

TALK TO ME

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Student: What are we going to do in this class?

Teacher: You're going to write and respect a sentence.

You're going to combine sentences into a paragraph, and you're going to respect the paragraph.

You're going to combine paragraphs into an essay, and you're going to respect the essay.

And, at the end, you're going to realize that a sentence is just as miraculous as an essay.

Student: My last teacher told me to visualize the whole composition and think about the sentence last.

Teacher: Oh, every idea is good if you recognize how it is a lie. You should have a sense of where you are going. You don't have any direction unless you have a sense of destination.

Decide what you want the entire essay to say.

Be able to outline it.

But if your essay faithfully carries out your outline, I'll know you did not, in my terms, write an essay — because the purpose of that first decision was to make movement possible, that's all. If you arrived where you thought you were going to arrive, it means you didn't discover anything along the way.

Student: Oh, man, you remind me of the guy who saw a bunch of targets each with a bullseye.

He asked the marksman how he got a bullseye each time.

"Easy," the marksman said. "I shoot first, and then I draw the circles."

Is that what you're saying? Take general aim, and then claim that what you hit was your target?

Teacher: I think we're going to cure each other.

No. Your analogy is not pertinent. The guy who drew bullseyes around the holes intended to deceive others that he was a marksman. If we're talking about writing an essay as an exercise in deceiving others, don't talk to me.

- Student: I don't want to talk to you.
- Teacher: Good. If you don't want to tell me anything, don't write. Would you accept that as the first principle of writing? Because if you don't love me enough to tell me something, then you're not going to write a composition; you're going to fake one. Right?
- Student: You want me to tell you something I really want to tell you?
- Teacher: Yes. I'm selfish. I'm not concerned, really, with your not wanting to write it.
Because the truth is, student of mine, I don't want to read what you don't want to write. Because it makes me into a farce, and it makes you into a farce.
- Student: Well, I've got to please you.
- Teacher: I'm sure you don't want to waste your life trying to please me.
- Student: I've got to admit that I don't offhand know something I want to tell you. Do you have any advice for me, how to discover such a thing?
- Teacher: No. I'll tell you one thing. I'm grateful to you for talking to me. But I don't know what I want to hear from you.
- Student: Are you serious when you say that if I don't have anything to say, I shouldn't write?
- Teacher: Yes. Because I can't conceive of a person who has nothing to say. If you think you have nothing to say, I think you're lying to yourself. You don't respect what you've been through.
You've got lots of things to tell me. I don't know whether you want to tell me or not. But I'll tell you one thing: I want to hear them. You've been places I haven't. You've done things I haven't. You know things I don't.
- Student: Oh, man, I've been trying to figure out what people want to hear so long that I don't have the least idea what I want to say. And you don't have any advice for me?
- Teacher: No.
- Student: I keep thinking of things I might say to you that might impress you, but I guess that's not what you want.
- Teacher: Yes. Don't impress me.
- Student: You only want to hear something you don't know?

- Teacher: I don't want to hear anything I know.
- Student: You want to convince me I shouldn't write if I have nothing to say, and you want to convince me I have something to say?
- Teacher: Yes.
- Student: Isn't there any help at all you can give me to get started?
- Teacher: You're asking me to teach you how to write my essay because you don't know how to write your essay.
- Why don't you fake me out? You know I'm a college professor, you know I'm in the English department, you know I'll probably like big words and references to classical literature — why don't you try that?
- Student: You just talked me out of it.
- Teacher: I want you to write something you want to tell me. I'm ordering you to want to. That's the situation. Let's recognize it. It's artificial and contradictory.
- I think a man could be happy married to a woman he didn't like. Because she is another human being and he's got so much to discover.
- If you can understand that, you can understand the glory and pain of a composition classroom.
- You hate me but talk to me, okay? That's love. That's self-respect.
- Student: Listen, what should I write about? What subjects? I know I ought to relax. Tell me what to do and I'll relax. I'm still afraid that what I'd write won't please you.
- Teacher: So I'm the fake, right? I'm acting as if I'm not your teacher, but you know I'm your teacher. And it's true that, for all this talk of self-respect, you better satisfy my idea of value or you'll flunk the course. I'll tell you one thing: you won't pass the course by trying to cater to me, because catering to me is not one of my values.
- Student: Why don't you tell me I can have any old grade I want and let me start from there?
- Teacher: No. You need a grade even if nobody is qualified to give it. The important thing is that we agree on what is being assessed — otherwise the grade is meaningless to you.
- But, hell, that's not the issue — if you think it's

- unfair to be in this classroom, write me a paper telling me how, why, in what ways it's unfair.
- Student: All right, you make a point. We're all stuck somewhat in reality here. We need to write in all kinds of circumstances.
- Teacher: Writing is the power, that's what I'm saying. Acquire it.
- Student: You're saying, I'm not going to have the power until I stop looking at you. You're saying, take the responsibility, write your piece, see what happens. You're saying, be a man.
Do you think I can do it?
- Teacher: Don't ask questions like that.
- Student: I thought you'd say, "Of course you can do it!"
- Teacher: I'm not your daddy.
- Student: You think I can't do it?
- Teacher: I don't know.
- Student: You're not going to give me any reassurance?
- Teacher: No.
- Student: I think that's kind of crucial. I think you should say, "You can do it."
- Teacher: No matter who you are, you can do it? Anybody who sticks his head through the doorway can do it?
- Student: Can't everybody do it?
- Teacher: Anybody can do it. Even illiterate people can do it.
- Student: Why didn't you say that to me when I asked you, "Can I do it?"
- Teacher: Because I hate that question.

Both Professors of English at the Pennsylvania State University (University Park), S. Leonard Rubinstein and Robert G. Weaver teach writing, literature, and are prolific writers. Professor Rubinstein is the author or co-author of seven books, including three novels and two texts. Robert G. Weaver has written two novels and a mystery novelette and has co-authored four texts on writing. Perhaps what Professor Rubinstein wrote in the preface to one of his books sets up nicely this rather enigmatic essay: the teacher of writing "like the student, like all men, is puzzled; he asks questions, which are pleas for help, and responds to questions, which are pleas for help. Ability to write is knowing and stating and resolving ignorance."