allegiance or commitment to the subject—not from a position of engagement in the world—but because he seeks a kind of disinterested enlightenment or disembodied pleasure. As a construct, the general reader is 100 percent audience, 0 percent person.

Yet none of these tricky audience issues tend to be raised for discussion. It’s no wonder then that students have only a vague, fuzzy or shifting sense of their audience and write in a vague, fuzzy, or shifting voice. (That’s also the kind of voice, by the way, that people often use when they write in a bureaucracy. The problem is the same: you are writing to an audience that seems unreal and ambiguous. School essays could serve as good practice for writing in bureaucracies if teachers spent more time talking about problems and solutions of dealing with “unreal audiences.”)

Because of this slippery way in which the “general reader” is both like and unlike the teacher, teachers, too, are often unclear in their own minds as they comment on a student’s paper whether they are saying “This doesn’t work for *me*—given my knowledge of the topic, my position on it, and my situation in the world,” or “I don’t believe this would work for a general reader who doesn’t already understand what you are trying to explain or doesn’t already have his mind made up on the topic.” It’s hard to argue well or

learn about argument when you are unsure who your audience is and what its position on the topic is likely to be.

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And yet it could be an advantage rather than a problem that teachers are *not* the real audience. After all, what could be better than having a coach who is different from your real audience but whose job is to help you achieve success with that real audience? The problem is that most student writing never does go to a real audience. Writing for your teacher is like playing your violin for your violin teacher. It is a great help in learning to play the violin, but it is not the goal. The goal—and thus the reason for getting the teacher’s help in the first place—is to play for yourself or for your friends or for a wider audience. Of course your violin teacher is, in a sense, a *good* audience. He listens carefully and thinks all the time about you and your technique. Your real audience doesn’t do that because they are busy doing the one thing your teacher cannot do: they are listening for the enjoyment of hearing you and the music.

Writing for a teacher is like hitting the ball to your tennis coach. It should teach you a lot and it may be great fun, but it is practice or exercise rather than the real thing. It’s a means toward improving your performance at the real thing—whether the real thing is success in professional competition or fun in casual tennis. But whereas very few play their musical instrument only for their teacher or hit balls only to their coach—or at least if they do they usually realize they are leaving out the goal for which the teaching is designed—most students in school and college write only for teachers and take the situation for granted.

It’s true that teachers prepare their students for other teachers, but that is as though tennis coaches kept their students moving up the line, volleying with one coach after another, till everyone got so used to the process that finally no one ever bothered to ask the obvious question any more: “Hey coach, when do I actually get to play a game of tennis?”

When you write for a teacher he won’t stay put on the other side of the net or across the dueling ground. When you make a really good shot and wipe the sweat from your forehead and look over to see him sprawled full length on the court unable to reach the ball—or when you put down your smoking pistol and walk over to

see him flat on his back with a neat red hole in his brow—all of a sudden you hear someone say, “Nice shot,” and there he is over on the sidelines, unharmed, unsweaty, unruffled. Next time you don’t try so hard.

But students couldn’t take it if teachers played for real instead of just practice. Students only dare get in the ring with their teachers because they know the teachers will pull their punches. Yet every now and then the student does get knocked flat on his back—even though the teacher didn’t mean to. Students discover they get knocked down more when they try their hardest. All but the born fighters learn to hold back—to do less than their best—when they spar with teachers.

This odd state of affairs has serious consequences for learning to write. For one thing, it’s hard to put your heart in your work when you never get the excitement and satisfaction of a real performance for a real audience. You may get *anxious* when you write for a teacher, but you don’t get the satisfaction that goes with a real performance, the satisfaction of knowing that you can actually affect your reader with your words. Occasionally, of course, teachers *are* informed, persuaded, or entertained by student writing, but the conditions under which teachers read are the worst possible conditions for being informed, persuaded, or informed.

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It is no bed of roses for teachers either. As a teacher I am a slave reader. I must read every piece to the end. I must say to every student those magic words that every writer wants to hear, “I couldn’t put your writing down,” only I say it through clenched teeth. Even if some of the writing is enjoyable, I can’t really read for enjoyment when I’m not free to stop reading. I can’t just sit back and be enlightened or entertained, I must look for weaknesses and mistakes.

Inevitably I improve. But students don’t improve with me. That is, each year I get better at finding weaknesses and mistakes, but each new batch of students is just as unskilled as last year’s batch. Thus, every year I find more mistakes and weaknesses per page. (How could I not believe that students get worse every year?) And yet I cannot do what every real reader can do, namely, say “The hell with you” or “That makes me furious, I want to punch you in the nose,” and throw it in the trash. I must continue on to the end

and then try to write a comment that will be helpful. And I mustn’t express to the student the annoyance that I feel—sometimes the fury. Is it surprising if these feelings sometimes get through anyway? Or that I am not always as helpful and supportive as I ought to be toward these creatures who cause me weekly agony?

In short, teachers cannot easily give their real reactions to the writing of their students because their real reactions are usually too critical and sometimes unprintable. They know that their students cannot handle or benefit from a mirror which shows so devastatingly every single weakness and mistake. Therefore since teachers cannot communicate to students what it actually feels like to read these words, and since there is no one else who reads these words, the student *never* gets the experience of learning what actually happens to a real reader reading his words. He gets only the conclusions of a skilled cataloguer of weaknesses and (one hopes) strengths.

As a result of all this the student’s job is both too easy and too hard. It’s too easy in that the student knows his reader will keep on reading to the end, no matter how bad the writing is. The student never has that frustrating but healthy sense of a reader on the other end of the line making minute by minute decisions about whether to keep on reading or put it down. Nothing really gives you the strength you need for revising but that feeling of trying to keep a reader from hanging up on you; that feeling of having only one thin thread connecting you and the reader. Once that filament breaks, you have lost your reader for ever back to the wide sea—or at least until you manage to hook him again with some combination of luck and good bait.

And yet writing for teachers is at the same time too hard. For there is a price you must pay for having a reader who never stops reading your words. He never really takes your words seriously as messages intended genuinely for him.

In what is the trickiest audience situation of all, then, it is easiest not to think very much about audience—about whom your words are intended for and what you want those words to do. And not thinking about audience is one of the best ways to block improvement in writing. Most people keep up their school habit of not thinking enough about audience even after they leave school or college—unless they write a lot for real audiences and also get lots

of accurate feedback from these audiences about what their words actually did. Most people just struggle along as they are writing something in an effort to make it “good writing in general” instead of thinking carefully or precisely about “good for what effect on what reader.”

Teachers, too, drift into ignoring audience. It is unhelpful, for example, to give assignments—as most teachers do and indeed I realize I tend to do—without specifying clearly who the audience is and what effect the words are supposed to have on it. Are these words meant to inform? To inform whom? How much prior knowledge do they have? To persuade? To persuade whom? How much do we know about their position on the issue? To give pleasure? To whom? What kind of reading do they like?

It is also unhelpful to evaluate and give feedback to student writing about its quality *in general*. It is meaningless, really, to try to tell a student how successful his writing is in general without saying how successful it is at achieving a certain effect on a certain audience. The only way you can give feedback on “quality in general” is by doing what teachers have historically tended to do: concentrate mostly on the conventions of writing as a medium, namely, spelling, grammar, footnotes, and paragraphing, and ignoring the question of how well it would work on what kinds of readers. It’s not that the conventions of writing as a medium are unimportant or easy to learn. Quite the contrary. They are *too* hard and onerous to learn if you try to learn them by themselves—as mere push-ups—without the incentive of actually trying to use them in real communication to real readers.

Advice

Advice for anybody—whether currently writing for teachers or not:

- Check your writing for habits that may still undermine it even if you haven’t written for a teacher in years:

Are you still writing like a nervous student? writing to your examiner? tentative, hesitant, beating around the bush? Is there an air of worry in your words as though you are talking to someone who makes you uncomfortable? Is your writing like the speech of people whose tone of voice always curls up into a mini-question mark at the end of every sentence?

Are you still writing like a timid student? always playing it

safe? Is your writing always scrubbed behind the ears? Are you always hedging your bets, always saying “On the one hand _____, but on the other hand _____,” always ending with a sweet, positive, noncommittal sentiment (“And so we see that this is a difficult problem though some significant progress has been made”), never daring assert any of your real convictions? Does your writing still pursue those gold stars for clean fingernails that you got (or didn’t get) so many years ago?

Are you still, twenty years later, writing like that angry student who is covertly giving the finger to the reader who made you write when you didn’t want to? Do your words, though perhaps civil on the surface, really carry a hidden message that says, “Dear reader, if you don’t like this, screw you.”

Are you still writing like that star student, working harder to impress the teacher—to show off, be fancy, or win points—than simply to get a message across? Does your writing try harder for an A than for communication with a human being? Are you turning off every reader except those few who are willing to relate to you as hot stuff?

These vestigial bad habits manifest themselves in infinitely subtle ways. You may be unaware of them. Even your readers may be unaware of them. A reader will complain about your argument or your organization—even your spelling—when really he is annoyed without realizing it by one of these half-buried ways of relating to your original school audience. But you can easily sniff them out if you just ask yourself and your readers “What is the relationship to a reader in these words? How do you feel that voice talking to you?” Even inexperienced readers will be able to detect those old and destructive tones of voice.

The best corrective for these old bad habits (in addition to getting feedback from readers about your tone of voice and stance toward readers—see Section V, “Feedback”) is to make sure you engage in two opposite kinds of writing: very practical writing and very impractical writing. By practical writing I mean words designed to make something happen in the world—words you want to *work*, not be *judged nice*, for example, requesting a refund or a contribution, writing a resumé or a letter of recommendation, writing to a publisher with a prospectus or proposal. By impractical writing I mean words which in a sense don’t matter at all: words for the wind or for the wastepaper basket, for example, freewriting

or exploratory personal writing that is not trying to make anything happen (except perhaps for yourself).

These two writing experiences are opposite yet essential. In the first case everything matters. The words you put down determine whether you get that money or whether the publisher asks to see your MS. Writing as *action in the world* intensifies the relationship between you and the words you put down on paper. With impractical writing, on the other hand, you get the experience of total freedom. Nothing matters. This intensifies in a different way your relationship to the words you write. There are certain trains of thought and feeling, and certain voices, that you never discover except by writing freely when nothing matters—as well as discovering that writing itself can be easy and painless. The opposite activities of practical writing and freewriting help you counteract the harmful effects of writing only for teachers where you get the worst of both extremes: all the anxiety yet none of the satisfaction of practical writing; all the ineffectualness yet none of the freedom of freewriting. That is, when you write for teachers you can be hurt by their verdict but you have no hope of actually making a dent on your reader.

Advice If You Are Currently Writing for Teachers

It can be a great gift to have a writing teacher—to have the services of a coach watching you play, suggesting exercises, and giving you feedback and advice. But you will miss most of this benefit unless you learn to take a certain amount of control of your situation and use your teacher as a service, a helper, an ally—not fight him as an adversary or go limp. Here are some concrete suggestions for getting the most out of teachers.

- Don't just hit balls to your coach, find someone to play tennis with. Give your papers to a friend to read—first for sharing, later for feedback. Get together with a small sharing or feedback group. If you give your writing only to teachers you get into a terrible rut of caring too much about your writing in one way—as an ordeal—and not caring enough about it in another way—as a message that matters to real human beings.

Once you start giving your words to someone in addition to a teacher you will feel an immediate relief: new perspective, new energy. Even if you *hate* the assignment you now have an interest-

ing challenge: taking your *friend* seriously enough to find something worth saying about that topic or to find a way of writing that gives pleasure. Both tasks, while difficult, turn out to be *feasible* and enormously rewarding.

- Work out alternative assignments with your teacher so that it will be easier and more natural to give your writing to others. If you make it clear to your teacher that you are really serious about your writing and if you accept the fact that he probably has a serious agenda of skills and techniques for his assignments, you can usually work out some alternatives:

Something quite close to the assignment. Simply ask if you can write about the topic exactly as given but in the form of a letter or personal essay to a friend, or a memo or article to some other audience you would enjoy addressing.

Significant variation. If you are supposed to write about some aspect of *Hamlet*, ask if you can write something you could submit to a literary magazine or to the arts section of a newspaper: something about *Hamlet* and some other play, novel, or movie that provides an interesting comparison—and promise to treat prominently that aspect of the play the teacher wanted you to treat. If you are supposed to write a history paper about a period in the relatively recent past, see if you can write it in terms of what it was like then for your ancestors and make it a piece of family history. If you are assigned a piece of persuasion on a topic of no concern to you, perhaps you could choose an entirely different topic where you have a real audience but where the *kind* of persuasion demanded is exactly the same as in the teacher's assignment. You may find the teacher more amenable if you ask him what skills or issues he is trying to emphasize in his assignment and then agree to emphasize them in your alternative assignment. For example, he may want you to document everything you say about *Hamlet* with quotations from the text; or to deal particularly with imagery; or to highlight economic conditions in the period of history you write about. You can do these things in your alternative assignments.

Something completely different. Something you need to write or want to write such as a short story, a memo, a letter of application, a political pamphlet, a letter to the editor. Emphasize the fact that you'll work at least as hard or even harder on it than you would on his assignment—and learn a lot about writ-

ing. Make sure, however, that you aren't just trying to do exactly the same kind of writing over and over again (for instance, nothing but science fiction stories about the future) since the teacher will probably feel, legitimately, that you won't be practicing the range of skills he's trying to stress.

- Ask teachers to specify clearly the audience and purpose for any writing assignment they give. It helps most if these audiences are actual people or groups even if the writing is not in fact delivered to them. And there is always a useful real audience available to whom writing can easily be delivered: other members of the class.

- Ask teachers to give some class time to discussing this issue of audience and if possible to bring in some outside readers—other teachers, magazine or newspaper editors, public relations officers of a business—to describe frankly their specific reactions to actual pieces of writing.

- You need to master the traditional genre of writing essays for that tricky general reader. But ask the teacher to explain more clearly who he thinks this general reader is and to sponsor some discussion of the matter. What level of knowledge should you assume a general reader has about the topic? What point of view should you assume this reader has about the issue? There is an easy way to remove this slippery issue from the realm of the hypothetical and that is to ask your teacher to specify for every essay assignment a particular magazine or journal in which it should be published. Then the readership and editorial policy of this publication can be discussed and people can look at some of the pieces that it actually publishes. (Remember of course that it may help you to do all your raw writing to a different, more comfortable audience, or no audience at all, and wait till revising to make your words fit the general reader or the readership of this publication.)

- Ask your teacher to assign pieces of writing where he is, indeed, the direct and real audience: pieces of writing designed to affect him in particular. If he is trying to persuade his own child to do something or trying to decide which brand of what'sis to buy, students could write genuine advice to him. Ask him to think of theoretical or political or practical issues where he cannot make up his mind. Also issues where he already feels strongly one way or the other. Since he is the real audience, he can give accurate feedback on how the writing worked and didn't work on him.

- Ask your teacher to grade and comment on your paper not just as to its quality in general but as to how he thinks it will work on the particular hypothetical audience. This change in feedback will come naturally if you have already persuaded him to specify audience and purpose more clearly—or worked out alternative assignments where you specify your own audience and purpose. And this change, interestingly, will usually lead him to do something else very helpful, namely to tell some of his own particular reactions—speaking as himself rather than as “representative reader.” It will become easier for him to say things like “This would probably work on Robert Redford but it bothers me because . . .” or “I found this section particularly interesting but I don't think it will make sense to your third-grade readers.”

- Almost all these suggestions involve asking for more and clearer feedback than your teacher usually gives. Find ways to make it easier for him to give it. For example, try attaching a sheet of paper to your writing with some questions on it that will permit him to say more in fewer words. On the next page is an example that can easily be varied.

If he didn't specify audience and purpose, you will have to say what your audience and purpose are on that sheet of paper.

See the next section on feedback for other questions to ask of a reader.

Offer a cassette (and cassette player) with your paper so he can speak his comment without writing. You'll get a much more human comment and learn more about how your writing affected him. (This is probably feasible only if he reads papers in his office. You can't ask him to carry a cassette player home.) Don't ask for conferences on every paper. That takes too much time.

- Ask your teachers to point out at least one thing you did well on each paper. If possible, one thing that's better than last time. (If they have too many students, however, you can't expect them to remember your last paper.) When teachers read huge stacks of papers they often drift into doing nothing but finding weaknesses. The goal of this request is not just to spare your feelings (though if you are too hurt you will learn poorly). Knowledge of what you did well is actually more potent in helping you improve your writing than knowledge of what you did poorly. If your teacher shows you what you did well, or even sort-of-well, you can do it again, more often, and even expand on it, because you already have the feeling

Please put a straight line alongside passages and underneath phrases that you like or that work for *you* as a reader; and a wiggly line alongside passages and underneath phrases that annoy or don't work for you.

Please write a brief comment here about the one matter that most affected your reading.

For the *intended audience*, which section(s) or aspect(s) of this piece do you think will work or be most successful? Why?

What do you think will fail or backfire on the intended audience? Why?

Here are some aspects of my writing that I especially want feedback on:

	<i>strong</i>	<i>adequate</i>	<i>weak</i>
• paragraphing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• convincing argument	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• convincing evidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• liveliness of language or humanness of tone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• punctuation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What is the quickest simplest change I could make that would create the biggest improvement?

What one thing do you think I should try to work on or think about in my next piece of writing?

for how to do it. You need only improve a behavior you already possess and learn to use it in more contexts. And as you learn to get your strengths into more of your writing you naturally tend to get rid of some of the other weaknesses. But if your teacher only tells you what you did wrong you may not be able to fix it no matter how clearly he explains the problem: he's asking for behavior you've never produced before.

For example, if you have consistently terrible organization and occasional powerful sentences, you may well improve your organization more quickly by trying to expand that gift for strong sentences than by working on organization. For some reason you have a serious blind spot or lack of feeling for organization, and it seldom does much good in such cases for someone to shout at you "pay more attention to organization." *You* have to develop that feeling for organization, and often you can't do so until you improve enough *other* aspects of your writing that your imagination can finally work on organization.

- To get the most help from a teacher you need him as your ally and helper rather than as your enemy. You will go a long way toward that goal if you can get him to specify the audience for the writing assignments and then to grade them and give you feedback in terms of how he thinks your writing would succeed with that audience. This makes your teacher into a kind of coach helping you aim words at some third party. But there's a lot more you can do to overcome the structural features of school and college which make teachers into opponents and policemen (a role most teachers would like to get out of). Pretend, for instance, that in reacting and commenting on your paper, your teacher is a *friend* doing you a *favor*—not an employee doing a duty. (He certainly is doing you a favor if he does it well.) Think of the specific things you would do for your friend if you were asking a favor:

You would probably make your paper neat and easy to read. I get mad at students when their papers are messy. I begin to feel them as the enemy.

You would probably get your paper to him at a convenient time. I resent students who turn in papers late. It usually makes my life harder, and even when it doesn't, it makes me feel I have to be on guard against them.

You would probably proofread and correct carefully to get rid

of all the mistakes you can. When I get a paper full of mistakes I know the student could have removed, I immediately feel like *not helping* him. I feel he's treating me as a servant who is supposed to pick his smelly socks off the floor when he could just as well do it himself.

You would probably make sure to stick to the assignment. When I come to a paper that avoids or drifts away from the assignment, I instinctively feel, "Uh oh, here's someone trying to get away with something. I'd better be on guard." I start relating to him as the enemy. (Usually, by the way, you *can* find a way to include almost anything that interests you, even if it seems quite distant, as long as you think carefully about how to make it *part* of something that does address the assignment squarely.) You can probably add to my list of suggestions for helping make your teacher into your ally rather than your adversary.

- None of those suggestions entails doing any *more* writing than what is already assigned to you by the teacher: merely giving that writing to other people and adjusting the transaction between you and the teacher. But the most powerful thing you can do to increase what you get from teachers is to write *more*. Not just because quantity helps—though that is probably the main fact about writing—but because you learn most from teachers if your writing for them is a *supplement* to other writing you are doing. Try to think of writing for teachers as sneaking off for a little help on the side, getting in some volleying with the coach between your real games of tennis. Writing more means working more, but the amount of writing your teachers ask for will suddenly seem small once you stop treating assignments as ordeals and scary performances for the enemy and start treating them like mere practice games or chances for feedback from an ally on a nearly final draft.

Once you can write more you can look to them for what they *can* give and look elsewhere for what they cannot. Teachers are good for giving criticism because they read papers in piles of 25 or 50. Take that criticism and use it. They are good at making you write when you don't feel like it, simply because they have authority. Instead of resenting this, try appreciating it and internalizing from it what may be the most important skill of all: the ability to write when you are in the wrong mood. They are *not* good at telling you

what your writing feels like to a real human being, at taking your words seriously as messages directed to them, at praising you, or perhaps even at noticing you. Get these things elsewhere. They are easier to find than what a teacher has to offer.