# JOHNNY AND JANE CAN WRITE IF . . .

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Marci, a third-grader from Dayton, Ohio, is living for three years in Cadiz, an ancient fishing village on the rocky Atlantic coast of southern Spain, where her father is helping to build a new factory. On one of the family's first excursions from their new home, they drove to a port in the shadows of Gibraltar, boarded a ferry, and crossed the legendary Straits to spend the day in Tangier. Later, Marci's teacher at the American school asked her to write about this "interesting experience." If I were Marci's teacher, I would do likewise, for I envy her continental residency and nonchalant jaunts to exotic places. Like Marci's teacher, I believe that students write best when they have something to write about. But here is what Marci wrote:

> Last week we went to Africa. We went on a ferry boat to get there. Africa is a very interesting place. It was neat. We ate fish there.

I'm sure Marci's teacher was disappointed, as I would be. A wealth of novelty, scenery, activity — reduced to platitude. Give *me* a trip to Tangier! I'll show you how to write about it! Her teacher might well conclude that Marci can't write.

Marci's mother gave her a writing assignment, too — a letter to the folks back home. "Tell them about Africa," she said. Here is what Marci wrote:

> Dear Grandma and Grandpa,
> Last week my mom and dad and my sister and brothers and me went to Africa. We rode on a ferry. I didn't like it too much. I kep on throwing up. We went

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> to this big market. Everybody keeps pushing and shoving there. I saw these fish that were dead but their eyes were moving. We ate fish there. I kep on throwing up. I don't like Africa.
>
> Love, Marci

What can teachers of writing infer from the two versions of Marci's story? Well, she knows the audience, for she adapts her writing to the rhetorical situation. She has learned that when teachers ask for an "interesting experience," that's what they get. She's also learned that you can tell it like it is to your grandparents. When Marci is older, maybe she will tap her trips to Africa for other stories, equally selective in detail. She may reconstruct her experience for the sake of her story. She may even gain insight into the whole notion of "experience," but she knows already that what you remember is throwing up! Even in the third grade, Marci behaves in many ways like a writer. But unless her teachers can help Marci to bridge the gap between creative process and written product, between writing assignments and writer's truths, the verdict will be that Marci can't write.

In 1961, George B. Leonard, staff writer for *Look* magazine, wrote "Why Johnny Can't Write."[1] It was subtitled "the disgrace of our schools." The nation learned from that landmark article that Johnny *can't* write. Blame Johnny's problem on television or teachers, "progressive" education or unread parents, urban blight or government indifference — blame it on anyone, but believe it. Recently in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* colleagues complained that disparaging the writing skills of our students is "a cottage industry among those academics who write the most about higher education and hence shape the public image of our profession."[2]

Indeed we, the teachers of writing, are one another's severest critics. Accepting the aphorism, we forget that *Look* was interpreting a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, a "state of the art" report on writing instruction. In fact, Leonard called it a "cry for help" from the profession, as educators feared that the teaching of writing was seriously undermined by overcrowded classrooms and impossible teaching loads, by inappropriate teacher education and an incoherent curriculum. Twenty years ago, teachers of English acknowledged that we didn't know enough about writing to reform a curriculum, to improve methods, or to advance teacher education.

In many ways the state of our profession is unchanged, twenty years later. The August issue of *Indianapolis Monthly* features an article called "The Old Gray Schoolmarm Ain't What She Used To Be," introduced by the author's fond reminiscence of a "Miss Thistlebottom" type who split not her infinitives. A warning on the cover reads "Teachers Under Fire." The article re-examines social and economic forces that damage teacher competency and student literacy. In it, Howard Mehlinger, dean of the College of Education at Indiana University, cautions us: "Teachers will have to change their ways more than at any time in their career. There is no room for amateurs in this group."[3]

If we are "teachers under fire," why teach? Erika Lindemann, in a wonderful new book called *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers,* offers an answer. "Teaching writing," she says, "can be rewarding. We may value our work for different reasons, but to give our teaching purpose, to justify our energies, we must believe that our efforts make a difference. Unfortunately, our self-esteem may be assaulted by parents, legislators, business and professional people — even other teachers — who charge that we are not doing an especially effective job. If we become preoccupied with reacting to what we perceive as criticism, we may neglect to assert the validity, even the necessity, of our work."[4]

After twenty years of "Johnny Can't Write," have we any evidence to justify our energies? Can we believe that our efforts make a difference? Or are teachers of writing simply waiting for Godot? Do we make pathetic gestures that assert nothing but our own existence? I teach, therefore I am?

Perhaps you must find those answers for yourself. Yet I believe that despite SAT scores, despite the National Assessment, despite coffee room grumblings and diagnostic themes, every one of us keeps teaching because a colleague is excited about a new method, or a researcher offers new insights, or a student writes a terrific paper. Each of us finds evidence that teachers can teach — and students can learn — the art and the craft of writing.

Twenty years later, the problems remain. The criticism persists. Yet change is in the air. In fact, twenty years of unsung efforts are finally making the press. In May of 1980 *Time* magazine reported a range of activities across the nation that will improve both writing and teaching. *Time* cited government grants to support research in writing and enterprises like the Bay Area Writing Project. *Time* discovered college programs dedicated to teaching students and re-educating their teachers who must learn to shift from an "all-out study of literature to a more rigorous blend of literature and composition." *Time* acknowledged projects in writing across the curriculum that focus all the educational resources of a school or college on the teaching of writing.[5]

John Lardner, in the *Washington Post,* discussed the National Writing Project, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. His research surprised him: "The quality of writing in the nation's high schools and colleges — leaving aside, for the moment, the real world — is a subject that offers plenty of fuel for pessimism . . . so it is a strange and wondrous, and conceivably significant thing, that many of the people closest to the problem — the teachers of writing, and *their* teachers — are sounding more upbeat these days. They think they are on to something, and they want the rest of the world to know about it."[6]

Yes, we are sounding more upbeat. Yes, we are on to something. And the message is this: Johnny and Jane *can* write if we believe they can, if we teach them how, and if we tell them why.

Johnny and Jane can write if we believe they can. In the *Look* feature twenty years ago, James Squire, then executive secretary of NCTE, reflected a growing awareness that we needed a theory of how people learn to write. Squire said about writing, "The main thing is thinking, and we don't really know how thinking develops." For a long while we believed that writing was thinking. So when we read writing that appeared less and less coherent and more and more riddled with errors, many of us wondered if our students could think. And after open admissions in 1968, many of us were convinced that the "writing problem" was, in fact, the problem of admitting to our classrooms students who could not think. Like Marci's teacher, we couldn't understand how a thinking person could fail to write well about an "interesting experience."

But Mina Shaughnessy put us on the right track. She proved us wrong by observing carefully her students' writing patterns and problems. She concluded that their writing, just like ours, followed rules and formed patterns. But the rules were inappropriate, the patterns unconventional. They were thinking, all right, but they lacked the protocol, the writing strategies, the written code to demonstrate on paper what they thought. Like Marci, they didn't know how to translate experience into essay. Many non-writers, in fact, couldn't write because they didn't write.

We know more, today, about how people write and how they learn to write. Studies by James Britton and Janet Emig investigated the development of writing skills and tried to unearth the mental processes of writers at work, suggesting a cognitive theory of writing instruction. Similar research led Linda Flower to define writing not as thinking, per se, but as problem solving. We can teach, and students can learn, problem-solving strategies. Such important insights, allowing us to see inexperienced writers from a new perspective, depend on close, careful, sympathetic observation of student writers and their written products. All teachers of writing can find the evidence if they will only look. Within our own classrooms, we can see and believe that Johnny and Jane can write.

Faith can move mountains, but it can't develop paragraphs. If we believe in our students, we will redouble our efforts in the classroom. Johnny and Jane can write if we teach them how. Teachers conducting a writing project at Stockton State College report that "the current generation of students, whatever their deficiencies in preparation and intellectual curiousity, want to take pride in themselves and their work. They can be motivated — *if* we are willing to demand it of them, and *if* we are willing to expend sufficient effort to help them meet our standards."[7] In other words, teaching our students how to write well is harder than demanding that they do; teaching them how is harder than failing those who don't.

Twenty years later, we know more about how to teach writing. Nancy Sommers and Donald Murray, for example, have demonstrated differences in how inexperienced and experienced writers revise their writing. They argue that students must learn a process in order to produce a product. Some years ago, when my son was in nursery school, he brought a friend home to watch TV. After awhile the little boy came to me in the kitchen and announced, "Damn! Superman is over!" In my own mother's voice I corrected him. "Stevie, we don't use words like that around here." He looked at me in wide-eyed innocence. "But what do I say when Superman is over?" Spoken words are fixed in time, but written words can be reconsidered. They can be revised.

We can help our students learn a dozen ways to express their dismay when Superman is over.

The National Writing Project, in Lardner's words, typifies a "surprising consensus" about "untraditional notions: that students should get beyond the model of 'academic writing' with mere correctness as its goal; that they should write in all classes, not just English; and that instead of trying to produce an acceptable paper all at once, they should be encouraged to keep journals, write drafts, criticize each other's preliminary work, and experience the ardor of revision."[8] We are learning to combat what the Iowa Institute on Writing calls the "battered writer syndrome," of which the most obvious symptom is a cryptic pattern of bright red markings on students' papers, and perhaps their psyches. We know, as Erika Lindemann put it, that "the study of English doesn't need to be distasteful for our students if we can prevent them from constantly associating their use of language with mistakes, penalties, and humiliation, real or imagined."[9]

If we believe, and if we teach, Johnny and Jane will still ask why. And they should, for writing is hard work. Teachers of writing know all of the pragmatic answers, and we continue to believe that good writers become more valuable employees, more capable citizens, more powerful social and economic forces than their tongue-tied peers. Yet each of us faces our students alone and in a classroom far removed in time and spirit from these realities, or so it must seem to our students. We know more, twenty years later, about the beneficial pressure that the act of composing exerts on the human mind, yet our students may demand a more concrete reward, or one that is more immediate. Telling them why is our hardest job. According to one of my students, "The hardest thing about writing is finding an idea that will last as long as it's supposed to." I have visions of a new student government enterprise: selling three-page ideas to freshman writers, 20-minute ideas to public speakers, or two-stanza ideas to budding poets. It's little wonder that our students need good reason to grapple with such ideas that have a will and a shape all their own.

While writing will always be hard work (in fact as it gets better it probably gets harder), we can help our students to experience the satisfaction of *having written.* And we can do that in our classrooms, because nothing is more seductive than an audience who anticipates a first-rate performance but still enjoys your dress rehearsal. If we become such an audience, we may learn, not that Africa is an interesting place, but that dead fish roll their eyes in the marketplace at Tangier.

As a community of writing teachers, we must now tune out the critics and believe in our students and ourselves. In the next two days, we will assimilate theories about the act of writing. We will learn strategies for the how of writing. And we will refine our arguments for the why of writing. I am not so naive as to believe that we can, in the short term, change cultural attitudes, redesign our kindergarten-through-college curriculum, reduce our class sizes, increase our salaries, and command the professional respect that would make talented young people eager to join our ranks. We can, though, re-educate ourselves as teachers of writing and create our own curricular network. No one of us can solve the writing problem alone, in one class, one term, or one year. But we can do it a little at a time, individually and collectively, because all of you, who have invested in this conference time, energy, and money (commodities in short supply among teachers of writing) — you are not the bemoaners of problems but the seekers of solutions. We can ensure that our students, the ones in your classroom and mine, grow up with good memories of writing teachers and writing classes. Beginning today, we can assert — and we do — that Johnny and Jane *can* write, and we can teach them.

## NOTES

[1] 20 June, 1961, pp. 103-104, 106, 108-111.

[2] Alan Arcuri, William Daly, and Peter Mercado, "Today's Students Want to Take Pride in Their Work," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 8 Sept. 1982, p. 72.

[3] Elizabeth Schaub, "The Old Gray Schoolmarm Ain't What She Used to Be," *Indianapolis Monthly,* August, 1982, pp. 28-37.

[4] *A Rhetoric For Writing Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 3.

[5] "The Righting of Writing," *Time,* 19 May 1980, pp. 88-89.

[6] "The National Writing Project," *Washington Post,* 17 August 1982, Sec. B, p. 1.

[7] Arcuri, Daly and Mercado, p. 72.

[8] "The National Writing Project," Sec. B., p. 2.

[9] *A Rhetoric For Writing Teachers,* p. 137.

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