

Behold, A Sower

What lasts of what we mark in student writing? How much teacher annotation is wasted? How many billions of incorrect commas and misspelled words, dutifully noted by conscientious graders who are often working after hours at home during "free" time, spill over into the void of student forgetfulness or carelessness? Is thorough annotation as efficacious as it is compulsive? Should we teachers be paid by the quantities of our marginalia? If so, what is it worth to police a gross of dangling modifiers?

I have been giving myself this line of questioning for all 20 of my years as a compulsive teacher of composition, whether in cold classrooms in the London slums or in the warm rooms of Eastern prep schools or in state universities or in my classes in rural black higher education; and at one time or another I have believed most of the contradictory answers that can be supplied to these questions, even as I have kept right on marking into the night.

Thereby I have become an editor fairly well trusted by my colleagues, for whatever their trust of this kind is worth. Routinely, people from outside

the English department nominate me to be secretary to most committees on which I serve, and at least a half-dozen of my colleagues annually send me their own scholarly effusions for such mending as I can effect before they send them to off-campus editors.

Still, I am hard put to know what lasts of what I mark on students' papers. How much learning does annotation encourage, and how can the learning be measured?

Let no scientist overhear and misunderstand me. I think we can do without a dissertation on these questions, and I can surely think of better activities for future teachers than designing a quantitative analysis.

I tremble lest some A.B.D. apply for a grant to compare the work of a representative sampling of freshmen whose writing has been marked in 15 exemplary categories with their work four years later measured by the same yardsticks. Within a mere 10 years, the A.B.D. may be winning the full professorship and become chairman of the department after developing this pilot project into the definitive work on relative student retention of five distinct styles of comma instruction in Iowa from 1920 to 1930. I

prefer to keep the evidence gloriously anecdotal.

Recently I reread a fistful of papers I had written in grades 7-12. Other teachers might also find it salutary thus to get in touch with their own studenthood. For me, the experience was less a literary journey back in time than a winner's holiday, so unimpressive were those fledgling efforts. My parents had kept them all, hundreds of them, neatly and chronologically in an attic file.

Although, at forty, I publish 20 to 30 articles a year, I found these compositions of my "formative" years more pretentious than portentous. And over the whole were spread the runes of the often forgotten graders. (Oh, she's the one who took an overdose of insulin and passed out in class; he's the one who yelled at the girl who said the world had to be square because the Bible talks of the "four corners"; she's the one who . . .)

Compassated about with so great a cloud of witnesses, I marveled at their generosity with grades only less than at their indefatigability. Yet year after year I continued to repeat many of the same mistakes. At no point could I shout,

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"Eureka! I've learned how to spell or how to punctuate or [much less likely] how to write!"

The one constant through all those years of obviously enlarging experience was my tendency to try to write with words over my own head, as if thereby I might more probably succeed in reaching the level at which I imagined my teachers' heads to float. Early on I had discovered the thesaurus, and I worked it with a vengeance, even when I forgot to transcribe correctly the Latinate polysyllables it imparted.

What sent me to my parents' attic file in the first place was an effort to unearth the two papers I had most clearly remembered as the ones that gave me the best instruction in writing that I have ever received from any teacher. I remember well the occasions for writing them—two consecutive Sunday afternoons at a boys' boarding school while I listened to the Longines Symphonette. As much as for good parent-school relations as for any educative purpose, the school required each boy to submit for his English teacher's grading one letter home per week. The unwritten rule for a grade of B or A was that these were to be expository essays with merely

a gratuitous salutation of "Dear Mother and Dad." The school did not want to invade our privacy; real news would have been stale after the week's delay; and a rehearsal of any campus episode would be so familiar that the most one could expect would be a C.

I remembered vividly how I had worked six hours (or was it only four?) preparing the first of these two compositions. I had recently been very sick after gobbling two extra steaks on a football trip, and my strategy in the composition was to write ironically about the pleasures of eating a steak, or, as I titled it, "The Modern Rarity."

I decided that this composition should stretch the teacher's mind more than anything else he would read all year. Since my mind was constantly being stretched by my having to learn new words in the readings assigned, I reasoned that my teacher could be similarly educated. Thus, after a careful and simple first draft, I worked with my thesaurus to enlarge each adjective and noun to longer counterparts that had to be new words for me, including "palatable," "nutriment," "succulent," "luxuriousness," "voluptuousness,"

"par excellence," "opulent," and on and on.

For the most part, I was able to keep from abusing the dictionary meanings of the words; my one lapse was the observation that "steaks prepared 'rare' are very *bibulous* and display a crimson hue," but most of the rest of the paper was similarly gagging and ostentatious. As I remembered it, the teacher returned the paper with only one word, "Jargon," and a grade of F.

I had never made below a B before and was angered beyond measure. Clearly the teacher had simply not known the words and was too lazy to look them up, I reasoned. The next Sunday afternoon, I paid more attention to the Longines Symphonette and followed the easier procedure most others used with the compositions. I dashed off a paper in only 20 minutes, a report of the week's activities, including a basketball game, a swimming match, and a Sweetheart Ball.

Ten minutes before class the next day, I got squeamish about the paper's mundaneness and, just to add a dash of difference, I rewrote it quickly, keeping the same activities but seeing them as a different person, beginning: "Dear Mother

and Daddy, Mr. Tweet, an imaginary bird, found life on the ridge very eventful yesterday. As he soared down from his lofty nest at 2:30, he noticed . . . " This version embarrassed me with its silliness even as I turned it in, but, since I had no time for another draft, I steeled myself for the inevitable C. As I remembered it, the paper came back again with only one word, "Imaginative," and the grade was A.

Easy moral: Teachers should not waste hours marking everything but should single out one or two major principles and teach them in an analogously dramatic fashion.

But morals are rarely easy. The distance of 24 years from the twelfth grade can play tricks on one's memory. Surely enough, I found the two papers, but the grade contrast was only 93-78 in favor of Mr. Tweet; and while the paper sporting Mr. Tweet had no mark except a grade, not even the word "Imaginative," the paper about the steak had 16 distinct annotations, including "Jargon" four times but never at the top, and five other questions of diction. I had also forgotten that the paper on steaks had three injunctions to combine sentences (1954!) to vary sentence rhythm, three correc-

tions of punctuation, and three corrections of spelling (though a fourth misspelling was overlooked). Hence, the highly selective and cryptic grading skill that I had attributed to this teacher in response to these two papers existed mainly in my own imagination.

I see no reason now to revise the high opinion in which I have so long held this teacher, even though I have discovered that he was as ploddingly compulsive as most other mortal teachers are. I suspect that what led me to misremember the markings on these papers were other, nonquantifiable personal enthusiasms through which he communicated the valuable preference for imagination over pedantry. I strongly suspect that his efforts to help me as a writer were not hurt by the fact that he kept me writing very frequently and by the fact that I knew my parents would be reading and saving those dreadful first efforts in their belief that given enough time and practice I would discover my truths and speak them. I also strongly suspect that the good principle I wrongly remembered as my teacher's had been in part my own discovery, the kind of discovery good teachers always work to prompt

for their students, perhaps by so simple a device as giving a grade grubber who normally gets a B a devastating 78.

I believe that teaching and learning are both mysteries we can solve only in part. As do other mysteries, teaching and learning depend heavily on accident. Unwittingly, we teachers shall always cast some of our seeds in the wrong season; and some that fall on what appears the hardest ground may survive to take root many seasons later, to the credit of other sowers. Because our students are people, not clods of earth, we can never know for sure their fallow times, nor can we get an accurate measure of their yield or of our part in it.

I wonder how all of these faith statements will be ingested by the accountability folks, but probably they are too busy counting more discrete integers to have read this far.

By Louie Crew

A graduate of The McCallie School (Tenn.) and formerly a teacher at Darlington School (Ga.) and St. Andrew's School (Del.), Louie Crew is associate professor of English at Fort Valley State College, in Georgia. He is the author of two books and over 100 essays.