THE WRITERS’ MYTH AND TEACHERS’ REALITY
OF WORKING IN ISOLATION AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON WRITING INSTRUCTION REFORM

By

Eudora Watson

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
English and Communication
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts in English and Communication
This thesis entitled

THE WRITERS’ MYTH AND TEACHERS’ REALITY
OF WORKING IN ISOLATION AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON WRITING INSTRUCTION REFORM

By Eudora Watson
Has been approved for the
Department of English and Communication

_________________________________               ______________
Assistant Professor of English and Communication     Date

_________________________________               ______________
Associate Professor of English and Communication     Date

_________________________________               ______________
Assistant Professor  of Literacy                     Date

The final copy of the above mentioned thesis has been examined by the signatories
and found to meet acceptable standards for scholarly work in the discipline in both
form and content.
PERMISSION TO COPY

I grant The State University of New York College at Potsdam the non-exclusive right to use this work for the University’s own purposes and to make single copies of the work available to the public on a not-for-profit basis if copies are not otherwise available.

____________________________________       ______________

Eudora Watson       Date
Abstract

Writing and teaching have this in common – popular images of each foreground isolation and art and obscure community and craft. These images play a role in shaping writing instruction in the public schools, particularly influencing the status of community among writers in a classroom. While there has long been advocacy for a move toward including collaboration in writing classes through peer and student–teacher conferencing, and more recently for collaboration in teachers’ professional lives, through peer mentoring and study, the strength of the image of teachers and writers working at their art in isolation stands against these reform efforts. As a first step in reclaiming the grade school classroom as a site of genuine writing instruction, the role of isolation as a presence in the schools – in writing instruction, as a management strategy, as a narrative of the working lives of teachers and writers – should be examined and challenged.
Introduction

I write from a personal belief that stories, told and untold, are powerful. My concern here is with the stories we do not tell – the unspoken of bits of life that, unattended to, become the elephant in the room. I propose that there are at least two elephants in the writing classroom, and, as these sorts of elephants do, they draw their strength from silence. I write about them here in an effort to diffuse that strength. I argue that one of the elephants patiently shifting its weight in the corner of a grade school English classroom is the idea that writers are “other” – suicidal drunks or aloof misfits who do not function in the world as ordinary folks do: unusual people who hole themselves up with their talent, forego normal relationships, and send out unnaturally perceptive essays, stories and novels to the world. The other elephant in the classroom is the culture of isolation in the schools. Isolation is used in schools as a behavior management tool, it is part of the media image of teachers, and it is reinforced in the frequent repetition of the concept of a “real world” separate from school. I argue that the idea of isolation as a part of writers’ lives and the reality of isolation as part of teachers’ lives work together to have a negative influence on writing instruction.

Much of the work I look at was published in the late 1980s, the time period in which I earned my New York State teaching certification in English, 7-12. So, many of my choices of text can be considered personal. However, the personal functions within the political, and the late 1980s were scene to potentially revolutionary reforms in the theory and practice of writing instruction – one strand of my inquiry is
to look at the fate of those reform efforts. I do move out of that time period: I reach back to the turn of the last century to bring in ideas from Dr. Gertrude Buck, the first person to receive a doctoral degree in composition, and I bring in a current *New York Times* column by Brent Staples. Buck’s text offers a sense of early stirrings of a “new” way to teach writing, and Staples’ column serves as capsule summary of what I call a “corporate” critique of writing instruction. I also draw from publications of the teaching profession, such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) publication for middle school teachers, *Voices From the Middle: Of Writers and Writing*, and texts on writing instruction by classroom teachers.

Looking beyond the profession, I bring in material from a trade publication, *Poets & Writers Magazine*, which I suggest has much to offer teachers of writing. In examining the idea of writer as “other” I begin with a text by psychologist Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, published in 1988, and a volume published the next year by Pulitzer Prize winning writer Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*. Storr, who has been described as Britain's most literary psychiatrist, was the author of twelve books, all but one of which is still in print. He began his reputation for accessible writing about difficult concepts with the publication of his first book, *The Integrity of the Personality*, in 1960. His books have been translated into twenty-four languages and were very popular in the United States - *Solitude* sold 100,000 copies here (Lehmann-Haupt). I address these two texts at length in the belief that it is important to look at influential texts about writers and writing, to see what it is they actually say and compare it to what they are reputed to say. For instance, Storr’s text is cited by writers in the academy and in the popular press without challenges to the basic
negative presumptions he makes about artists in general and writers in particular. (Hollenhorst, Daiss). I argue that Storr’s presumptions should be examined and challenged. For example, in order to provide a balancing counter to Anthony Storr’s theories of creativity, I bring in the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyin on what he calls “optimal experience.” Annie Dillard’s text, a collection of journal entries on her experience of writing, is one she herself now discredits as “embarrassing.” However, it was popular enough to be republished, “fixed somewhat,” by Harper Perennial nine years after it originally appeared (Dillard website). I am not asking my reader to critique the collection, rather I am asking my reader to wonder with me why Dillard’s disturbing images of writers and writing are so strangely palatable in our culture. As an alternative to the suffering-writer narrative Dillard artfully relates, I bring in a number of texts I believe generally contribute to a more balanced view of writers and specifically contribute to a view that is more applicable to the goals of writing instruction in the grade school classroom. It is my hope that the stories other writers tell about writing, drawn from the works of Dan Wakefield, Rita Mae Brown, Natalie Goldberg and Louise Gluck, will provide a suggestion of the rich array of life-affirming stories of writing experience that are available to teachers of writing.

In considering the role of isolation in teachers’ lives, I draw from my own experiences in the schools; I also bring in a publication of the New York State Teachers’ Union, and studies of popular media. I argue that the repeated cultural images of good teachers working in isolation contribute to a mythology about teaching that is a damaging companion to the myth that good writers work in
isolation. Further, I agree with those who believe that the writing process reforms of the 1980s have not been successfully implemented in grade school classrooms (Beers, Atwell), and I suggest that cultural ideas about writers and teachers and the culture of isolation in the schools must be taken into account in any effort to reinvigorate those reforms.

Teaching writing well is important, and the current state of writing instruction is disheartening. More than any other single area of instruction, it is writing that teachers across grade levels and disciplines are called on to teach. However, unlike that other near-universal area, reading, at this point there generally is not a specialist down the hall to consult with or send students to. Writing instruction therefore not only falls to a great many teachers, for a number of them there is no ongoing support. The expansion of reading specialist to literacy specialist may be heartening, but a look at the New York State Education Department website: nysed.gov., could serve to dampen raised hopes. Consider the Grade 3 2006 ELA (English Language Arts) sample exam posted on the site. From the very people who publicly insist on more rigorous standards for students and teachers comes an exam with a section that is labeled “Writing” that involves no writing, only simplistic corrects of a given text – fix some upper/lower case problems, switch a period to a question mark – all using that popular method of crossing off errors and writing in corrections. The misunderstanding that editing is writing is institutionalized. The test also reveals a disturbing lack of writing expertise on the part of teachers. Peek into the FAQ section offered on the website, and you’ll discover that teachers – those trained as scoring
leaders anyway - need to be told that it is ok for students to use standard editing marks rather than the cross-out technique suggested on the test. Further, teachers need to be instructed that, when students are actually doing some writing (on the listening section), they should not be penalized for starting a sentence with ‘and’ or ‘but.’ At a minimum, these questions reveal that many teachers are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable with standard editing symbols and that many confuse stylistic guidelines for rules of usage. That’s a glimpse into the state of writing instruction. What about the state of students? In 1984, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote, in Being Adolescent:

The hidden curriculum of growing up lies in how a person learns to respond to daily situations: in mastering interactions with parents, achieving harmony with friends, learning how to handle pressures of school, and developing means to transcend everyday conflicts. (5)

Csikszentmihalyi indicates that young people have a complex puzzle to work through on their way to adulthood. Twenty years later, Chris Crutcher, a writer of young adult novels that address particularly difficult lives of children, summarizes that puzzle-solving this way: “I believe that the kids who best survive the hard times are those who find a way to make sense of their lives. And I believe it is our job to help them” (6). How to help? Many people believe that adopting a habit of writing helps young people make sense of their lives. Dr. Mary Pipher, author of Reviving Ophelia, Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, recommends writing: “I encourage girls to keep diaries and to write poetry and autobiographies . . . In their writing, they can clarify, conceptualize and evaluate their experiences. Writing their thoughts and feelings
strengthens their sense of self” (255). And educator and writer Linda Rief contributes this idea about writing’s potential as a positive element in children’s lives: “Our students must be allowed their voices through writing because it helps them think and feel and play with language as they make order out of their chaotic lives: their school lives, their personal lives, and the chaos of the world around them” (9).

Pressures to do well on a writing test, no matter the original purpose of the test, in practice reduce the act of writing from a making of meaning to a performance of rule-following. As I will discuss later, this transformation of writing – from a tool in the development and organization of thought into a litmus test for an ability to follow discrete rules – deprives writing of the kind of power that Pipher, Rief, and others attribute to it. The current trend in education is an increased use of writing as a litmus test. Despite this, in the face of this, our young people must have writing instruction that offers them a means to develop and articulate their ideas. Writer Gloria Naylor documents the vital importance to young people of the ability to write about their feelings:

My mother, seeing that I was not a talker . . . went out to Woolworth’s and bought me one of those white plastic diaries. . . From the age of twelve I made the vital connection between inarticulate feeling and the written word. Whatever went into those original pages are not eternal keepsakes . . . but they were my feelings, it was my pain, and the pain was real to me at twelve years old. And we wonder about the rise in teenage suicides. It is because adults resist believing that whatever the demons are, if they’re twelve-year-old,
thirteen-year-old, fourteen-year-old demons, they are real. I know, I had them

. . . with the gift of that diary, my life was saved (21).

Naylor credits her wise and perceptive mother with taking her to the library, where she learned to love books, and giving her a diary, in which she learned to articulate her feelings. My own mother was a woman who, with no room of her own and only the tiniest of independent incomes, wrote two novels and a soothing stream of poetry. She did this while she raised seven children, and she did it as though there were no other sensical way to live. Living with her, I gathered a knowledge of and an interest in writing that has guided my own means of making sense of the world and guided my academic curiosity. It is just as well my mother leant strength and genuineness to my understanding of writing, and modeled tenacity. I have needed it in my vocation of writing – as a practitioner and as a teacher. And I have needed it, only doubly so, in my academic pursuit of trying to make sense of the fate of the potentially sweeping reforms in writing instruction I took part in as a graduate student in education at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Potsdam.

I came to the field of public school writing instruction at a time when a shift from written product to writing process was being heralded in the United States, and teachers-in-training were advised to adopt writing workshops as the modus operandi in their classrooms. The workshops were meant to foster an environment in which students and their teachers would get to the genuine task of writing – creating meaning - in a specialized atmosphere of mutual inquiry, individual effort, and supportive community. I received my teaching credentials in 1990, and was one of thousands to be trained in the pedagogy of writing process. Over the next ten years it
became apparent to me - first in my work in the public schools and later in my work with college students - that the wave of writing process reform that I had taken part in had not taken hold.

Kylene Beers, as editor of *Voices from the Middle: of Writers and Writing*, sums up the fate of writing process reform this way:

[Students] learned to brainstorm, revise, edit, all while considering audience and purpose. Then somewhere along the way, a “sloppy copy” became a requirement, journal became a verb, revision became a checklist, and this complex generative recursive process (writing as a process) was reduced to sequential steps (The Writing Process). . . In many places, as students dutifully follow The Writing Process, revision looks like copyediting, and assessment is about the teacher jotting *frag, awkward, and run-on* in the margins. (4)

In Beers’ concise and, I can attest, accurate summation of what has happened to writing process reform, she lists the visible signs that adoption of writing process has been limited to an adoption of its language. Beers looks back to the *Newsweek* cover story “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” published in 1975, as a watershed event that “created a writing stir in America’s schools,” and notes that “a stir” wasn’t enough. She cites the 2003 report of the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges on the state of writing instruction, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, and supports the call to revolution that the Commission suggests. I note however, that the 2003 call does not ask for a change
from the writing process way of thinking about writing or in the fundamental strategies advocated for teaching writing as a process.

For instance, Beers’ one specific recommendation for teachers’ actions in the classroom – write with your students – is a mainstay of that potentially revolutionary writing instruction text from 1987, Nanci Atwell’s *In the Middle*. And, in giving other particulars about what should happen in the writing classroom, Beers describes writing process instruction as it has been described for several decades. Teachers and their students should be “looking for ideas, working through drafts and revisions, stumbling through writer’s block, sharing during writer’s circles, accepting advice, starting, stopping, and starting again” (4).

Other articles in the December 03 issue of *Voices from the Middle* support the conclusion that the recent call to reform is not a finding of fault with writing process as a method of writing instruction (Rief, Jester, Atwell, Saddler). Rather, it is a finding of fault with the implementation of writing process. The two remedies suggested by the report are more training for teachers and more time in the classroom devoted to writing instruction. Some of the training Beers mentions as available to teachers is in the guise of the new and some in the respected form of the established. For example, she informs her readers of the NCTE’s own Writing Initiative and she reminds teachers of the ongoing National Writing Project.

In her call to action, she makes what amounts to a plea: “Even if your students are your only audience, let them see you writing. When that happens, then the writing revolution will most certainly be underway” (4). Here Beers identifies one particular action on the part of teachers – writing with their students. In doing so, she identifies
the teachers’ own relationship to writing as a crucial element of writing instruction. While I fully agree that the teacher’s own relationship to writing is key to establishing a writing-friendly culture in the classroom, I notice that in making this plea she echoes similar pleas, from Nanci Atwell, from Linda Rief, from Donald Murray and Donald Graves. Notably, those pleas did not prevent writing process from turning into The Writing Process.

I suggest that persons looking to understand and reform writing instruction in the schools should keep in mind that classrooms and schools not only function as a cultural setting, they are embedded within a larger cultural setting. There are indications that a federal approach to reform, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Education Act, recognizes that schools are a cultural setting. At its most drastic, NCLB promotes reforming inadequate schools not just by changing curricular practice but by emptying them of the old warm bodies and starting with new warm bodies (nysed.gov). This certainly takes on the problem of “sacred” traditions that educational sociologist Donald R. Thomas, in his book The Schools Next Time, identified as complicating organizational change. And it pretty much wipes out the problem of the “unexamined life” Thomas refers to: teachers, aides, janitors, and cafeteria workers all sent home to fill out applications and reapply for their jobs no doubt do undergo considerable self-examination of their lives.

This method of school reform can be critiqued along multiple fault lines. The line I will follow is the belief that even emptied of warm bodies the schools will not be empty. As hard as the government tries to reinvent a school by wiping out the staff, the new staff will not arrive to a clean slate. The hallways and the classrooms,
the gyms and the auditoriums will be filled before the first new person crosses the threshold. They will be filled with the cultural stories that we tell about teachers and teaching, about students, about writers and about writing. The person who believes that we can empty the schools of the offending staff and leave a virgin territory for reform knows too little about these cultural stories.

Acknowledgment of the cultural stories told about schools and about writing is an important, and neglected step in reform. Thomas cautions against launching reform without adequate tools in place to guide change. He believes this is equivalent to proposing “a life not clearly defined or experienced” (88). I suggest that the lives that need to be more clearly defined in the schools are the lives of teachers and the lives of writers. The cultural images of these lives amount to a mythology. The stories told about teachers and writers, which have much in common, are at best grossly incomplete. I argue that these stories influence writing instruction and, in particular, hamper the adoption of a key element of writing workshop: the collaborative conference.

Part 1: An Overview of Collaboration in the Writing Classroom

Collaboration has been championed as an integral part of classroom writing instruction by various practitioners and theorists for decades. Donald Murray, one of the pioneers in popularizing “an old and rather ordinary idea – that writing is a process” (21), believed that “Students of writing should become colleagues” (17). Composition theorists Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff believed strongly that what writers needed most was readers and that writing students should be trained in peer
feedback. To that end, in 1984, their college textbook *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing* was published with a companion booklet, *Sharing and Responding*. Their view on the role of collaboration in the writer’s life is evident when, in the introduction to the larger text, they speak to students about the booklet: “Actually, we hope it’s the part you’ll find most useful for later writing; thus we’ve bound it separately to make it easier for you to continue to use after you’ve finished this particular course” (4). Strategies for peer collaboration were the lessons these authors most hoped their student readers would take away with them. These educators were not the first to suggest the idea that students should collaborate. Ninety years earlier, Dr. Gertrude Buck and Dr. Elisabeth Woodbridge began their text, *A Course in Expository Writing*, with a preface focused on advice for providing genuine audience for student writers. They recommend that students discuss topics together before writing and that they join the teacher in creating “real readers” for each other. The authors suggest that students exchange papers, that they read their work out loud to the class, that “the teacher or a fellow student tries to give back in other words the impression he has received” (vi). These authors did not see their advice taken up at that time as a rallying call; however, a hundred years later, when I did my degree work toward certification in English 7-12, that advice was part of the canon on how to teach writing in the grade schools.

In 1983, Murray and eleven other professors from the University of New Hampshire visited the classroom of eighth grade teacher Nanci Atwell. Atwell was an early champion of the kind of writing instruction that Murray advocated. She went on to be profiled in *Esquire* magazine in 1984, and her book *In the Middle: Writing*,
**Reading, and Learning with Adolescents**, (1987) won the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize. This book showcased the strategy of “giving back in other words.” It was a key text in the first methods course I took, and it was my key reference when I began teaching. Atwell’s text stressed the importance of establishing a community of learners in the classroom, and student contributions to everyone’s learning are given high status. In the world according to Atwell, the key elements in learning to write are writing and talking about one’s writing in conferences. A chapter is devoted to explaining the philosophy and the practicalities of various kinds of writing conferences – status of the class; content; group share; topic; self; editing, and evaluative conferences. In the writing classroom, as advocated by Atwell, conferences take place between teacher and student and between students.

Ten years later, three authors with books brought out by the same publisher, Boyton/Cook Heinemann, treat student collegial work in the writing classroom quite differently. Educators Susan and Stephen Tchudi, both with editorial experience at *English Journal*, and coauthors of four books on English Language Arts, published *The English Language Arts Handbook: Classroom Strategies for Teachers* in 1999. In this book, they give “productive engagement among peers” a mere seven-and-a-half-lines. It is one item in a bulleted list of twelve suggestions for implementing workshops. In comparison, their suggestions on ways for students to publish run to two and a half pages.

That same year, high school teacher Jim Burke published his guide to teaching English, *The English Teacher’s Companion: A Complete Guide to the Classroom*. This book was touted by Sheridan Blau, then President of the National Council of
Teachers of English, as the book that “will be to the teaching of English in our time what Dr. Spock’s *Baby Book* was to child care” (Burke, back cover) What Burke describes, and advocates, in this “complete” guide, is a writing process relatively devoid of Murray’s ideal that writing students should be colleagues. In his explanation of process, peer-feedback is folded in with teacher-feedback and mentioned as one bullet in a list of “four quick steps” that will encourage revision. Like the Tchudis’, more of his text is devoted to publishing possibilities than collaborative efforts. On the page with the thirteen-word reference to feedback, he devotes sixteen lines to ways to publish student work.

These two texts offer corroboration for a trend I observed in my ten years in the public schools and in my more recent work with first-year college students and grade school teachers. While some aspects of writing process have survived implementation in the public schools, collaboration between student writers in the form of peer conferencing – sharing and responding – has not fared well. Ironically, the theory of teaching writing as a process developed within a philosophy that supports the idea of writing the way writers write. The *Paris Review*’s publication of interviews with writers in the 1960s fueled an interest in the working habits of writers, in the processes that lead to published texts (Tchudi, 141). By the 1980s, this interest in the process writers used was reflected in theories that guided public school writing instruction - the focus moved from product to process (Tchudi, 137). Instructional emphasis shifted from “writing by the rules” to “writing by the method.” The method, termed “writing process,” (i.e., brainstorm, draft, revise, edit, proofread,
publish) developed as a distillation of the practice of “real” writers (Tchudi, Atwell). This was the emphasis I learned as a writing teacher-in-training in the late 1980s.

However, the implementation of this streamlined listing of writerly steps has moved away from the intent of early writing process proponents and does not adequately reflect the complexity of the nonlinear practice from which it has been extracted (Murray, Atwell, Burke). The over simplification of writing process has allowed a key, social aspect of writerly practice - working collaboratively within a community of writers for feedback and support – to be obscured. In a public school environment that stresses individual effort and achievement, an environment in which groups of people work together only in order to compete and defeat, too often the collective nature of much of the work of writers and the rich working relationships between writers and the readers of their drafts are lost.

Peer conferencing, a primary forum for development of collegial writing collaboration, has the potential of playing a powerful role in writing instruction in the public school classroom. It not only follows the model of writerly practice that writing process is modeled on, but it brings to the writing classroom provision for the key ingredients of the basic needs that behavioral psychiatrist William Glasser put forward in his Control Theory model of human behavior: belonging, freedom, fun, and power (Glasser). That this potential is not fulfilled should not, perhaps, be surprising. The absence of collaborative peer conferencing in the classroom version of writers-at-work mirrors the lack of experience with collaboration among most public school teachers. The practice of teachers working in isolation undermines
reform efforts that depend on those same teachers to encourage peer work in their classrooms.

**Part II: Stories of Writing**

I write and I teach. From these two experiences I’ve observed that teachers and writers have this in common – powerful, popular narratives of each foreground isolation and talent at the expense of community and craft. These narratives play a role in shaping writing instruction in the public schools, particularly influencing the status of community among writers in a classroom. Development of collaborative community in the writing classroom has long been advocated for through encouragement of peer and teacher-student conferencing. And more recently there has been support for increased collaboration in teachers’ professional lives through peer mentoring and group study. However, the strength of the popular narratives of teachers and writers working at their art in isolation stands against these efforts. What follows is an examination of these narratives, the source of their strength, their influence on writing instruction, and counter narratives that provide stories that are more conducive to teaching people how to write. But first, some common ground for what is meant by “writing” needs to be established.

The “clear definition” that Thomas sets as a prelude to real organizational change is lacking when it comes to writing. In a remarkable adaptability, the term “writing” means any of a disparate number of things. For many people it refers to handwriting – penmanship. When I was talking with Middle School parents, I learned to ask a clarifying question or otherwise lead the conversation in a way that would reveal
what the parent meant when they said their child’s writing had always been good, or had always been a problem. Generally, they were remembering back to the legibility of early handwriting. Even when a colleague said that writing had come fairly easily for her child, she was referring to penmanship.

In another use of the term, “writing” means proofreading of text. This use is evident on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) sample exam referred to in the introduction. On this particular test, students receive credit on the “Writing” section for recognizing and correcting capitalization and punctuation errors. In an unfortunate development, New York State is further institutionalizing the misleading idea that proofreading is writing, rather than its servant.

This conflation of writing with editing and handwriting is problematic; however, even when “writing” is understood to mean the production of a text, it has a split personality. Mention of it most often brings the conversation to creative writing, but discussion of its quality tends to bring up the ideals of nonfiction writing. For example, when I say I teach writing, people will most often make references to their experiences, good and bad, with creative writing. They speak fondly, or with clear relief that it is over, of writing poems or stories. Rarely do they talk about the nonfiction essays they were required to write. However, despite the remembered stories and poems, the standards for good writing that are mentioned in such conversations are those most commonly linked to nonfiction writing: clarity and conciseness; not those commonly linked to creative writing: voice, word choice, passion, tempo. Even in discussions that focus on experience with creative genres, the
notion of style is absent – it would seem to have no genuine place in the discussion of school writing.

Evidence of this homelessness is a drift to false location. Where, in school writing, do concerns of style wind up? Lacking their own place in the discourse of school writing, stylistic decisions about word choice - use of repetition, selection of the first word in a sentence, use of pronouns - get slotted into the rules column: words should not be repeated, sentences cannot start with “and” or “but,” the first person pronoun may not be used. It is ironic that many schools have “voice” on their rubric as a quality that contributes to good writing while the stylistic choices that would lead to voice are hindered by the hardening of cautions about style into rules that ban certain uses. The critical thinking, the decision-making and problem solving that grade school teachers hanker for, they discourage by setting false restraints on students’ use of language. The artificial rules may help beginning writers avoid some standard problems, but by limiting students’ experience with decision-making, they also steer them away from developing the ability to solve those problems. The chance to learn from mistakes and think things through, key components of developing critical thinking, is forestalled.

I can imagine three narratives that would give rise to a classroom environment friendly to the widespread acceptance and use of theses rules. Two of these narratives are suggested if the intended function of the rules is to serve as something akin to training wheels that aren’t meant to be removed. One possible rationale behind the story of rules-as-training-wheels is a belief that writing is a dangerous activity that students must be protected from. Another rationale is the view that students are
people who lack the ability to form judgments over time through acquaintance with models and practice. E. B White, in the chapter he contributed to the third edition of Strunk’s *The Elements of Style*, cautioned, “No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader’s intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing” (84). I respectfully suggest that no one can teach writing decently who is distrustful of the student’s intelligence, or whose attitude is patronizing: the use of artificial rules as training wheels is, regardless of intent, distrustful and patronizing.

The third narrative of writing that is supported by the designation of certain stylistic choices as “error” is no more attractive – it is the story in which avoidance of error is the goal of writing and fewer errors is equivalent to better writing. White spends a couple of pages on *effective* stylistic “errors” and begins his chapter summary:

Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, “Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar” (84).

The elderly practitioner and Strunk do not stand alone on this issue. The developers of the New York State ELA exam, despite their reinforcement of editing-as-writing in their test design, do try to separate out the act of writing from the “tricks of grammar” by having the two scored separately. However, in my experience working as a table facilitator in scoring sessions, teachers who are learning this scoring method have great difficulty with it – having been trained to find error, they struggle with setting aside judgments about error long enough to see and give credit to the ideas that are expressed.
The strength of the association between the quality of writing and the measurement of error was further demonstrated in a conversation I had with a student who is a tutor at the College Writing Center (CWC) and a member of the grant program I help coordinate. She told me she had half of an essay assignment for grant participation completed and asked if she should give me that half or wait until she had it all done. When I suggested that it would give me a chance to give her some feedback if she gave me what she had, her response surprised me. “Oh,” she replied, “That’s ok, I’m not worried about my writing.” I wasn’t either, but I was curious about her ideas. However, to her, “feedback” meant error correction, and since she was, reasonably enough, self-assured about errors, she didn’t see a role for reader feedback. Although she has had CWC training in putting meaning first in tutoring sessions, error management was the story of writing she seemed to work from that day.

Other stories about writing can be found in discussions of the causes for poor writing on the part of college graduates. The talk commonly includes references to “watered-down first-year comp classes” and the grade school education of the people in question. *New York Times* editorial columnist Brent Staples’ corporate take on the situation is not unusual. Staples has both the legitimacy and readership afforded *New York Times* columnists. I use his column “Get it down on paper, fast” because Staples’ argument relies on, and so reveals, a commonplace narrative about writing and writers. The underpinning of his story of writing is a view of writing as a utilitarian tool important to corporate success. The narrative of writing-as-job-skill is well documented in this article.
The not uncommon beliefs about writing that are reflected in this piece are the complementary notion that writing, once taught, will not be forgotten, and that the ability to write well is a static attribute that can be trotted out on notice. It follows, in this story of writing, that if students learned to write well in high school, they will write well in college, and will go on, with no further training needed, to produce satisfactory texts of all sorts for their employers.

In his column, Staples uses elements of storytelling: he includes a problem, a villain, and a hero. In telling his version of the story of writing, Staples identifies the problem as “...Bright, well-educated people” who were “never trained to express [their] thoughts in words.” The culprit he identifies is the public schools; the hero is the corporate world. The measurement tool Staples uses to determine that there is a problem with writing is a survey of members of the Business Roundtable, “an association of chief executives from the nation’s leading corporations.” Staples reports that the survey revealed “...a fair degree of dissatisfaction with the writing produced by recent college graduates” (1). While I agree that much is amiss when it comes to writing instruction, I wouldn’t call “a fair degree of dissatisfaction” a harsh condemnation, as Staples apparently does. However, rather than quibble with the degree of his discontent, what I am interested in doing here is examining his definition of writing and his ideas about teaching writing – ideas that are shared by many. In this one article, the key ideas of this particular story of writing are packed in tightly. My purpose is to unpack his argument and lay out the distinct elements that characterize a “corporate” understanding of writing. I use Staples as a spokesperson for a vocal and powerful contingent.
Based on his article, Staples believes writing is equivalent to “expressing thought in words,” and that it should be “clear and concise,” “fluent,” “effective” and structured in a way as to be intelligible. I would add to this list that he also believes that writing should be taught in the public grade schools, since he identifies reform there as the answer, and that he believes a college degree should certify that the holder has the know-how to write an audit report, or any other business report, without further training from the business that requires the report.

I also suggest that he sets forth the contradictory notions that it is difficult to train writers and easy to do so. He speaks of companies that went to the now-too-expensive lengths of “cover[ing] for poor writers by surrounding them with people who could translate their thoughts on to paper.” If it were easy to turn “bright, well-educated people” into writers, presumably those companies he refers to would have done so, instead of cushioning them from the demands of writing. The very same companies who are willing to “pay a fortune” to move an employee cannot find a cost-effective way to train that employee to write a coherent report. Training people who don’t already know how to express their thoughts in written words in a clear and concise manner is an insurmountable task for companies. So on the one hand, teaching writing must be difficult, require skills not readily found in corporations, and expensive.

On the other hand, for public schools, success at teaching writing requires only a willingness to do it. However, according to Staples, public schools aren’t willing. He believes the failure of the NCLB Education Act is a failure of will on the part of the schools: “persuading schools to improve math and reading instruction,
even in exchange for federal dollars, has proved difficult. Persuading schools to rethink the teaching of writing – those that teach it at all – is going to be a lot harder.”

In his view, business leaders, driven by their “fair degree of dissatisfaction” have become “champions of education reform” and are up against the difficult task of “persuading” schools to improve writing instruction (1).

Not only that, but public schools seem not to have been aware that there was any problem with writing instruction. It has taken, in Staples’ view, the inclusion of a writing segment on the SAT college entrance exam to “put schools and parents on notice that writing instruction needs to improve.” His choice of words indicates that, prior to this revision of the SAT, schools and parents did not, in fact, notice a problem with writing instruction. He goes so far as to categorize this action on the part of the test developers as a public service, and credit them with “bringing writing to the top of the national agenda.”

Although Staples calls for concision as a measure of good writing, the standard for language use in this country is not concision; rather, it is often simplification and expediency. It is this language of simplification and expediency that Staples himself uses in this article. For instance, when he states that the goal of the federal NCLB Education Act is to “erase the achievement gap between rich and poor children,” he makes use of terminology that ignores a fundamental of economics: wealth and the lack of wealth reside with adults, not children. This phrase uses the simplifying strategy of calling to mind children and passes up the more accurate, but complicating, idea of the gap in adults’ economic status. In Staples’ story of writing, the source of the gap between the achievement of the children of the
poor and the children of the rich is solely located in the schools and can be addressed
with school reforms in writing instruction. However, while Staples calls for
“common-sense writing reforms,” the only reform he mentions is the addition of yet
another writing assessment.

Staples reports that NCTE opposed the addition of a writing segment to the
SAT, and launching from this instance, he devotes considerable text to building a
case against teachers. He begins the essay byfaulting the abilities of college
graduates - who were, no doubt, taught by teachers. He characterizes schools, and
therefore, unless one attributes them with an equally damning total passivity,
teachers, with needing to be persuaded to improve instruction. According to Staple
s, the members of NCTE don’t just lack common sense but are deeply resistant to it. In
his view, they are condescending to poor and minority students; they are misguided;
they support appalling notions and are ignorant of a need for improvements in writing
instruction and ignorant of a call for any but long-term writing projects; they suffer
from egocentrism when it comes to judging writing; most are untrained in teaching
writing and many can’t produce good writing. Whew. Having wiped the floor with
them, and spent almost half of the physical space of the essay on them, he dismisses
them: “The blame lies not with the teachers...” This adds insult to insult: being held
blameless in a situation in which they are so clearly present is hardly a compliment.
In this case, not-responsible is equivalent to being irresponsible.

With just six sentences left, Staples throws in a flurry of ideas - he pulls in
state colleges of education (private colleges that confer teaching certificates are
exempt?), and suggests a remedy: double the time spent on writing instruction K - 12
(with no suggestion where that time might come from - he might look at the mandates for middle school instruction in New York State for a beginners’ lesson on the improbability of this suggestion). He agrees with teachers that the “we live in a test-obsessed culture that puts far too much weight on the SAT,” but they are already, by his hand, a discredited bunch. His last sentence begins on a grand scale – “What we need now is a revolution in writing instruction”— but unexpectedly ends with a note he hasn’t played anywhere before - a cautionary note that we don’t need “just another test prep exercise.”

In Staples’ story of writing, good writing instruction is a matter of will and common sense. His view, and the corporate view he presents here, is not unique in its “once taught, forever learned” philosophy about writing instruction. After all, I have had three conversations just this semester with college faculty members who brought up the point “they must have passed Comp 101” when we were discussing the puzzle of poor writing on the part of students in upper level classes. Unlike Staples, they were not blaming the Comp 101 instructors, but wondering how particular students got through the class and did not later have adequate writing skills.

Importantly, the “ability to write well” as used by Staples and others, is an umbrella phrase under which all the possible ways to write are left to huddle. This story of “writing well” ignores the idea of genre, of categories of writing, and the demands, organizational strategies, and quirks of various domains of knowledge. A generalist approach to writing, it ignores differences in disciplinary uses of and approaches to writing, and gives rise to this narrative about writing: anyone can learn to do it well, anyone can teach it well, and there are standards of good writing shared
by all the disciplines – therefore making it possible to write across the disciplines, spanning the differences between disciplines with the bridge of writing. In this story, writing is an educational constant that can be produced in one classroom as well as another, evaluated by a teacher in one discipline as well as in another. In this story, writing can be judged with standards that are uniform across the disciplines.

Standards for writing are not uniform across the disciplines. There are elements that are common to various fields, elements that can be said to be universal – for instance the role of story is key in writing a fictional story, an historical account, and a mathematical equation (Baker). However, this narrative about writing, that use of story crosses the disciplines, is not told, and the companion idea that different disciplines use different grammars and have different standards for sentences is missing as well.

In the absence of a story that includes both commonalities in various fields and key attributes that distinguish one field’s text from another’s, whose story of writing will be used in setting the ground rules for writing across the disciplines? The mathematicians’? The historians’? The scientists’? As in other matters about writing, the matter of who knows about writing instruction is already settled in the schools – it is the English teachers’ standards for school writing that will define writing and label it good or bad. It is not writing that is being taught across the disciplines, it is one standard for writing: the English classroom standard for school writing.

“Write in complete sentences” may be the most common instruction about writing given to students in grade school. Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, a common complaint of college composition teachers is that their students don’t know
what a sentence is. Given that information, it doesn’t bode well for the seventh grade student who is taking the NYS Math Exam and must explain an understanding of mathematics in narrative sentences.

Sentences have purpose, they are not the purpose; they should serve an objective, not be an objective. Their use as a hallmark of “good” writing results in math teachers being expected to require, and grade for, an understanding of mathematics expressed in sentences - sentences as defined in the English classroom, not in the field of mathematics. Given this disparity between good mathematical practice and required test practice, I was impressed with the good faith effort the math teacher I worked with put into the mandate that he require writing in his math classes. However, an interesting, and counter-productive, result of this movement to require writing in math classes was brought to my attention by an education student studying to be certified in math. In a discussion about writing with three faculty members from math, science and history, he suggested that, “The English teachers should teach students how to write in a systematic, orderly way.” His view was that he was helping the English teachers out, and the least they could do was return the favor. The mathematics professor in the meeting firmly disagreed with him (Baker).

The use of writing in the evaluation of mathematical skills contributes yet another curious episode in the story of writing. The purpose of this kind of writing is not to communicate a mathematical sequence of ideas, but to communicate an understanding of mathematics using a genre developed in another classroom. That doesn’t seem pertinent to student acquisition or understanding of mathematics, and indeed it is not entirely meant to – a large part of the purpose is to reinforce the
importance of writing. This is obvious in the grading requirements for the Grade 8 Math test. Current scoring practice reveals that narrative sentences, the kind taught in English classes, are weighted more strongly than mathematical sentences. In the guide to scoring the Grade 3-8 Math Test published on the New York State Education Department’s website, nysed.gov, examples of student answers and the correlating score for those answers are given. On the Grade 8 Math test, Number 33 is a word problem. Setting aside the complication of the reading that is being tested here, let’s look at the writing that is being scored. In part A, the students must use an equation, which is given, to solve the problem and they must show their work. In part B, the student is instructed to explain the correctness of a statement made by a character in the problem. Five lines to write out this explanation are supplied. The students’ work is scored on three criteria: Correct solution of the equation, appropriate work is shown, correct explanation of the correctness of the statement. Samples of answers that would receive each possible score, 0 – 3, are given. The following table summarizes the comments about student success with each criteria and the total score given for four attempts in the example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solution correct</th>
<th>Work shown</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>incorrect</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Supports the results</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Nothing written</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The student who couldn’t do the math but correctly explained his flawed mathematical process received more credit than the student who could do the math but did not attempt to explain the correctness of the character’s statement. The explanation of this last score reads: “Although 3 is substituted for $h$ and solved
correctly, holistically this is not sufficient to demonstrate even a limited understanding of the task.” Giving all the respect to the New York State Education department that is its due, I suggest that this example illustrates the extent to which they suffer from limited understanding, both of the task they set out in this problem, and in the bias they reveal. This math problem involves using skills in reading, math and writing. Publicly, only skills in math are acknowledged: this test is considered the “Math” test, after all. However, since it is a word problem, skills in reading are essential. But in this instance, it is needlessly complicated reading. I want to note here that students must make sense of these sentences:

Noel and Renaldo want to rent bikes with two other friends. They have $150 to spend on bike rentals. The sign below shows the bike rental rates. Based on the information on the sign, the equation below can be used to determine the number of hours, $h$, the 4 friends can rent bikes with $150. [The equation $4(9.75h-3) = 150$ is given.] Noel says they have enough money to rent the bikes for a maximum of 3 hours. Solve the equation for the number of hours, $h$, in order to determine whether Noel is correct. Show your work. Answer _______ hours. On the lines below, explain whether Noel is correct.

Simpler instructions could have been used. The test writers could have given the information in this form, for instance:

Four friends want to rent bikes. They have $150 to spend. Read the “Bike Rentals” sign below. Using this equation, solve for $h$ (hours they can rent the bikes): $4(9.75h – 3) = 150$. Show your work. Answer _______ hours. The
friends think they can rent the bikes for 3 hours. Are they right? Answer _______. Explain.

It is here that I have to stop, because, when the “problem” is put in this simpler language, the absurdity of this manipulation to include a written narrative is too evident for me to continue the charade. While the published version encourages long-winded complications of a scenario, the simpler version shows it up. A straightforward student could answer to the last part: “4.15 is larger than 3.” Would this reveal an understanding of the task? What task? The only mathematical task here is solving for $h$. The other task, that of recording an explanation of whether the guesstimate of 3 is correct or not, does not involve mathematics. It does involve writing, and I suggest it is a subversion of the meaning-making role of writing, since this last part of the question is devoid of meaning. It also masks the low level of mathematics required. Since the test makers have already done the work of devising the equation with which to solve the problem, what purpose does the story of the friends renting bikes serve? Why offer the bike rental sign? Why not just give the students the problem this way:

Given: $4(9.75h - 3) = 150$    Solve for $h$. Answer _______.

This is the math problem in number 33, unobscured by requirements to read or write narrative sentences. However, correct solution of this problem does not earn a student credit.

I believe the neophyte who had advice for how to teach writing was correct in one sense: the use of writing for evaluation on the math exams is meant to spread the burden of getting students to “write well” beyond the borders of the English
classroom. Its presence on the math test is meant to prove the importance of skill in writing and to motivate students to write better - which, in this case, as in many others, equals writing narrative sentences. His reaction, sniping at his colleagues-to-be, may be a logical reaction, but he should focus his energy on changing the exam instead.

Further, English teachers should back their math colleagues in advocating for change because this use of writing on the math test is counter productive to reforms in writing instruction. The use of genuine audience and genuine task have been touted as effective teaching strategy for decades, yet here the teacher as sole audience is again reinforced, and the task could hardly be more contrived. And, in this instance, the teacher-audience is not allowed to be even genuinely a mathematician, but must try to behave as an English teacher. Before the test the math teacher must train students in writing the appropriate kinds of narrative sentences that will earn them credit; on the test they must give credit for narrative sentences even if they support a flawed mathematical process. This view of writing as a skill that is undifferentiated by genre or discipline and teachable by anyone should sound familiar – it is a match to the corporate view expressed by Brent Staples.

Writing is, however, a complex skill developed over time by a complex species to address a multitude of needs. In schools, the need most commonly associated with writing is the need to communicate - ideas, information, and opinions. Purpose is considered important and is traditionally defined by categories such as writing to inform, persuade, or entertain. Indeed, a key purpose in school writing, one that is noted and critiqued in the NCTE guidelines for writing instruction, is to
persuade a teacher that the writer has an acceptable level of knowledge. Students must get that understanding across in terms and structures used in the English classroom and will be successful in fully expressing their understanding of the matter at hand depending on their fluency with English classroom writing. For instance, students who are not skillful in such communication may not receive complete credit for their understanding of math concepts – the understanding they receive credit for is only that understanding which gets through the filter of their ability to use language as measured by the artificial, and in this use, arbitrary, standards of the English classroom.

This leads me to another story of writing – one in which writing is a part of literacy and literacy is a potential tool for oppression. J. Elspeth Stuckey, author of *The Violence of Literacy*, writes of the idea that “many goals in this society involve repression which masks as opportunity” (61). The use of English classroom standards in the math classroom amounts to trying to improve students’ writing skills by creating yet another place in the school where they will be penalized for a lack of those skills. I respectfully suggest that this is repression masked as opportunity. What is repressed is the students’ use of mathematical language to communicate mathematical understanding, and what is presented as an opportunity is the new site in which to successfully demonstrate mastery of an understanding of classroom-English.

The genuine (functional and evolving) English that the artificial classroom English most nearly resembles is that of the middle class (Brodkey, Stuckey). Stuckey describes one chapter in the story of the use of middle class language as a standard for
all in her description of the ironic dismantling of the black educational system in the United States in the 1970s:

Integration may have been a laudable goal, just as teaching literacy to the illiterate is. But the society that wrought the educational change just as quickly ensured that those newly integrated into it would find themselves dominated by white middle class teachers and administrators who would institute or reinforce policy to ensure the maintenance of white middle class values and opportunities at the expense of others and would use literacy to do it. (122)

In my work as a classroom teacher in a predominantly white, rural school district, I witnessed the extent to which middle class values could determine ease of success in the English classroom. The majority of my students were children of working class parents and guardians, many of whom were only seasonally employed. Many of these students’ daily language included variants of the verb “to be” that are considered substandard and reported as erroneous in general guides to grammar, including the ones on my classroom shelf. Problematic usages such as “ain’t,” “I been,” “we was,” “they is” had to be translated by these students into classroom-English before they could produce the kind of “error-free” text that would earn them the most credit on standardized tests. On the other hand, my students who were children of middle class parents and guardians did not have this work to do. Their habitual language was a match for classroom-English, and they earned credit for simply reproducing the kind of language they were immersed in since birth. This imbalance of workload and ease of success is further compounded when the use of classroom-English serves as a
gatekeeper for success in the mathematics classroom. It puts students conversant in middle class English at an advantage and students who are not conversant in middle class English at a disadvantage. It also puts students who can translate the mathematical process they follow into a linear narrative using classroom-English at an advantage, and those who cannot at a disadvantage.

This use of writing as a tool for maintaining the status quo by denying students’ knowledge unless it is couched in classroom-English, is part of the story of writing. An entire area of scholarship examines this gatekeeper use of literacy. In the math class instance of gate keeping, what is being kept out or let in are students. The ones who get past the classroom-English gate are deemed to be in-the-know. What they are allowed is recognition of skill at mathematics; the others are denied that recognition. For example, when I worked at an alternative school, I had a student who had been kept out of that recognition by his inability to write out narrative descriptions of isolated steps of mathematical problem solving. Mathematics had an internal logic to him – he wasn’t able to delineate the steps he had taken because he wasn’t taking steps – he zipped through the materials we gave him by leaps of understanding. He absorbed, whole, concepts that others had to have broken down to be palatable. He was not, as seems to be suspected by test makers, tapping into an uncomprehending rote that would do him no good – rather, he was working from a natural talent for mathematics. This did him no good in the ordinary math classroom; because he did not perform the task of writing out mathematical ideas in the sentences of classroom-English, he failed math classes. The classroom-English gate kept him out of school success in mathematics.
Stuckey says this: “Students of nonstandard languages in the United States do not fail because of a language failure; they fail because they live in a society that lies about language” (122). My student had not failed math because he could not do the math. He failed math because of a lie told about language – that proficiency in classroom-English had anything to do with math. Much in the stories about writing that I have related here is founded on lies about language. They are not sophisticated lies; they are simply convenient lies. They maintain a status quo in which many students do not learn to write beyond the most basic transcription of words, in which teachers are both condemned for and excused from that failure. Penmanship is not writing, spelling is not writing, editing is not writing, grammar is not writing. What are they that they gain this misleading identity? They are easily measured. And they are specialized.

School culture respects and works toward specialization. Students in elementary and lower middle school may study math and science; by high school they will be studying calculus and chemistry. In the schools, the story of writing has been specialized into “language arts” in the elementary school and further specialized at the high school level into “English.” I suggest that the story of writing and writers needs to be de-specialized, decentralized. Classroom teachers and their students need stories of writing that include the myriad types of writing done in various fields of study, work and play. And they need stories of writers that open the possibilities of writing as a positive element in their own lives.
Part III. Stories of Writers

In my eighth grade classroom, the subject we studied was called “English.” But, in as many ways as I could, I advocated the term used in the elementary grades: Language Arts. I had no good answer to my rural students’ observations that they already knew English, and I preferred the references to language and art. They served, for me, as reminders of the richness and variety that are the hallmarks of language and the interwining of personal and public meaning that fuels its expression. Richness, variety and meaning are aspects that are first reasons for instruction, not nice-to-haves that follow mastery of something else. But there is heavy competition for the position of first reasons in schools, and a reminder was helpful. Often enough I needed a capsule summary of what I taught, and so to communicate my intent, and to reinforce it for myself, I divided up the Language Arts and said that I teach reading, writing, speaking, listening and manners. (My explicit inclusion of the instruction of manners, was of course, something of a surprise to students, but it was not only self-preservation, and not at all just a personal hobbyhorse, that rated its inclusion. Much of manners is linked to speaking and listening; putting it on the list kept its role clear and my motives evident.)

My classroom library also communicated my intent. I stocked my room with paperbacks that met my criteria of good writing that would serve as interesting reading for my students. My classroom library included the plays of Shakespeare, many of the juvenile Goosebumps ghost story series, classic and contemporary young adult novels, poetry anthologies – pretty much anything good I could get my hands on. Many of my purchases were books students recommended. The Brian Jacques’
Mossflower series arrived after heavy campaigning by a fan, and new copies of Ann Martin’s California Diaries series replenished the worn copies that made it back to the room after circulating from friend to friend. Books rode waves of popularity. The ice hockey mystery series got heavy use some years and was passed over in other years. Go Ask Alice sometimes generated enthusiastic comments along the lines of “Every eighth grader should read this book!” and sometimes disapproving reactions of “Ms. Watson, did you read this page?” My students did a lot of reading, and every year at least one student reported to me that he had read his first “chapter” book all the way through. In my classroom, the role of reader was fairly straightforward. Students either considered themselves as readers or they didn’t. In either case, it was my job to feed them books that would take them to the next level – either from non-reader to reader or from reader to better reader. The role of writer, however, was more complicated. Having been trained in writing process, I worked from the philosophy that I was a writer and my students were writers and together we formed a community of writers who encouraged, and learned from, each other. What I did not take into consideration, though, was the negative mythology of troubled, lonely writers that my students brought into the classroom, and my own inability to counter that mythology.

The mythology that writers work in isolation and angst so strongly forms the base of a general understanding of the work of writers that composition scholar Linda Brodkey, who names this idea “The writer-writes-alone,” calls it “a familiar icon of art” (59). Brodkey, who writes, teaches writing, and teaches how to teach writing, describes writing as being woven into the “very fabric of her social life.”
acknowledges that the “writer-works-alone” narrative is far stronger for her than her own rich background of writing experience:

When I picture writing, I often see a solitary writer alone in a garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle. It seems a curious image to conjure, for I am absent from this scene in which the writer is an Author and the writing is Literature. In fact it is not my scene at all. (59)

Given the power of this mythology over an established writer whose experience runs counter to the myth, it is reasonable to argue that it has a strong influence on the attitudes about writers and writing that are held by public school teachers and their students.

Indeed, the general level of acceptance of this message in the public school arena is reflected in the selection of authors whose photographs grace the cover of promotional material sent out to school teachers and librarians in 2000 by Merlyn’s Pen, a magazine that publishes “Fiction, Essays, and Poems by America’s Teens.” Beneath a black banner that announces “Published In Their Teens,” there are four photographs, and beneath these photographs are the names, birth and death dates of the pictured writers. The selection of authors is interesting on several counts. Presumably these authors are presented as role models for the student writers who are referred to as “America’s rising authors” inside the booklet. Oddly enough though, the authors pictured did their rising quite some time ago, only one of the three was born in the same century as the student writers, and all were dead before these writers were born. There are other, more pertinent to this argument, shortcomings in their use as writers teenagers should emulate. For both Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath,
the date of their death commemorates the year of their suicide. Edgar Allan Poe’s public persona is that of a possibly mad, desperately unhappy man who abused drugs, deeply mourned his dead wife and died in the gutter. Of the four reputations brought to mind by this cover, only Walt Whitman’s (violently insane brother aside) is not burdened with associations of mental instability or untimely death. It is not that the editors of the advertisement knew of no other writers “published in their teens.” Short biographies that appear inside the booklet also include Louisa May Alcott and Langston Hughes. Either or both of these authors on the cover would have helped balance the portrayal of writers. The selection of writers who do appear on the cover of the booklet, besides being one hundred percent white, and seventy-five percent male, is fifty percent suicidal, a representation that skews the image of writers towards instability and angst.

This brochure arrived in my school mailbox when I was teaching eighth grade students. At first I thought it was a spoof along the lines of something from National Lampoon or The Onion. When I realized it was an ad devoid of humorous intent, I found it odd, vaguely disturbing, and not pertinent to the environment I wanted to foster in my class. I set it aside. Looking back, I see I might have done better to think about my discomfort and try to understand what this brochure had to teach me about the context of my writing instruction. This seemingly odd view of writers was extremely pertinent because I followed the writing process philosophy: I asked my students to read the texts of many writers and to take on the role of writer. The structure and content of my classes brought writers to the foreground. However, I
neglected to consider that the role of writer was complicated by the cultural ideas about writers and writing that the students brought with them into my classroom.

For example, while other authors’ popularity waxed and waned, a perennial favorite of eighth graders was Edgar Allan Poe. Each year, he presented the same problem. On the first mention of Poe’s name, hands would shoot up and “He died in the gutter!” would be helpfully called out by a student too impatient to wait to be called on. Each year, I would turn the conversation to Poe’s work and make a mental note to look into the circumstances of his life and death so next time I would have a good response to that “died in the gutter.” Many teachers will be familiar with the fate of mental notes about “later” and “next time.” In the enormity of the task, many details go missing. I never did that research on Poe, never told my eighth graders that he did not die in the gutter, but was taken ill when he was traveling and tended by a stranger – a circumstance not entirely unusual at that time in that city. I did not tell my students, because I did not know, that some scholars believe that Poe was on his way to his second wedding when he died. That would have been a handy bit of knowledge to use to cut the doom-and-gloom cloud that shadows his life’s story. I wish even more that I had known more about the circumstances of poet Anne Sexton’s life and death. My students often found her work on their own and loved it. It came as a shock when one of my students discovered that she had committed suicide, and it served to reinforce the idea that writing is related to suffering and writers are inordinately likely to commit suicide. Better if I had known then the story of her life that her friend Dan Wakefield tells -- that writing was not damaging to
Sexton, but therapeutic, and it was alcoholism that contributed to her death, not poetry.

The connection between writing and tragedy was brought up by my students each year. At the time I knew I did not adequately address the problem of the reputation of writers and writing. On reflection, the importance of working on the problem of this connection seems to be essential in reviving the potential of using writing process in the classroom. Fortunately, this topic is not inaccessible or off the beaten path for American teachers: it has been noted that the mythology of the writers’ relationship to isolation has American roots that were established by Henry David Thoreau, who went to a Massachusetts woods 1845 to “front only the essential facts of life” and to write about his experience. Part of the legacy of his work is the strength it leant to the idea that writers work alone. Noel C. Paul, writing for the Christian Science Monitor, comments on Thoreau’s influence, “the popular success of ‘Walden’ . . . fixed in the world’s literary consciousness the image of the isolated writer in a Spartan shed, extracting poetry from solitude.” The image Paul summarizes here is one that sets forth physical deprivation and solitude as favored work conditions for writers. While the Thoreau version of this deprivation-and-solitude image has the appeal of nature and the draw of the ultimate camping trip, other variations are as strongly representative. When we turn away from Thoreau as he lights his lamp to spend a night writing in his cabin, we can turn to a second well-worn scene of writing - the writer in her urban garret. The word “garret” no doubt doesn’t get much use anymore and owes any familiarity it still has to the writers who work away in them. Notice the more familiar word “attic” just won’t do –the myth of
the writer working alone requires the additional bleak tone supplied by “garret,” which is, by one definition, “an attic, usually a small wretched one.” The austerity of the word is no accident: it dates back 500-800 years and derives from the word “garite,” meaning “watchtower.” Its association with writers is long. While Amy Rosenberg, writing for Poets & Writers magazine, credits Henri Murger, the French author of The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter (later known as Puccini’s opera La Boheme), with giving “the world its romantic notions about starving artists in garrets” (22), in the 1700s, both Samuel Foote and Samuel Johnson linked writers with garrets – Foote in the life of one of his characters, Johnson by reporting that he had written a particular speech while living “in a garret, on Exter Street” (qtd. in Bartlett, 312).

The image of the writer scribbling away in uncomfortable urban conditions is simply another version of writerly solitude. The fundamental idea that joins these rural and urban versions of writers at work is the idea that writers work alone. Indeed, there seems to be a love affair going on with the idea that writers work alone. In this love affair, as in other falsely-grounded affairs, distinctions are blurred; characteristics of the loved one are exaggerated; facts about the loved one are ignored; and toleration of unhappiness is taken as a measure of dedication. The blurred distinctions here are between isolation and solitude – they are mistaken as interchangeable concepts. The exaggeration is in the focus on the aloneness of the writer: it is given a level of attention that precludes a balanced view. True to the idea of blind love, in this affair information that works against the belief of writers working in isolation is excluded from credibility. And in keeping with the traditional rules of the course of love, suffering is seen as the norm.
Psychiatrist and author Anthony Storr, in his best selling book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, gives ample evidence of being under the sway of this love affair. Although Storr’s medical training gave him the credentials to write convincingly on topics of mental health and personality, it does not appear to have inoculated him from the symptoms of a love affair with the idea of the lonely, suffering writer. In support of his suggestions throughout the book about links between creativity, suffering and solitude, he conflates isolation and solitude and exaggerates the isolation of the writer. He also ignores information about the active social life of writers and suggests that suffering is not only the norm for writers, but also a necessary precondition. Despite these weaknesses, Storr’s text was widely popular when it was published, and continues to be cited, both in scholarly articles and in popular books on how to write. I suggest this success is not a testament to the strength of his argument, but to the strength of the attraction of the myth.

I want to make clear that I am not arguing that Storr invented this image of writers. I am arguing that the rationale he sets out, however lacking in logical rigor, tapped into a strong belief that the myth is true. I use Storr’s text at length because it is packed with the negative notions about writers I will argue against, it was widely accepted as offering proof of those negative notions, and it remains influential in both academic and popular literature about writers and about human nature. I make use of it not to condemn Storr, but to address specific elements of the myths about writers and writing that permeate our culture. Grade school teachers who bring the role of writer into the classroom, taking it on themselves and asking their students to take it on, should carefully consider the extent to which negative ideas about writers are part
of the intellectual currency in our culture, and the extent to which that negativity is either invisible or considered unremarkable. For example, in a review of *Solitude* for *The Journal of Leisure Research*, Ruth V. Russell gives the book an “A” and concludes with these words:

> If I had felt compelled to write a different sort of review of Solitude I would have been obliged to criticize its lack of scientifically derived conclusions, the occasional broad leap from reasoning to maxim, and is (sic) slightly pop-psychology texture. But that’s not how I read it. I enjoyed its aesthetics, its peacefulness, the quotes from Milton, Yeats, and Wordsworth; it made me feel luxuriously alone. (224)

In her review, Russell notes that she read the book while on sabbatical in Malaysia, dissatisfied with her “habitual self” and looking for personal renewal. She comments that given the situation, “it was perhaps inevitable that I would nod in agreement as I read this book” (224). My argument is that many people simply nodded in agreement when they read the book – a nodding that indicates an uncritical acceptance by a wide audience of the worst stereotypes about writers. For example, Storr’s claim that “many writers, composers, and painters” are self-centered, alienated, or “narcissistic” is representative of his portrayal (xiv). This claim goes unchallenged by Russell.

I read Storr’s text from a very different position, as a writer and teacher concerned about writing instruction. I was curious about a text by an Oxford scholar who was reputed to have proven so much about what was needed for creativity to flourish. My reaction on reading *Solitude* was incredulity that the flaws in Storr’s
argument about writers’ nature and habits were, and continue to be, overlooked. Russell’s review indicates that she chose to overlook them. I, on the other hand, am not content to let the head-nodding uncritical assessment of this text go unchallenged, and I set out here specific areas where I believe the text should be challenged.

What Russell calls a “lack of scientifically derived conclusions” I call a reliance on vagueness and sweeping presumptions. These begin in Storr’s introduction, where he sets out the presumption that artists have an occupational need to spend time alone: “The majority of poets, novelists, composers, and to a lesser extent, of painters and sculptors, are bound to spend a great deal of their time alone...” (ix). In a vagueness that is characteristic of this text, Storr fails to define his terms: he gives little indication of what he means by spending time alone, either in terms of intensity or duration. By “alone,” does he mean the creative person is the only person in the room? The only person in the house? Does the person have little interaction with others or no interaction? Are they alone for an hour, a morning, a week? He does not clarify, but such clarification is important. For instance, in writing this document, I will spend many hours “alone,” a circumstance that would seem to support Storr’s narrative of writing and writers. Indeed, in this moment, I am alone – these minutes will contribute to those hours, but a friend has just left the room and I’ll join him soon for breakfast. While I readily admit to spending a lot of time alone while I write, I maintain that the degrees of aloneness I experience have nothing to do with isolation. However, when no parameters for “aloneness” are established, then any degree of aloneness can support Storr’s conclusion that writers spend much of their time alone. This vagueness serves the myth of artists’ isolation.
Writers are familiar with the myth of writers’ working in isolation, of course. Poet Agha Shahid Ali, when answering the interview question put to him by Eric Gamalinda, “How do you write a poem?” uses the myth to frame his answer, but he supplies the details that Storr’s account lacks:

It varies from poem to poem. I am not one of those people who requires to be away from the world and be isolated and all that. I need chunks of time, which can be just one day or two days, but I don’t need to go away to one of those places. I can work quite well in my own room, meeting friends in the evening and just working on the poem during the day. I can even work with friends – someone may be in the room and I’d be working on the poem. I can do that also. (44)

He addresses his habits of writing by invoking, and contradicting, the myth of the writer working in isolation. Unlike Storr, Shahid, even in this short text, defines his terms: chunks of time are a day or two; not being isolated means meeting friends in the evening or sharing his workspace with them.

The lack of clarification in Storr’s text, and the subsequent inclusion of many degrees of aloneness under the generality “alone,” might be missed by the reader who tries to keep up with the rush of declarations that Storr makes. He quickly moves from an opening presumption of an occupational need to be alone, to a mention of “psychopathology” and on to an hypothesis that presumes a preference for spending time alone[---] a preference that derives, Storr asks, from “some inability to make close relationships?” (x) With this suggestion of a link between creativity and emotional flaw, Storr has set out four of the main components of the mythology
surrounding writers: they need to be alone, they like to be alone, they have trouble in
their personal relationships and they just might be crazy. This is all in the first two
paragraphs of his introduction. With such a perfect fit between what people generally
believed already and what Storr wanted to tell them, no wonder the book was popular
and remains influential. If inducing head-nodding in his readers was the goal, Storr
reached it.

Ironically, however, Storr’s stated goal was to counter what he perceived as an
overemphasis in his field. He argues against the assumption that people are social
beings who need “companionship and affection […] from cradle to grave”; his stories
about solitary creative genius are meant to serve as a corrective to that notion (ix).
However, he presents and helps further popularize an imbalanced view himself when,
in the process of making that correction, he asserts that “many writers, composers,
and painters” are self-centered, alienated, or “narcissistic” (xiv).

I will come back to Storr’s ideas about emotional flaws and creativity, but I
would like to return first to his claim that the creative have a predilection for solitude.
Storr repeatedly strengthens his links between creativity and isolation by the time-
honored strategy employed by those blinded by love – he ignores counter evidence
that he himself supplies. He begins his introduction with a quote by Edward Gibbon
that starts out, “Conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of
genius.” Storr ignores the first part “Conversation enriches understanding,” and
amplifies the meaning of the second part when he suggests that what Gibbon says is
that a great deal of solitude is necessary. Later in the introduction he uses Gibbon as
an example of a writer who worked in solitude. However, in describing Gibbon’s life
Storr seems to offer a view of a balanced life, not one that indicates a predilection for solitude: “Although the immense labor of composing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire necessitated long periods of solitary study and writing, Gibbon was equally happy in company” (xi). True to the course of false love affairs, in Storr’s narrative of Gibbon’s life, the “conversation” and “equally happy” part of this story, which serves to counter Storr’s argument, gets little attention - Gibbon’s sociability is downplayed and his ability to adapt to and use solitude is stressed.

And although Storr affirms “less intimate” relationships, he nonetheless ignores their role in the lives of writers. He suggests that “The modern assumption that intimate relationships are essential to personal fulfillment tends to make us neglect the significance of relationships which are not so intimate,” but he himself neglects to account for less intimate relationships in measuring the solitariness of a person’s life (13). Gibbon, despite what Storr terms his “active social life” is designated a solitary person, as is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, a man who, Storr tells us, considered marrying on “several occasions,” and in later years, “entertained friends every day” (156). Storr thus spreads a very wide net in his definition of the solitary life when he includes those who clearly had a network of friendships. In doing so, he maintains and fuels the myth of the writer as a person who works not just alone, but in isolation.

This myth is not an invention of the uninitiated; writers contribute their own stories to it and are equally susceptible to its seductions. A year after Storr’s book took on the task of reestablishing the benefits of solitude, The Writing Life by Anne Dillard arrived in bookstores to make its own contribution to the lore of the writer’s
life. What narrative of the writing life does Dillard tell in these pages? This is a text that celebrates the state of isolation as an ideal working condition for the writer. “Every morning you climb several flights of stairs, enter your study, open the French doors, and slide your desk and chair out into the middle of the air” (10). The individual essays in this anthology, taken together, set isolation as an ideal and describe a separateness from people, from the pulse of larger life, even from the writer’s own work.

In a telling scene, one of the few that mentions people other than herself, Dillard writes of seeing a softball game from the window of her work place; for a while she joins in - going outside day after day to join music-camp boys at play. Although here is the evidence that this experience did find its way into her writing, she makes no mention of it contributing to her writing life, to her sense of herself as a writer; there is no development of this image of a writer joining a community. Her words linger instead, on the isolation she later enforces. “I shut the blinds one day for good,” she begins, then gives a detailed account of closing herself off from distraction by drawing a stylized sketch of the view and taping it to the closed blinds (30).

Spending the fourth of July evening in her small room with the blinds shut and the outline drawing of the view taped on them, she hears a sound. She takes it to be a June bug knocking against the window, attracted by the light. Without thought she reaches out to part the slats and sees the fireworks in the distance. “It was the fourth of July and I had forgotten all of wide space and all of historical time. I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came exploding in on me at once – oh yes, the world” (31).
I am not arguing that Dillard’s tale of self absorption is not good writing. I thought it was good writing myself when I selected *The Writing Life* to use in a college composition theory course I co-taught. At that time, one of my students was quick to point out the doom and gloom quality, but even with her prompting I didn’t see it for myself until I did a discourse analysis on the text for this project. What I am arguing is that it shows signs of being love affair writing – it downplays the role of other people in Dillard’s life and blurs the distinction between being temporarily lost in one’s work and being truly isolated from others. Within the anecdotes selected for her book, Dillard manipulates the elements to showcase herself as a writer who sought out and worked from isolation.

In one passage Dillard does indicate that she recognized the folly of the extent of her love affair with the idea of the writer working in solitude, "During some of the long, empty months at work on the book, I was living in a one-room cabin on an empty beach . . . I did not yet know how foolish it was to plan days of solitary confinement" (48). In keeping with the course of falsely-grounded love affairs, Dillard now looks back on *The Writing Life* and considers it embarrassing (Dillard website). The book is still in print however, and this collection of stories continues to give a sense not only that isolation was a condition of her own writing life but also that isolation is a condition of all writing lives. It is, after all, not titled *A Writing Life*, but *The Writing Life*, as though Dillard speaks for all writers’ lives.

This viewpoint is supported by reviews of the book. *The Boston Globe* called it “A kind of spiritual Strunk and White, a small and brilliant guidebook to the landscape of a writer’s task;” the *Chicago Tribune* critic suggested that, “For
nonwriters, it is a glimpse into the trials and satisfactions of a life spent with words;” and while Sara Maitland, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, articulated a not uncommon idea that this collection of essays “do not add up to make a book,” the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reinforced the even more common idea of the book’s role in communicating the story of writers: “these little stories illuminate the writing life” (Amazon). Unfortunately the writing life illuminated by Storr and Dillard is one in which writing is romanticized as a solitary activity, difficult and isolating by its nature.

If this attraction to the myth of the writer working alone were simply a summer romance – perhaps painful, but most likely harmless, and enjoyable during its short run – it could be left alone. If it served any function as a rite of passage, it might have a reason for its existence. But rather than a rite of passage, this idea serves as a blind alley that cuts students of writing off from the potential of community. It also cuts students off from potentially positive role models, because the ideal of the writer’s life that is championed in these two texts features not only isolation but also angst and instability.

While Storr hedges in his introduction and says that “the belief that men and women of genius are necessarily unstable . . . cannot possibly be the whole truth,” he spends considerable time setting forth a social-inadequacy model to explain creative activity (x). Storr makes statements such as, “It is true that many creative people fail to make mature personal relationships” (75). Again, Storr’s argument is vague – with no definition of what constitutes “many” and a very narrow band of what counts as a “mature, personal relationship,” this unsupported statement is a mere recitation of
part of the mythology that has developed around writers and writing. And Storr counters it when he later summarizes his discussion of Anthony Trollope, Beatrix Potter, Edward Lear, Rudyard Kipling, Saki (H.H. Munro), and P.G. Wodehouse:

“With the possible exception of Saki and Lear, all made relationships which, although varying in intensity and closeness, were at least as satisfying as many of those made by people who had not suffered similar childhood deprivations (122).”

Further, Storr blithely makes such careless and telling statements as “Creative talent of a major kind is not widely bestowed (ix).” This statement is careless because, by definition, things “of a major kind” are not wide spread, since that designation is relative and therefore self-limiting, and it is telling because the word “bestowed” places creative talent in the category of things that are handed out, rather than things that are developed. It also suggests that creative talent is identifiable and measurable; otherwise how would we know if it was wide spread or not, major or minor? Also importantly, Storr makes no accounting for barriers to the expression or recognition of talent - he makes no suggestion about the influence of opportunity in developing or bringing talent to light.

These are important ground rules for Storr to set because philosophical beliefs and assumptions about creative talent influence instructional approaches. Take, for instance, the acceptance by a wide readership that talent is bestowed and measurable, along with no suggestion for the role opportunity might play in its development or expression. Brought into the classroom undiluted, an underlying philosophical belief that creative talent is bestowed, that students have talent or not, and in certain measure, leads to a predictable approach: measurement, rather than development, and
low standards for everyone, since major talent, the only talent given credit in this narrative, is so rare, and will spring up on its own, or not. Equally important to the teaching field, without the belief that previous opportunity had played a dynamic role in students’ current level of creative expression, and that current opportunities can develop it, there is little incentive to do the work of designing activities that provide all students with opportunities to develop and express their creativity.

Dillard’s images of the writing life, too, are not limited to depictions of isolation. Rather, her story of the writing life is a story of isolation and deprivation that is woven with repeated references to death. “Sometimes part of a book simply . . . wanders off to die,” she writes (16). It is not only parts of books that die in this narrative. Dillard notes about a time of writing: “I let all the houseplants die. After the book was finished I noticed them: the plants hung completely black, dead in their pots in the bay window” (37). And she makes this summary about writing, “I do not so much write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend” (52). Some of her passages are tinged with references to suicide. “Why not shoot yourself,” she asks, early in the book, “rather than finish one more excellent manuscript on which to gag the world?” In contemplating the “dimwit” life of an inchworm, she tells it in disgust, “Why don’t you just jump? … Put yourself out of your misery” (8). One day, trying to reach a state in which she can work, she smokes “to stimulate the brain or stop the heart, whichever came first.” She gives up and “blindly” goes for a walk on the beach; when she returns, she “. . . fell back in the door, sick, dead, dying” (51). A moth burns up in a candle flame, another drowns in the ocean; the final chapter is
given over to stories about a stunt pilot who eventually crashes his plane. Her repeated references to death add to the gloom of isolation – exquisite gloom it may be, but gloom nonetheless. When she does allow an occasional light aspect to show through, she pairs it with an overwhelming darkness. For example, she speaks of the freedom of a writing life, “It is life at its most free” and then goes on to note:

The obverse of this freedom, of course, is that your work is so meaningless, so fully for yourself alone, and so worthless to the world, that no one except you cares whether you do it well or ever . . . Your freedom is a by-product of your triviality. (11)

Dillard’s text outlines a life of isolation that has poor nutrition and brushes with insanity as its foundation and images of death and dying woven into its fabric. I suggest that it reflects a culturally accepted idea of writing and feeds that same idea. For my purposes, it does not matter whether the writing in Dillard’s book is brilliant or smug. What does matter is the popularity of The Writer’s Life, and the acceptance of its message that writing hurts, that good writing requires deprivation. It is evidence of the general acceptance of the lore of the writer as isolated and miserable, and writing as soul searing.

It is a problem for teachers of writing that its practitioners are commonly believed to be unhappy, unstable and, not uncommonly, suicidal. While the writing “process” may seem to transfer tidily into the goals of the writing class, the negative reputation of its role models comes along with it and should be addressed. If the teacher has nothing to use as a counter to the negative myths about writers and their lives, students are left to the not illogical conclusion that writers are troubled “others”
and writing is an emotionally dangerous activity. Danger and identification of self as troubled may be attractive notions to some adolescents – for those few of us who do not remember our own adolescence, Atwell reminds us that it can be a time when “the worst things that can ever happen to anybody happen every day” (25). These students may be particularly susceptible to the seduction of the love affair with the idea of writers as loners who suffer, and they may indeed be spurred on to write as a result. Author Erica Jong tells of her youthful suffering over “tiny things” and finding ways to use it in her writing, but she places this in the framework of dealing with pain and declares “We heal ourselves by writing” (Wakefield 37). This potential for writing to be healing is generally overwhelmed in popular mythology by the notion of writing as the activity of a suffering “other.” Writer Judith Barrington, author of two collections of poetry and the nonfiction book, Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art, addresses this identification of writers as “other,” noting that in the U.S. writers are viewed as “special,” seen either as drunks or “peculiar but mystical” (153).

No matter which brand of special is used to label a particular writer, the placement of writers firmly in the province of unique “other” is damaging to writing instruction in several ways. For instance, if writers are “other” they, and their work, need to be made understandable to nonwriters – in this circumstance, a set of directions or a cookbook approach, e.g., the five paragraph essay, will be welcome. Many high school teachers do not write texts of significant length or development, for them writers of such texts are “other.” I argue that these non-writing teachers may therefore be inclined to see formulas as useful tools that will help make the task of writing understandable and approachable for themselves and their students. Burke, in
a slightly different stance, suggests that the five paragraph essay is a model fallen back on by teachers who are not trained to teach writing (81). Whatever the cause, there is a disparity of opinion about formulaic writing instruction - it may be considered a reliable tool in the grade school, but it is often an object of scorn in the academy. In their college composition text, *The Craft of Argument*, Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb recommend beginning with a stock plan when designing an argument, but specifically caution against the five paragraph essay, explaining that it “is too simpleminded to accommodate complex problems” (35).

Indeed, students who have been trained in the five-paragraph essay way of writing may well be ill prepared for the demands of college composition – in a needlessly frustrating situation, they may not understand how to develop a meaningful text, but think they do. As a tutor in SUNY Potsdam’s College Writing Center (CWC), I tutored many first year students who were genuinely perplexed, and/or angry, that the kind of writing that had earned them passing, even high, marks in high school was unacceptable to their professors. The simplistic rules they had memorized – don’t use “I” for example, were directly counter to the more complex thinking and composing that was required of them in college. One student at the CWC blurted out to me, “Why did my high school teachers drum it into my head that I can’t use first person? They drummed it into my head and my teacher here says we can use it, that we should use it!”

The high school teachers I spoke with during my own years teaching in the public school claimed that their writing instruction was designed as preparation for college writing. In a recent conversation with an education student, she recounted to
me her surprise at the insistence of the ban on student use of “I” by both of the public school English teachers who sponsored her student teaching experience. Their rationale for the ban was, again, preparation for college work. However, the struggle of many first year college students to adapt to academic writing indicates a very real gap between preparation for college writing in the public schools and the expectations for writing in the college classroom.

I will return to this gap as evidence of the isolation of high school teachers, but for the moment I want to return to the consequences in the public school classroom of writers being viewed as “other.” Another damaging result of writer as unique “other” is that most people will not be labeled as writers. For instance, if writing requires an unusual degree of isolation, and writers a personal tolerance for that isolation, then most classrooms are ill suited for practicing writing and many students and teachers are, by their social dispositions, excused from developing advanced writing skills. In my ten years in the public school system, I met very few teachers who came close to considering themselves writers. Certainly in my three years of tutoring students at the CWC, I met very few first year college students who seemed to view themselves as writers – as people who used text to express and develop meaning. Instead, many were working from the stance of trying to write out enough words to satisfy the professor. Some were more mathematicians than writers, looking for answers to word problems of this sort: if there are three sentences in a paragraph, (and none of them start with “And,” “But,” or “Because”) and five paragraphs in an essay (and none of them contain “I” or “you”), then how many words do I need for this paper?
Two characteristics were common among these students: they didn’t read much (which is a topic for another time), and they didn’t write much. Of course, people who wish to improve their writing need to practice writing. Buck’s statement of this truism serves as well as any other: “It is only by writing that the student can learn to write well” (iii). Students, in other words, must be writers. But the notion of writer as “other” is directly contrary to this idea. This contradiction – students must write to get better at it, but people who write are remote and special “other,” a status not attainable by most students—is an unacknowledged problem in writing instruction. To pick a starting point for acknowledgement of this problem—writer as “other” creates a stumbling block for a strategy for encouraging students to write that is advocated by almost every author I have read in my research. From Buck to Atwell to Burke and the Tchudis, having students write about their own observations and experiences is a way for teachers to interest students in writing – to launch them on the practice of writing that will help them improve. This writing about personal experience in the classroom has a counter point, in the larger world of writing, in the increasingly popular genre of memoir. In that larger world, the specific problem is pointed out by Barrington, who defines memoir as “beautiful prose writing about actual experience.” She cautions would-be memoirists who have “no recognized claim to fame” that the public may conclude that they are “too full of themselves, self-occupied, overly self-important, narcissistic” (154). In other words, that the public may be of the same opinion as Storr.

This has particular importance to writing instruction in the public schools. Personal narratives are key to Buck’s, Atwell’s and the Tchudis’ recommendations
for work with students; Burke’s list of twenty-two “Journal Jumpstarts” includes only three phrases that don’t either start with “I” or include “me” or “my.” Writing about actual experience is a base for many writing programs, and while the level of writing may not be universally declared “beautiful,” it could be declared that most students and teachers generally have “no recognized claim to fame.” These students and teachers are part of the public culture and, as such, are susceptible to perceiving writing about actual experience as self-indulgent. This perception is encouraged by the idea of writer as “other” and it has the potential to discourage students and teachers in their attempts to write. That sense of writing as self-indulgent, writing as something “others” do, hinders young people from getting a start.

Barrington argues against allowing damaging ideas about writers and their lives to go unchallenged. She points out the power of negative role models and tells the story of having arrived at a poetry class, offered by a “moderately famous poet,” to find that the supplies for the class included four gallons of wine. Barrington calls this behavior irresponsible, cites alcohol as a “highly mythologized, dead-end path that has taken its tolls on writers,” and notes:

With models like this, the neophyte writer may eagerly set herself up with a computer, lots of solitude, a doomed relationship, and a supply of cheap wine, which will very quickly produce the despair that she considers another essential ingredient in her chosen career. (155)

Barrington suggests cultivating a different model, one that includes “healthy food, exercise, a sane attitude, and a tranquil soul – all of which are surely more compatible with great writing than is being a physical and mental wreck” (158).
They are also more compatible with the work of training young writers. While the idea of writers as people who suffer inarguably has a base in truth, it is not the whole truth, or even most of the truth. Dan Wakefield, journalist, novelist, writer of inspirational texts on creativity, and former drunk, points out that while Poe, a frequent topic of books, was a drug addict and alcoholic, most of the giants of literature of the nineteenth century were not. In his book, *The Creative Spirit*, Wakefield points to Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Whitman and Twain and posits that their level of “human suffering” was in keeping with the general experience of the time (35). While theirs is the more typical experience of writers, Wakefield claims, it is Poe’s extra-ordinary experience that is best known. The partial truth that Poe’s story represents is not the part of the truth that is the best fit in the classroom. I am not advocating a sugar-coating of the stories of writers and writing, I am advocating a consciousness on the part of writing teachers that the prevailing story of writers and writing has a bitter coating that influences the environment in their classrooms. Teachers should provide an alternate image of writers and their work. Students will surely encounter the negative myths about writers and writing. The myths permeate our culture and there is no need to think they will be deprived of them if the teacher does not celebrate them in the classroom. What they may be deprived of if teachers do not bring it into the classroom is the larger story about writers and writing that includes “healthy food, exercise, a sane attitude, and a tranquil soul.”
Part IV: Healthy Food, Exercise, a Sane Attitude and a Tranquil Soul

The view of writers and writing set out in Solitude and The Writing Life was by no means the only view put forward in the late 1980s. Starting From Scratch, by Rita Mae Brown, best selling novelist, poet and activist, was published in the same year as Storr’s Solitude. Like Storr, she opens her book with a quotation that brings to mind Edward Gibbon. However, the quotation she chooses, “Scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr. Gibbon?” gives a good indication of how far from Storr’s vision of writers and writing her thought is located. The fuller quotation is, “Another damned, thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?” These words were the response of William Henry, the Duke of Gloucester, to the length of Gibbon’s latest work that had just arrived on his desk: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Oliver).

Brown, whose credentials include a graduate degree in Classics and a PhD in Political Science, no doubt has respect for writers such as Gibbon; however, the sense of reverence for “great minds” that runs through Storr’s text is absent in Brown’s. Irreverence is the stance she not only takes, but recommends. Her story of writing though, at least in part, supports Storr’s stance that distress is a source of creativity. In her version of the tale of writing, pressure “magnifies talent,” and she dismisses a writer who hasn’t suffered as someone “who writes in pastel as opposed to primary colors” (34). Indeed, Brown’s start in life is one that Storr might have cited for its potential to foster the unhappiness he sees as fertile grounds for creative talents. Brown was born out of wedlock in 1944 and put in an orphanage. She was adopted by foster parents whose fair coloring did not match her dark hair, and she lived in the
same town as her birth father: a talent for fist-fighting helped her combat her ‘bastard’ status. But her parents were loving and encouraged her propensity to read. In 1955 the family left Pennsylvania, the scene of Brown’s ignominious birth, and relocated to Florida. This move, by her own account, freed Brown from “the bonds of my illegitimacy” (8). It also introduced her to the pre-concretized natural beauty of Florida and placed her in a small town atmosphere of friendly, supportive adults.

While Storr credits a dis-ease with life as the muse for writers, Brown credits an early love of reading, self identification as a writer, and early, by kindergarten, reinforcement by the adults in her life that she would be a writer (5). Brown does not see unhappiness as the root of her creativity; on the contrary, she recounts that “Being happy made me want to write, so I figured writing would make me happy” (x). The links between creativity and mental distress that Storr and Dillard highlight are absent from Brown’s telling of the story of writing. In Dillard’s telling of a writer’s life, writing is a hated task. Brown’s story could not be more different. “Happiness is in the animal brain and joy is in the cerebrum. Writing gives me both experiences of pleasure” (x). In no way does Brown discount the difficulty of writing; rather, she asks, “Why dedicate yourself to something that’s easy?” (x). But she does, in her chapter, “The Beginning of All Literature,” discount as foolish the type of unhealthy consumption that Dillard uses to fuel her writing. While Dillard relied on cigarettes and coffee to stimulate her brain, Brown suggests that writers use exercise to keep themselves fit for the mental activity of writing. Dillard tries to trick herself into writing a few more lines while Brown heads to her basement to pump iron and release the inhibitions and mental fatigue that stall writing.
Whereas Dillard says she hates to write, Brown proclaims, “I have been given an opportunity to work. I love the work” (19). Storr and Dillard both focus on the darkness in the story of writing and writers: Storr brings to the tale unhappy childhoods, Dillard brings dead plants and dying moths. Brown brings light. “I am trying to convert human experience into sunlight,” she writes, “I think of laughter as sunlight. Creativity is the animal kingdom’s answer to photosynthesis. We take what is around us and make something new, something nurturing” (20).

This life-affirming attribute of creativity might be viewed as compatible with Storr’s model of creativity as a positive element in response to social stress. However, it is in direct opposition to the images of death and dying Dillard uses in her tale of writing, at least as told in *The Writing Life*. Brown states her belief that creativity is a “power intensifying life” (18). For Dillard, based on the stories in *Writing*, it seems to intensify the darkness of life. At the same time Dillard acknowledges that sometimes her writing came easily, “as though I were copying from a folio held open by smiling angels,” she cannot resist the dark allusions; she says even of these blessed manuscripts that they, “revealed the usual signs of struggle – bloodstains, teethmarks, gashes, and burns” (29). This is a world apart from Brown’s attitude about her work, “My drive comes from throwing my work out to you like a great beachball and hoping you will play with it” (14). This lighter image of writing is an image that grade school teachers should know about. It would, of course, be a useless image if it were mere sugar coating to make the work of writing more palatable. If writing instruction is going to rely on a description of what ‘real’ writers do, an
an approach to teaching writing that is not without its own problems, teachers at the least need genuine, realistic reports.

I suggest that Brown’s words about writing can be taken as straightforward observations. When she sees a difficulty, she does not manipulate her language for a softened effect. Her treatment of the topic of writers and alcohol is typical. She does not merely admit, but affirms the link, “Alcohol is associated with writers. The list of famous literary drunks could fill pages” (29).

Dan Wakefield is one such drunk. He stepped away from a love affair with the mythology of alcohol-as-muse, and his story is instructive. Wakefield began his freelance journalism career in the 1950s. He was a hard drinker who had ambitions of writing fiction and he looked to Fitzgerald and Hemingway as models. He now writes against the myth of drugs and alcohol as stimulants to creativity, noting that he believed it and lived it for years. He documents the extent of his investment in this belief with an anecdote recounted in his book, *Creating From the Spirit: Living Each Day as a Creative Act.* At an afternoon party that brought together many writers, Wakefield is drinking multiple Bloody Marys. The host corrects a statement Wakefield has made and gives him the news that actually, Dostoyevsky was not an alcoholic. “The shock and disillusionment must have showed on my face, for everyone burst out laughing. One of my other writer friends pointed at me . . . You’re mad that Dostoyevsky wasn’t a rummy!” Wakefield had been under the illusion that the great writer was a drunk, and it was an illusion he valued. It was also one he gave up after serious health problems led him to begin a course of action that included exercise and excluded alcohol. Looking back to his drinking days, he comments,
I was lucky to survive. Too many writers, some of them friends of mine, crashed right into their graves while riding the booze train. Instead of burying any more artists and writers, let's bury the myth that booze is a muse, that alcohol and drugs are a spur to creativity. The path to creativity begins with clarity, which means clearing the mind and body of substances that numb the senses and cloud perception.’ (qtd. in Gordon 17)

Wakefield learned to value a different mentor, writer Willa Cather. Wakefield credits Cather with advocating physical condition as an important part of the writing life at a time when Hemingway and Fitzgerald were drinking themselves to death. As assurance to others that writers who had once leaned on substance abuse could function without that crutch, Wakefield lists John Cheever, Pete Hamill and Eugene O’Neil as writers who stopped drinking and continued writing. (Wakefield 16)

Wakefield’s take on this abuse is tempered by his own experience and he worries about a new generation that is falling for the myth. Brown, on the other hand, finds the booze-as-muse crowd contemptible: “If you seek solace or inspiration in the bottle, you’re an asshole”(34). The narrative of booze and drugs as a muse is not devoid of a belief in connections between mind, body, and spirit, of course. What Wakefield mourns and Brown finds contemptible is the mistaken belief that poisoning the body can heighten the connection to mind and spirit. A counter narrative is needed, one that will help students understand their own physiology and treat their bodies in a way that will make best use of their minds.

Besides the occasional naughty word, Brown brings an important consideration to the topic of writing and writers – the non-writing activities that
support, or hinder, creativity in general and writing in particular. Her distain for mixing alcohol and writing is linked to her fundamental belief that creativity is supported by physical activity. “Art is presented as something that happens from the neck up. But creativity is not an isolated mental process. Your body is involved” (25). Dillard talks of writing as a fundamentally draining activity, and so does Brown. But Brown has an explanation for the slump in mental activity that writers sometimes experience. Her story of this part of writing acknowledges the importance of the biological body and offers a remedy for moving past the slump: bypass the sugar treats and caffeine and head for the gym. Physical exercise, Brown reports, will increase creative productivity (29). Brown offers specific information and practical advice. One section of her book, “The Beginning of All Literature: Your Body,” outlines detailed recommendations about sleep, food, and exercise. About sleep – develop a regular sleep pattern, sacrifice your social life before you sacrifice sleep (a recommendation I am feeling rather fond of at the moment, as I’m skipping out on a late evening of music, friends and dancing to work on this section of my own writing project). About food – listen to your body, carry good snacks with you, eat when you are hungry. Brown spends a third of this section on the nutritional problem of refined sugar – as readable an explanation of the relationship between glucose, oxygen, adrenal glands, muscles, sucrose, and intestines as I’ve read. She offers one back exercise and suggests going to at least one aerobics class to pick up pointers about stretching.

Brown is not the only writer to advise others to take care of themselves physically in order to produce mentally; as I noted above, Willa Cather made an
effort to bring this topic to the conversation about writerly practice. But I agree with
Brown when she comments that not much attention has been paid to the importance
of physical conditioning in creative endeavor. It isn’t that the connection between
physical and mental states has not been explored; indeed it has a long history. The
practice of yoga, which is commonly believed to date back five thousand years, has
the goal of unifying body, mind and spirit. The Roman satirical poet Juvenal, writing
at the turn of the last millennium, advised his readers to pray for a sound mind in a
sound body. Of particular interest to teachers, three hundred years ago, John Locke,
in his text “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” invoked Juvenal’s phrase and
declared, “A sound mind in a sound body, is a short but full description of a happy
state in this world” (McRobbie).

Evidence of the popularity of the shorthand version of this phrase, “A sound
mind in a sound body,” can be seen in its use as an inspirational text carved over
school entryways. I walked beneath these words myself whenever I entered the
elementary school in Cape Vincent, New York. At the time, I was unfamiliar with
their history and the sentiment seemed quaint. It is perhaps this kind of reaction that
Harvard faculty member Dr. Robert Brooks has in mind when he comments on his
website, “To some, the phrase … may seem trite, but I would contend that
appreciating the interface of mind and body is an essential ingredient of a fulfilling,
resilient lifestyle.” This appreciation is enjoying a renewal, albeit one I suspect is
not generally placed in its historical context. It is evidenced, for example in Howard
Gardner’s inclusion of kinesthetics in his stable of multiple intelligences, in the
increasing practice of including on school report cards what might have previously
been thought of as medical measurements of students’ physical fitness, and in the work of educators Dr. Paul Dennison and Gail Dennison (Brooks, Official).

Going to the gym for a recharge of energy and focus isn’t often a practical option for students in school. However, the Dennisons offer teachers an in-class way to enhance the body-mind connection. They have developed a collection of movements, called Brain Gym™, that uses the benefits of movement to improve concentration and other learner-friendly attributes. These movements take neither equipment nor much space; students can do many of the exercises at their desk. The strategy of drawing lazy-eights while following the motion with your eyes can even be done during exams. The Dennisons began their work in the 1970s, looking at the research on the potential of movement to improve learning. This grounding in research is a quality of the program that teachers will appreciate, given the emphasis on “research-based” in federal education mandates. Practitioners of yoga will recognize the crossing-the-mid-line strategies that make up an essential part of most Brain Gym movements (Official). When I used Brain Gym with my eighth graders, it was very striking that my student who had the most problems with attention also had the most problems doing some of the crossing-the-mid-line movements. In general the students found the program interesting and fun, and the student who at first could not touch his hand behind his back to the opposite raised foot practiced it at home until he could do it. Several students reported to me that they successfully used the lazy-eight strategies to help them maintain their focus during difficult Regents exams.

Of course, a sound mind is not merely the result of a sound body. A writer whose personal history could be offered as credentials to speak on the topic of mental
illness and writing is poet and essayist, Louise Gluck. In a lecture delivered in 1996, Gluck, a Pulitzer Prize winner and, seven years later, the Library of Congress’s twelfth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, discusses the links between suffering and making art. She reflects on her experience in her early twenties when she began, “finally, to master in psychoanalysis the range of symptoms I had been controlled by . . .” and discovered that she was “suddenly terrified” (579):

For five years I had been struggling desperately to become whole and sane . . .

And I remember very clearly my panic and the terms in which I accused my analyst . . . he was going to make me so happy I couldn’t write (580).

Gluck feared that “normalcy – whatever I meant by that,” would erase either her need to write or her capacity to write. Her analyst’s response to that fear was to assure her that the world would provide her with enough sorrow. Over the years, Gluck’s understanding of the fundamental truth behind that conversation shifted. At first she took it that her analyst did not understand her powerful capability to generate sorrow; later she thought he had summed up an early approach of hers to a world filled with potential harm – do the harm herself so she could avoid being a “victim” of the world.

A third view of this conversation, and recognition of an “underlying assumption” on her part was long in coming. “Why was I so sure unhappiness was essential to the making of art?” In what way had she imagined happiness that she believed it threatened her creativity?

Gluck realized that she considered responsiveness as a key to creativity and “ascribed to happiness some opacity or chronic unresponsiveness.” Storr would recognize the sentiment she looks back to when she observes about her self, “I saw
responsiveness, it appears, as resulting from a keenly felt abrasiveness between the self and the world, as though that boundary could be perceived only in the most dramatic and negative terms.” However, Gluck realized that it was despair that threatened her, not happiness. “I was protected from my asserted wish to shore up suffering, to stabilize it, by the intensity of my suffering at the time” (580). Where did her strategy of shoring up suffering to protect her ability for creative work come from? Clearly it was strong, since she clung to it through years in which her despair silenced both her ordinary and creative self. Gluck’s hypothesis is this: the catharsis of creative acts lends a temporary euphoria to the writer and it is addiction to that euphoria which leads the writer to pursue a life pattern of miserable lows and cathartic highs. This theory would ring true for psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi summarizes years of studies of happiness. He reports

> When a person becomes so dependent on the ability to control an enjoyable activity that he cannot pay attention to anything else, then he loses the ultimate control: the freedom to determine the content of consciousness. Thus enjoyable activities . . . can become additive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and then is unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life” (62).

Thus, Gluck’s addiction to the euphoria she could induce by writing her way out of misery served to trap her in a cycle of misery and limit her ability to function outside of it. Positioning herself so firmly inside misery gave her a sense of control, but
Csikszentmihalyi would argue that it is not a “sense of being in control” which makes us happy,

but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control.

(61)
The use of alcohol, other drugs, or mental illness may help some writers set up the protective routines Csikszentmihalyi speaks of; they certainly lend a sense of veracity to negative elements of the myth of the unhappy writer. But Gluck points out that our perceptions of the “fundamental truths” of mythic stories change over time (584). I suggest that the truth contained in the mythical story of the isolated, unhappy writer is misrepresented when it is placed at the core of a script that predicts a downward path for those people who cultivate their creativity. Rather than the lead character in a story of the omnipresent dangers of creative activity, this actor could serve as a minor character in the story of the strength of creativity to enrich life, tempering it with an acknowledgement that creativity cannot wholly sustain life. Rather than serving as a summons to sacrifice human health and sanity for the sake of art, this reading would cast the image of the wretched writer as a reminder to continually work towards balance in life.

The negative reading of the myth would have a writer agonize over every word, every work. Poet Natalie Goldberg would remind us, “One poem or story doesn’t matter one way or the other. It’s the process of writing and life that matters”
(12). In schools, the state exams and the emphasis on accountability have moved some teachers to agonize over every score, every exam. If one poem or story doesn’t matter one way or the other to a woman who has devoted her life to them, then certainly one exam or score shouldn’t matter to those of us who would teach writing.

However, the current status quo of “increased accountability” through proliferation of testing situations presents strong pressure to focus on test preparation, and the cult status of suffering in the world of writing can serve as a disincentive to bring genuine writing tasks to the classroom. Grade school teachers who are intent on countering these pressures with support for solid, humane practices need resources to turn to. While the Paris Review interviews served as a catalyst for an interest in writers’ working lives and strongly influenced writing instruction, an update is needed. A publication that can serve that purpose is the bimonthly Poets & Writers Magazine. Its pages offer a view of writing and writers that can balance the negative image of writers. Its fit to the classroom is not entirely coincidental, as the nonprofit corporation that publishes the magazine was organized to advance both literary and educational purposes. While its motto is “What Creative Writers Need to Know,” I suggest that between its covers it also contains what grade school teachers ought to know. In particular, the department “Literary Life” addresses issues around writing and writers that are pertinent to teachers of writing. The background information and the stories of writers’ lives that fill these pages offer a pragmatic balance to the romantic image that has overwhelmed our cultural ideas about writers.

For example, in his article “And Also, I write,” Michael Depp, a regular commentator for NPR’s All Things Considered, reminds the reader that for most of
literature’s international history, writers had day jobs that were their first concern: writing was an avocation. In keeping with the global situation, for most of American literary history, writing did not produce an income that then could be used to buy the time to write. The situation for writers changed with the rise, in the late nineteenth century, of the popular magazine trade and its ability to pay writers for their words. Poe was unable to make a living with his writing before the Civil War, but after the war, the magazine market strengthened and supported writers like William Dean Howells (19). This type of review of the history of literary production in this country offers some useful context for grade school teachers. Begin with this fundamental question: can writing be taught? The answer is not a universal yes. “Writing can’t be taught” is a fairly common sentiment, even among those who teach it. It is not, therefore, a rhetorical question, and the answer is crucial in determining the practical procedures in the writing classroom. The strength of the narrative “writing can’t be taught” can be measured by the priority NCTE gives to countering it. In their Guideline “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” published in 2004, the first statement directly addresses the teachability of writing, “Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers of writing can help students become better writers.” The document goes on to delineate their stance on the issue:

Though poets and novelists may enjoy debating whether or not writing can be taught, teachers of writing have more pragmatic aims. Setting aside the question of whether one can learn to be an artistic genius, there is ample empirical evidence that anyone can get better at writing,
and that what teachers do makes a difference in how much students are capable of achieving as writers. (1)

Further, and pragmatic, credence to the answer – yes, it can be taught – can be found in Depp’s brief discussion of the success of the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) writing programs that now serve as training grounds for writers. These programs don’t just attract students; their students are published (19-23). A counter argument could be made that students who enter MFA programs already know how to write and they simply learn to hone their language to make it acceptable for publication. I answer, yes, that’s true, and on a less advanced level, which is appropriate since we are not talking about work worthy of an advanced degree, the majority of students in grade school classrooms already know how to use the English language and the goal is to teach them how to hone that use. (The case of English language learners aside, albeit that is a big aside). In both cases, students are being taught how to develop their ideas and how to communicate those ideas to an audience beyond themselves.

Another helpful idea that teachers can take from this review is the reminder that the professional, writing-to-make-a-living model of writing is not the only model. The majority of writing teachers are, after all, training students who are not likely to turn their lives over to writing. Discounting the distractions of our sensationalist culture, most classroom students of writing have other school subjects that demand their time and mental energy. Therefore, the story of writing that includes educated people creating meaningful texts without turning their lives over to the task is a better match between role model and writing student than the model of the writer totally immersed in the kind of writing life extolled by Dillard and Storr. For, if the path to
good writing that is depicted in some writing memoirs, and in the representations of the lives of many writers whose texts are used in classrooms, were actually the only path to good writing, frankly, all would be lost, and a very low standard of writing (much like the standard in schools today) would be justified. If students of writing needed massive doses of all-consuming attention to writing and suffering to hone their writing ability, well, never mind trying to teach them. Fortunately, a desire to write well is not mutually exclusive with a desire to do other things, and do them well. This story of writing, the story told outside of the love affair with suffering and isolation, needs to be brought into the classroom.

However, it is the model of a perceived obsessive devotion to writing, and the subsequent suffering, that is too often allowed to represent writing in the public schools and take up more than a reasonable share of the study of writing. To discuss a writer and her works that are commonly, and justifiably, studied in American classrooms, consider Emily Dickinson. Without argument, her poetry deserves a place in the study and celebration of language. However, I suspect that in most classrooms the oddities of her dress and the legendary, not to say actual, seclusion of her life are given more attention, both in terms of time and enthusiasm, than the revolutionary power of her words.

Also brought into the classroom should be the historical context of the writers whose texts are used. An understanding of context would bring balance to the classroom story of writers and writing. Teachers who intend to use Dickinson’s poetry need to make an effort to understand its role in defining American poetry – they should be at least as well versed in the story of her words as they are in the
anecdotal story of her life. And the story of her life should be understood in the context of women’s lives during her times, not left to fend for itself in the context of the current times. Let’s return to Poe for a moment. With no further background information, his financial failure could be read as an individual, personal failure on Poe’s part. Given the information that literary publication at that time did not generally offer a sustaining income, the failure becomes less personal. I’m not claiming that these were not adverse circumstances for Poe, but that they were not “his” circumstances only. A reading of Poe’s literary life that places him in the context of his times offers a fuller, potentially less tragic reading of his life.

Teachers could use Poets & Writers to bring a balance to their own understanding of writers at work today. A writer from its pages who is well aware of his own historical context is Anthony Bourdain, whose day job for twenty-eight years and counting is chef. He identifies himself as being part of a centuries old oral tradition of cooks “standing around bullshitting and talking. I just started writing it down.” Bourdain offers balance to the popular texts that feed the image of writing as fundamentally painful. “I see the world through a cook’s eyes. I know what real work is, so I don’t spend a lot of time agonizing over sentences or whining about my fate” (qtd. in Depp 22). He might have been directly addressing Annie Dillard’s tone of suffering and lament in The Writing Life.

It is not just lessons about writers that can be found in these pages. In the same article, writer Frank McCourt, whose day job was teaching high school students, offers this cautionary tale about teaching. “I didn’t have the ability or the knowledge that I should be able to think for myself . . . That’s what I was teaching
the kids and [what] I should have been telling myself” (23). McCourt’s comment offers a lesson for teachers that counters the popular idea that teachers should be entirely self-sacrificing and only serve their students. McCourt characterizes himself as a slow learner. I wonder what he will eventually make of his own motivation to write the book *Teacher Man*. He describes his frustration with what he saw as the failure for literature, such as *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *To Sir With Love*, to get it “right.” Given that *To Sir With Love* was written by a teacher, perhaps this is a cautionary tale of its own – that there isn’t one right way to portray the professional experience of a teacher – there are many experiences and many ways to interpret experience.

Since I fault McCourt for not crediting a teacher with presenting a genuine version of the experience of teaching, I must bow to the credibility of the numerous writers who report that writing is suffering and that they struggle with all sorts of bad things as a result of being a writer. There is no argument from me on that count. I simply argue that the story they tell is too well told, too often told, and too exclusive of any other story. And, that the tale they relate about writing is not much help to teachers of beginning writers. There is a story of writing going well, of writing that does not torture, of writing instruction that works – and by works I mean that it improves students’ ability to write. The old saw about happy families being all the same but each unhappy family unhappy in its own way is instructive. It speaks to the story-telling potential of unhappy situations. The focus falls on the unhappy families, and the story of the happy family goes untold, deemed uninteresting. In the same way, the story of writers focuses on the unhappy writers. I argue that teachers need a
story of writing and writers that has a more positive focus and one that has an application in their classrooms. The stories that writing requires undivided devotion and the stories that end in suicide do them no good. I suggest that the story of writers who function outside of the misery stereotype and the story of writing instruction that goes well can be found in the pages of Poets and Writers.

For example, a fond complaint of teachers is that students are great storytellers, but have little to say when it comes to writing on the page. How to move students from telling their stories to writing them down? A method of writing instruction that is grounded in oral story, and is therefore a compatible model for grade school writing instruction, is related in Greta Anderson’s Poets and Writers article about the work of Robert Wolf’s Free River Press. Wolf’s journey to co-founding the nonprofit Free River Press began with his work using writing workshops to teach basic literacy in a homeless shelter in Nashville, Tennessee. He moved on to work with displaced farmers in Iowa. Wolf runs workshops for writers he describes as “without literary ambition.” That might also be an accurate description for most grade school students and their teachers. Free River Press workshops rely on a base of oral story telling, moving participants from telling their stories to writing them down. This strategy for moving people from oral stories to written ones has two basic components: speaking and positive critique. As a starting point, published work is read aloud. On hearing a story, group members comment on what they heard in terms of what was effective. Teachers might recognize this as the use of an “exemplar” – a model for students to learn from. The discussion is a teaching method, or pedagogy,
that public school teachers could also recognize – this is a discovery approach, used in this instance to discover what it is that makes a good story.

I suggest that many things are going on in the discussion of what makes this published work good. Members are honing their ear for language—importantly, and particularly, for good language. “Good” here means language that is memorable, that attracts the reader with its ability to create experience for them. Novice writers can be told to use the five senses to make their writing come alive for readers; but they also can discover, through listening and discussion, how writing that helps them see, hear, smell, taste, or touch is writing that gets their attention, writing that they will remember and want to read. The ability to pick out specifically what makes a story work will also be important to novice writers in their role as peer responder. Untrained responders too often comment that they “like” a passage but can’t tell the writer what it is they like. Reference to specific details and phrasing helps the writer understand in what way the listener is connecting with the work.

Also, listening to a range of readers give specific responses offers all members in a group important lessons about audience. Grade school writers are often cautioned to pay attention to “audience,” but that lesson needs to go beyond the commonly used slang-versus-formal language exercise. When students hear others respond to a neutral text, a published work in which neither they nor others have authorial investment, they learn possibilities for both a range of responses and for commonality in response. When I worked with eighth grade students and had them read their work to the group, invariably during a class period there was a phrase or incident that inspired a strong, positive group response, yet the writer had doubted its effectiveness.
and had considered cutting it. Through these experiences students learned to value the perspective offered by classmates. And, also invariably, there was drastically uneven response to particular choices a writer had made; the students learned to weigh feedback and trust their own judgments. This kind of collaborative give and take – each student functioning and learning as a writer and each student functioning and learning as a reader – offers a healthy, community experience that can serve to counter balance the solitary angst-ridden notions about writers and writing that are the stuff of popular culture. It is not a substitute for practicing the craft of writing or for the discipline of sitting down with our thoughts and developing them into a communicable form; it is an aid in learning the craft of writing.

Writer Natalie Goldberg has much to say about writing, including this, from her book *Writing Down the Bones*, “One of the main aims in writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body; to grow patient and nonaggressive” (12). Here again is the mind-body connection. This concept of the body’s role in the mind’s work may be one of the pieces missing in the mid-century reform of writing instruction. The vista of writers and writing revealed in the *Paris Review* interviews did help launch an important stage of writing instruction reform. That reform has not fulfilled its promise. However, it can be revived and redirected if an attempt is made to critique specific aspects of writerly practice in terms of their desirability for implementation in the classroom. Here are my terms for desirability: the practice must make sense given the physical qualities of the classroom and it must make sense in its accommodations to the human qualities of the people in the room.
There will be few tranquil souls until expectations for writing in the classroom take these into account. However, given these two criteria, some of the advice that is most loved in the writing process literature will have to go or be significantly toned down. For instance, while it is wonderful that some teachers are able to include beanbag chairs in their classroom, and make private-feeling cubbyholes out of an arrangement of bookcases, such physical accommodations are not always possible and should not be held up as ideals to strive for. And, while it may seem ideal that teachers write along with their students and share their work, that too is a problematic ideal, for reasons I will expand on below.

First, though, let’s look at a common idea about writing that just will not fit into the classroom: writing requires quiet. This requirement fits very nicely in accommodating some human needs, but it fails the physical space criteria. For, while quiet is nice, it is not a reasonable expectation in the classroom and perhaps not outside the classroom (as I write this, band practice is warming up downstairs), and so should not be held up as essential. Of course, as much as possible, the teacher should routinely support an environment for writing that is quieter than normal for at least two reasons. Students need training in un-dividing their attention. While the ability of young people to “multi-task” is in some quarters lauded, students need opportunities in which distractions to their attention are limited. Csikszentmihalyi advocates for the research-based idea that a key component of happiness is the ability to focus thought, and certainly, a temporary reduction in sound will also benefit those students who are particularly tired by the general noise level in school.
The other reason for quieter moments is the sanity and tranquility of the teacher. Whether teachers spend their days in a room with twenty-three eight year olds, or have a hundred and twelve thirteen-year-olds cycle through their room, occasional blocks of quiet are a good thing for the mind and soul. Personally, nothing gave me greater pleasure than to tell my students, “Writers need quiet.” But the expectation for “quiet” was always tempered by the reality that as quiet as we could be, the chances were pretty much 100% that our quiet would be intruded on by the verbs being conjugated in the Spanish classroom next door or the shouts and whistle-blowing out on the athletic field outside our window.

Working under the constraints that recommendations for writerly practice must make accommodations to the people in the room means that some “must do” elements of writing process instruction need to move to “might do.” For instance, the requirement that teachers share their own work with the students is unreasonable. Although this might be a good ideal, it will not work for all individuals at all times in their teaching careers. For any number of reasons, teachers might find this practice a hindrance. For example, teachers whose writing is not appropriate to share, either because of subject matter or difficulty, will find this practice problematic. Other teachers who are unsure of their writing might be hesitant to put it on display. We are not all bold souls, as seem to be the people whose behavior we are asked to use as a model. Further, some teachers may feel that using their own works smacks of ego and dislike the practice. While it is widely promoted in educational circles (Atwell), sharing unfinished work is not universally applauded among the ranks for working writers. For instance, Brown doesn’t do it, preferring writing to sharing her writing.
One of the conditions for being a good teacher of writing is being a writer. This notion is a key to writing process instruction and is supported by the NCTE guidelines, which state that writing teachers should “know and practice good composition.” However, while NCTE acknowledges that, for students, learning to teach well occurs over time, there is no equivalent acknowledgement that for teachers learning to write well also occurs over time. Given that individual teachers will have different degrees of expertise in writing and different comfort levels with instructional practices, there needs to be flexibility in the ways in which the writing teacher conducts her writing instruction. Returning to the idea mentioned in the introduction, that the teachers’ own relationship to writing is a crucial element of writing instruction and will be key in establishing a writer-friendly culture in the classroom, it makes sense to look for ways to increase teacher comfort with various aspects of writing process instruction. However, given the seemingly crucial importance of sharing writing, what are teachers who are not yet comfortable with the recommendation to do? Some teachers will simply forego it as an optional suggestion. A number of teachers, however, in trying to develop good teaching practice will try to faithfully adopt each strategy that is lauded at conferences and in professional literature. This may lead to contrived writing produced to have something to share or a pretense of comfort with sharing a piece. Teachers can’t model comfort they don’t feel. Some may develop that comfort over time, but in the meantime they should not be made to feel inadequate because they do not fit this part of the profile of the “good” writing process teacher. A better understanding of the
purposes behind the routines of writing workshop, and their relative importance, will lead to more tranquility in the classroom and less rote adherence.

To gain that understanding, a central question the teacher returns to could be: Why write? This question, used as point of reference, could help foster an attitude of critical examination of writing instruction methods. Unfortunately it has been answered by commercial interests as though no other answers exists beyond those that emphasize learning to write in order to pass exams, to get into college, to get a corporate job, to keep a corporate job. These are inadequate answers. Why we write is a matter as much of philosophy as economics. The economic answer is trumpeted in popular culture – from articles like Staples’, to posters in the high school classroom that picture an expensive car above a caption that identifies affording an expensive car as another reason to do well in school, the tie between potential income and the ability to “write well” is pointed to over and over. What is not trumpeted is a philosophical answer that speaks to quality of life rather than quantity of money. But it is here that writing’s best purpose, and strongest educational reason to teach it to all, lies. Wakefield points out to his readers,

Those who promote the mythical glamour of the ‘doomed’ artist, psychoanalyzing art into an expression of neurosis, seldom, if ever, mention the central aspect of the creative experience: the incomparable joy of it … what Robert Henri calls, “the happiness that is in the making.” (14)

The act of writing, in any genre – poetry, short story, nonfiction article, is a creative experience. The NCTE guidelines, for example, remind teachers that writing is not the transfer of fixed ideas from the head to the page: writers generate ideas as they
write. Csikszentmihalyi points out that “the point of writing is to create information, not simply to pass it along” (italics original). He looks back to the detailed letters of the Victorian era as a means by which people used writing on a personal level to make sense of their lives. He laments the recent connection between writing and commerce:

Not so long ago, it was acceptable to be an amateur poet or essayist.

Nowadays if one does not make some money (however pitifully little) out of writing, it’s considered to be a waste of time. . . But it is never a waste to write for intrinsic reasons. (131)

Csikszentmihalyi’s intrinsic reasons are that writing “gives the mind a disciplined means of expression,” allows for recall and reliving of experiences, analysis and understanding of experiences, and serves as “a self communication that brings order to them.” It is this base in experience that Robert Wolf taps into in his writing classes, and which writing teachers can tap into in their classrooms. “Write from experience” is clichéd advice, of course, but Henry James offers an instructive qualifier, saying that if he were to offering it to novice writers, he would be careful to add, “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost” (qtd. in Bartlett 548). Following Csikszentmihalyi’s logic, writing is a means by which we can become people upon whom nothing is lost. Writing about experience may help us improve experience.

But, even with the question of “Why write?” answered in a way that moves past test taking and marketable skills, the question of how to teach writing remains. If the answer is to teach writing with the process methods developed over the last thirty years, then the question of the failure of those methods to thrive in the schools needs
to be addressed. For that, I will look at the prominent role of isolation in the public schools and the narratives about teachers that create a misfit in the classroom between writing process methods and school environment.

**Part V. The Role of Isolation in the Schools**

In K-12 schools, isolation is used as a behavior management tool; it surfaces as a compelling part of the image of schoolteachers in the popular media; it is institutionalized in the concept of a “real world” separate from school. For me, an early view of the role of isolation in the schools came from my experiences as a substitute teacher and as a student teacher. On one of my first days subbing in an elementary school, the students in the class were doing the assigned seat work. I was walking from child to child, leaning over to check progress and help them along. The smallest ripple of excitement traveled with me, the excitement of each child's encounter with a new adult, the substitute teacher. I looked up to the other side of the room; one of the boys was standing. This was an early grade, second or third, so even standing he didn't make much of a mark in the world. But the school's rules were posted on the front wall in all the classrooms, and there was a specific rule against standing without permission. A set of school-wide consequences was established: the first consequence was to put the child's name on the board. I walked over and squatted down next to him so we were just about eye to eye, and we had a conversation that ran like this:

"Did you know you're breaking a rule?"

"I am?"
"Yup, do you know which one?"

"No."

"Can you read the rules on the wall to figure them out?"

"I can read some of the words but not all of them."

"Let's read the first one together." So, we read the rules together and eliminated possibilities until we came to the rule about standing.

"That's the one," he said, and sat down. "Are you going to write my name on the board?" Although this child did not know all the rules, he did know the first consequence.

Later, as a student teacher in a junior – senior high school building, I was on duty rotation for after-school detention supervision. On my one afternoon in the detention room, there were just two high school boys in the room. They sat scowling in the back row; I sat behind a desk in the front of the room. The older boy whispered things I could not quite catch, but the effect on the younger boy was easily read. He was in bad company and uncomfortable, but also pleased. I asked them to be quiet. I moved them a few seats apart. The muttering, the James Dean posturing, and the dark looks continued. I called the younger boy up. "Bring your books." He walked to my desk. "Here's your new seat, no, not there, right here, in front of me." He dumped his books down and sat, shoulders slouched, arms crossed, eyes down. He was hunkered in for a miserable hour. In back of the room, the older boy settled into his homework.

On the younger boy's desk, the spines of his small stack of books faced me. One was a novel. "What's the book you're reading?" I asked him. He looked up at me, then down to his pile of books. He told me the title. "How is it so far?" His scowling
face relaxed. We began to talk. We talked about books, he told me why he was on detention. He started doing his homework. The hour passed and we said, "Good bye, it was nice to meet you."

In both these instances, the students and I were participants in a system that sets children away from the group in order to punish them. The name-on-the board, checks after-the-name system is like a secret handshake in reverse. There is a shared meaning behind the ritual, but where a secret handshake binds relationships, names on the board rupture them. Children are placed on a behavior management conveyor belt that will take them through increasingly isolating stages. The children whose names go on the board are not being drawn into a community, in which they might derive comfort and modify their own behavior to keep status as members: they are being isolated from the community. In the detention room, also, students are isolated. They are placed away from their friends, with an adult whose role is to not talk to them except to enforce the punishment. Despite their initial posturing, neither of the detention boys was eager to fill his own role as “bad.” The older boy readily gave up his overt attempts, and the younger boy dropped all pretense of being bad. The simple invitations to community, “What book are you reading?” “How is it so far?” offered a common ground and helped him step back into a trusting, respectful relationship with a teacher.

It is not only the students who are isolated in the schools. The February, 2005 issue of New York Teacher, published by the New York State Union of Teachers, can be used to answer three questions that must be asked when trying to understand the status quo of teachers’ isolation in the public schools. How bad is it? What is being
done to reduce it? What is being done to keep it in place? This one issue offers these contributions to the story of teacher’s isolation from each other: an anecdote that shows how entrenched isolation is, a look at a state-mandated solution, and an example of the type of text that strongly supports the traditional narrative of teachers working alone.

The headline on the cover reads: “Why each teacher should have a mentor.” One article refers to mentor relationships as “the magic ingredient for new teachers”(8) and another calls it a “lifeline for new teachers.” In this second article the degree to which isolation is institutionalized in schools is evident in an anecdote about a mentor teacher’s interaction with her new teacher colleague:

When Batavia’s Starowitz, a 29 year veteran who mentors in the western New York district, observed a positive interaction between newcomer Carly Slaughter and a student, she felt comfortable in her role as Slaughter’s mentor to comment to the young teacher. “I was so impressed with the way she handled the situation,” Starowitz said. “If we hadn’t had this program, I don’t think that would be something I would have shared with her. But as a mentor my responsibility is to encourage her.” (12-13)

How did this 29-year veteran, who clearly values her interactions with her colleagues, come to a place where she was reluctant to share even a compliment? Have all observations about each other’s work become off limits? Why did support of new colleagues have to be institutionalized in order for it to be acceptable? While the newly instituted requirement in New York State that new teachers with initial certification must have a mentor in their first year of teaching is a welcome tool in
breaking the isolation typical in schools, the degree to which it frees mentors to join in helping their new colleagues reveals the extent to which those same teachers felt constrained by the school culture. The article ends with Starowitz’s voice, “As a mature teacher it makes you feel good to be able to share what you’ve learned with somebody new” (13): a satisfaction that apparently had not been available to her prior to the sanction of sharing in her school. And, despite the support for collegial relationships in this issue, the back cover of the magazine offers an opposite, and very traditional view of teaching. Physics teacher Ernest Kuel is pictured in a phone booth, holding his shirt open to reveal a white t-shirt that proclaims ‘Superhero,” an image clearly modeled on the Superman comics image. The opening text makes reference to the comic book phrase “faster than a speeding bullet.” The text reveals that the superhero in mind is not Superman, but Green Lantern, and the link to the teacher is that the writer of the comic strip, Benjamin Raab, is a former student of Kuehl’s. A very legitimate link, but also supportive of a very traditional narrative about teaching - the headline “I’m a Superhero, I teach” supports the notion of the isolated, anonymous individual who acts on his own using extraordinary talents. This is in direct contradiction to a narrative of teaching in which new teachers are mentored and receive training and support from their colleagues in the profession. The Superhero is a very poor role model for teachers. Consider that, typically, Superheroes’ powers are derived from circumstance. Their talents are a matter of accident (Spiderman’s fateful spider bite), or birth (Superman’s extraterrestrial origins): they are not related to hard work, personal effort, or training. When the narrative of superheroes is put forward as
a fitting narrative for teachers, the cornerstones of professional life, knowledge and experience, are discredited.

Another troubling aspect of the teacher-as-superhero narrative is the level of acceptable challenge. A superhero functions successfully despite what would be crushing odds for ordinary people. The odds are stacked in the hero’s favor, not by reducing the challenge to ordinary levels, but by giving the hero superhuman powers. The extraordinary challenges he faces serve to isolate him. His (and it is most often his) success depends on his unique abilities, not accumulated knowledge, not wisdom that can be passed down. There is little potential for mentorship. The Superheroes’ power isolates them from others, since they cannot share that part of themselves, and they must work without recognition or reward: they can’t mentor anyone. The story of successful teaching told through this image is one contrary to the mentoring story. This issue of the magazine seems to attempt to foreground mentoring; unfortunately, the flashiest story is not about sharing experience, but about lone, heroic effort, not about helping others set reasonable goals in reasonable conditions, but about superhuman effort.

This type of lone effort is the stuff of Hollywood storytelling about teachers. Dr. Mary M. Dalton, professor of Communication and author of *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers and Teaching in the Movies*, notes that in what she calls “the Hollywood model,” good teachers are outsiders. Dalton examined fifty-eight films in which the main or important secondary figure is a teacher. She found that “good” teachers are different than the other teachers and threaten the status quo. However, they do so only in impotent symbolic gestures that may leave the teacher exhausted.
but do not influence the institutional culture of schools (32). In films about teachers, Dalton reports, the potential of collective power among teachers is ignored: “The celluloid world of teaching is filled with pretty platitudes that keep teachers isolated in the classroom, toiling against a system that doesn’t care and against students who don’t come around until the final reel” (27). And, in much the same way in which Storr questioned creative artists’ ability to form close relationships, “good” teachers’ in film often are depicted as having close relationships only with their students – they are generally not well liked by their coworkers and supervisors (24-26). The attraction of these films, according to Dalton, is that:

The Hollywood curriculum . . . allows us to pretend, if only for a couple of hours, that a good teacher working alone can fix the damaged system if he or she is committed enough. These films dichotomize teachers and teaching into the “good” and the “bad” and present a reductionist view that being “good” enough is, in fact, good enough. . . In the movies, children are not hungry and sick, poverty is not a trap, only “certain” students use drugs and alcohol, teenage sex is usually played for laughs, and violence is neither random nor widespread. (104)

Dalton suggests that we think and talk about the images of good and bad teachers that the movies put forward in order to “reclaim the images for ourselves” (105).

The images put forward by the movies contribute to the larger cultural context of teaching. They support an environment in which the isolation of teachers, from their students and from each other, is ordinary and acceptable. The work to reform the culture of teaching to include an environment supportive of mentoring and
collaborative work requires an acknowledgement and questioning of the powerful images that reinforce the status quo of isolation and individual effort.

**Conclusion**

One indication of a “damaged system” is a school culture largely structured by preparation for the "real world." The idea of a real world located somewhere outside of the school discredits school, leaves its students isolated from any possible continuum of valuable life experience, leaves its teachers isolated from other, non-school adults. What often is not "real world" is the collection of composition rules taught in schools. It is puzzling. How did a rule like "You can’t start a sentence with a conjunction" come into being? It clearly isn't so, based on a look at the work of writers who have attained some status. Another school 'rule' that suffers in comparison when compared to published works is the ban, previously mentioned, on the word “I” in essays. “It's hard to say your opinion when you can't write “I,”” my students tell me, and I can well agree. Why are we holding young, inexperienced writers to a standard more confining than the one mature writers are held to? Which is not to say that we shouldn't hold young writers to the same standards of good writing that hold for anyone else. It is to say that when we hold them to contrived standards that apply to no one else, we further isolate them by ensuring that they will not be conversant in the writerly talk and practice that will be expected of them in college.

In grade schools, students’ development of a writing practice grounded in isolation is fostered by the ways writers are viewed in the popular culture and reinforced by the use of isolation to manage their behavior. Their experience of
working in isolation in school classrooms may foster a frame of reference in which collaboration is a foreign practice, a frame of reference which may later make them resistant to the college practice of assigning peer writing conferences that work as collaborations between writer and responder. If, when students begin college, they have experienced feedback only in terms of line editing, they may be initially disappointed in the lack of corrections offered by faculty in response to early drafts. If they have experienced writing only as communication between teacher and student, they may be uncomfortable with peer-response exercises. While high school teachers often claim that their instruction is guided by what will be asked of students in college, the struggle of many first year students to adapt indicates a very real gap between preparation for college writing and the expectations of college writing. It is a gap that indicates the isolation of many high school teachers from the practices of many college composition teachers.

One result of this gap is that newly trained teachers who are fired up about teaching writing may go into schools and find themselves unexpectedly under fire. “Their way,” taught in universities for well over a decade, is a “new” way and unwelcome. Their methods of teaching writing are a challenge to the status quo and may serve to isolate them from their colleagues. And this isolation, while discomforting and hindering, may not be recognized as a bad thing, since in the popular media, and even in the teacher-specific media, “good” teachers are often portrayed as Lone Rangers who act alone against daunting odds. This narrative of working in isolation celebrates a culture that lacks an atmosphere of collegial support. This is a serious lack for teachers who are trying to incorporate writing conferences
into their school day. For instance, questioning students about their thinking and their writing requires practice and self-reflection, conversations with like-minded colleagues could greatly enrich that self reflection. However, an accepted status quo of solitary endeavor diminishes the likelihood of those conversations developing.

Therefore, in terms of writing instruction reform, the myth that good teachers work in isolation is the equally damaging companion to the myth that writers work in isolation. One myth works against the notion of writers talking through their ideas and testing their words with practice audiences – both myths work against implementation of the conferences that are key to writing instruction based on process rather than product.

In the 1980s, excitement over the promise of writing reform was palpable. This promise has not been fulfilled. Instead, under the considerable pressure of the status quo of isolation in the schools, the new form of writing instruction was itself reformed. How could something that had seemed so vibrant lose its energy and submit to a repackaging that was just like the old packaging? How did the the-way-writers-work become the-way-to-work-writing? I argue that the ideals of teaching writing as a process in which the people and the learning were first priorities met the reality of writer-as-other in a setting of isolation, and lost. I argue that an essential clue in the failure of the reform at the grade school level is its failure to implement peer conferencing. The role of peer conferencing during writing has often been diminished or dropped altogether. This most social aspect of writing reform was not compatible with the environment it was transplanted to and therefore it failed to thrive; without it, there is no reform of instruction, only a repackaging of old method.
I believe Staples underestimates the power of the addition of a writing component added to what, as he acknowledges, is an already overly-influential test. The environment this test will reverberate in is an environment that is enormously at risk. The rate at which new teachers leave the profession tells a story: half of the teachers who begin to teach in this country don’t reach the five-year mark. Surely, some people do go into teaching as a back up plan they are surprised to find themselves using, and others go into it for “the summers off.” But many of both these stripes would be scared off by the grueling experience of student teaching. That leaves people who should be a good match for the profession walking away from it – people who are at least capable of finishing an undergraduate college degree and are no doubt strapped with a debt that would encourage keeping a job, not leaving it. They quit anyway. I suggest they leave because of an unexpected condition on the job – isolation from their students, from each other and from other adults in the community. Simply, and starkly, put, I believe that teachers in grade schools are crippled by the isolation of the environment. The sheer number of adults who choose to leave our public schools should tell us that it is, for many, an intolerable situation.

What does it matter? I’ll return to Gloria Naylor’s mother for a partial answer. This woman turned her daughter towards the healthy use of writing, towards growth through articulation of difficult ideas. But for many children, it will be a teacher, not a parent, who introduces them to journal keeping, to setting down in words what they can’t yet say out loud. Unfortunately, the current stage in the evolution of writing instruction is making that less and less likely to happen – writing about feelings is not tested and therefore it will have increasingly less evident value. In this setting of
challenge to professional expertise, experienced teachers who might use their better judgment to keep the tests in perspective are aging out of the system: the Vietnam teaching-exemption folks have been retiring and the later baby boomers are beginning to come due. New teachers, who are intimidated by their own lack of experience and are particularly vulnerable to going against judgments they’ve barely formed, are left behind. The drumbeat of testing is replacing the heartbeat of individuals; it is creating an environment that is even more hostile for teachers; for students; for a patient, social way of teaching writing. In this environment, the consequences of the failure of the reforms of the 1980s to take hold are particularly harsh.

Writing and teaching have this in common – popular images of each foreground isolation and art and obscure community and craft. These images play a role in shaping writing instruction in the public schools, particularly influencing the status of community among writers in a classroom. While there has long been advocacy for a move toward including collaboration in writing classes through peer and student –teacher conferencing, and more recently for collaboration in teachers’ professional lives, through peer mentoring and study, the strength of the image of teachers and writers working at their art in isolation stands against these reform efforts. As a first step in reclaiming the grade school classroom as a site of genuine writing instruction, the role of isolation as a presence in the schools – in writing instruction, as a management strategy, as a narrative of the working lives of teachers and writers – should be examined and challenged.
Works Cited

Amazon. Rev. of *The Writing Life*, by Annie Dillard. 16 July 2004


- - - . *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*. Portsmouth: Boynton, 1987.


Watson 102
Watson 103


