



# This time it's PERSONAL

Teaching Academic Writing through  
Creative Nonfiction

John S. O'Connor

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*Cover Background:* iStockphoto.com/PPAMPicture

NCTE Stock Number: 54304

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

O'Connor, John S.

This time it's personal : teaching academic writing through creative nonfiction /  
John S. O'Connor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8141-5430-4 (pbk)

1. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching. 2. Reportage literature—  
Authorship—Study and teaching. 3. Prose literature—Authorship—Study and  
teaching. 4. Creative nonfiction. 5. Creative writing. I. Title.

PE1404.026 2011

808'.042071—dc23

2011042004

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I

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# Examining Our Lives as Texts

# Once More to the Ocean: The Case for Personal Writing

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The Ocean of the Streams of Story is made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity... [E]ach strand represented and contained a single tale.

—SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (71–72)

**T**rying to create a coherent narrative of my high school classes, I often feel like the eponymous hero in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The multiplicity of stories is dizzying—each of my five classes deserves a story of its own; so too do each of my 125 students within these classes. Yet, impossible as it is to unbraid the narrative strands, to hear each voice distinctly within the deafening din of a school day, this search is essential if I am to claim any understanding of the most basic questions teachers can ask themselves: Who am I teaching? What is happening in my classroom? And what, in short, is the purpose of school?

Every education system I've taught in for the past twenty-five years answers these questions numerically—through ability groupings, IQ scores, test scores, state standards, demographic data, and the like. Yet such measures seem hopelessly reductive to me as an English teacher. These numbers are useful in sorting students but not in discovering who our students are. They leave us with answers but not necessarily wisdom.

## What's the Story with School?

The short answer is that it's a folktale with little regard for character development or dialogue. But it doesn't need to be this way.

In *Making Stories*, Jerome Bruner distinguishes between two kinds of stories—the legal and the literary, or “the established and the possible” (13). Within the world of education research, these story types are derived from quantitative and experiential research, and the tension between the two story modes has been long-standing. Citing scholar Ellen Lagemann in a 2007 issue of *English Education*, Schaafsma and colleagues say that

the history of educational research . . . can be summed up . . . [as an] ideological battle between Dewey [and his commitment to grounding research and scholarship in experience] and Thorndike [and his commitment to “hard science” with its focus on experimentally based, numerically summarized notions of “proof” and “validity”]. (Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock 283–84)

Examining education research over the past century or so, and the great preponderance of quantitative measurement, Lagemann concluded that, at the end of the battle, “Thorndike won” (284). The consequences of this victory for the kinds of stories that are told about school life are profound. To privilege the “scientific” is to privilege the scientist as collector and analyst of data and to reduce students to mere data, often in the form of raw numbers. What’s missing is the student him- or herself. Consider this brief excerpt from a student named Alexa (her complete essay appears in Chapter 11):

To the nurse’s office I’m a red folder full of immunization records and my temperature from the one time I actually needed their services. To the IT department I’m 20060916. . . . To the Dean’s office I am parking pass 224 with a ‘95 maroon Volvo license plate #6718748. To the College Board I’m 329-XX-2222 and 13 penciled-in computer-read bubbles that spell my name—as if it even matters. To the college counselor’s office I’m a 5.26 GPA AP student on the Honor Roll—all of which turn out to be meaningless distinctions in the real world. . . . But I won’t be forgotten. I’ll be remembered as a hard-working student, a friendly face who always said hi in the hallways, . . . the short comedian who spent every waking minute trying to make people laugh. I won’t let myself become a ghost, just a number in a file.

Alexa’s voice in relating this information is as alive as the numbers are dead, ghostly in their emptiness. This piece, part of a longer reflection written at the end of high school, speaks volumes about the third dimension—depth—that is lost when students’ stories are told only through numbers.

Bruner himself once privileged the scientific narrative. Speaking as one of the most forceful and articulate proponents of scientific positivism, Bruner argued

that “the scientific method could tame ordinary narrative into testable hypotheses” (qtd. in *Making Stories* 101). Forty years later, however, he reconsidered this notion in *Making Stories*, admitting ultimately, “I think I was profoundly mistaken.” Seeing the legal or scientific story as looking only to “the actual, the literal, the record of the past,” Bruner, like Alexa, sees such “ordinary” narratives as incomplete. Instead, he turns to a literary model since “literature looks to the possible, the figurative” (61). This is an especially interesting narrative leap when considering the learning and lives of children in schools.

Out of bureaucratic necessity perhaps, schools rely on the reductive story—the scientific story in Bruner’s formulation—that seeks to establish absolute truths. These stories, such as those derived from scores on standardized tests, are often instructive, but they are also simplistic. They are usually more interested in figuring out what students don’t know than in what they do know. As Mike Rose puts it in *Lives on the Boundary*, kids always “know more than the tests reveal, but they don’t know how to put their knowledge into a coherent pattern” (8). As a result, these stories often read like folktales or fables, with students represented as two-dimensional characters—caricatures, really—shallow representations instead of human beings.

## ***Typecasting***

I walked right into such a fable at my first high school teaching job, where I was immediately confronted with a rigid and implacable tracking system. Most shocking of all was the nomenclature used for the four ability groups identified at that school: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, and Deltas. Contrary to what some of my students might tell you, this was not the Late Mesozoic era but the early 1990s! Incredibly, this public school blithely borrowed the terminology from the satirical dystopia *Brave New World* to describe its students. Students were assigned to these “ability” groups based on IQ scores, and almost without exception these students remained in their tracks for the duration of their high school careers.

Even among the academically strongest of the “low-level” students, an incredibly low self-image was common, making it difficult for any of these students to imagine they could ever be “college material.” One student named Frank told me that “his people” didn’t go to college, a statement that has haunted me ever since. Students seemed to internalize their rank and quickly came to see their track as determining their fate. As Tobias Wolff writes in his memoir *This Boy’s Life*, “It takes a childish or corrupt imagination to make symbols of other people” (178), yet schools do this daily as a matter of routine.

Reducing students by labeling them reinforces their marginal status. As a result, schools create a facile world of stock characters—like those found in folk-

tales. According to Bruner, “characters and events in folk stories serve as mere functions in narrative plots: they do not exist on their own” (*Making Stories*, 79–80). Literary stories, in contrast, “require a cast of characters who are free agents with minds of their own” (16). This cannot happen if students’ stories are told only by institutions through numerical shorthand.

### ***Diagnosing***

Salman Rushdie might as well be talking about the reductive nature of tracking and standardized testing when he describes the poisoning of the Ocean of Stories. When Haroun tries to untangle the myriad story strands—and rescue himself by taking control of the story of his life—he realizes that the waters have become polluted with poisons and that “*the poisons had had the effect of muting the colors of the Story Streams, dulling them all down toward greyness; and it was in the colours that the best parts of those Stories in the Streams were encoded*” (Rushdie 122, emphasis added). Validating only quantitative measures such as tracking and test scores mutes the brilliance of children by robbing them of their individuality and reducing them to mere numbers or labels.

I’ve seen the inadequacy of labels firsthand. My daughter has autism, but I’m afraid to introduce the *A* word too early in any conversation. I’m liable not to mention it at all if I sense any hint of a lack of empathy. I’m terrified that people will conjure up images of *Rain Man*’s Raymond counting toothpicks and stop listening right there. My daughter is a bright, beautiful teenager, a talented writer and artist who loves to sing and draw and read. She is good-natured and kind, and she desperately wants to please the people around her. And, yes, she happens to have autism. Wittgenstein knew that “the limits of our language were the limits of our reality.” I weep at the thought of anyone perceiving my daughter solely as a diagnosis, or as a test score, missing the full story of the lovely human being she is. So, yes, this time it’s personal.

### ***Reducing***

On beginning-of-the-year inventories at my current school, I once asked all my students some variation of this question: What is the point of school? Their answers roughly corresponded to their academic track. High-track kids not only enjoyed school more, but they also took it on faith that there would eventually be a payoff for their hard work. Low-track kids saw almost no connection between high school and post-high school life. It was, as one student put it, “just something you have to do.”

Karen, a student in one of my 2-level classes (the lowest track the school offers since the term *1-level* somehow sounded pejorative) responded this way: “The purpose of school is to find out who is smart and who is not and to keep the smart kids away from the dumb kids.” As a 2-track student, Karen likely considers herself one of the “dumb” kids. But worse, she feels segregated from the “smart kids” around her, quarantined from the real intellectual life of the school.

And it’s not just the low-level students who are reduced in the tracking numbers game. Elaine, a high-level senior, wrote a chilling memoir (such as those described in Chapter 5) about the death of her “10 year long dream to be a National Merit Semi-finalist.” Though her “selection index of 215 put [her] in the top .05% of test-takers in the nation,” she felt compelled to recite the “mourner’s kaddish for [her] dead dream.” Perhaps the most disturbing part of her memoir is the moral value she assigns to her test score: “I thought I would be rewarded for my hard work, even just for being a good person. I had thought good things happened to good people [but] I wasn’t even good enough to deserve His [God’s] favor just this once. I just desperately wanted to believe that everyone gets what they deserve.” Elaine even makes an ontological case on the final page of her essay, commenting that though she herself had been ignored most of her life, “No one could deny a test score or deny its existence.”

This is one of the saddest essays I have ever read. If tests carry a moral weight, I wonder, what are the moral consequences for those at the bottom of the test-taking pool? Do schools make similar judgments when they assign kids to ability tracks? At every school where I’ve taught, I have regularly heard teachers make the same association: “I’ve got a good bunch this year” or “The class is a real mixed bag, but there are some good kids in there as well.” This is pretty standard teacher-talk; I’ve made these kinds of comments myself. But reading the moral reductiveness in Elaine’s essay makes me wonder if she’s not on to something, if we aren’t tacitly assigning a moral goodness to those students who think about school the way we think about school and condemning those who don’t—not just as academically deficient but also as morally bereft.

This tendency to reduce students to a raw score may be one reason so many students see little connection between school life and their lives outside of school. At best, they see school as preparation for the *real world*, a term that about half of my students invoked on those initial inventories. If post-high school life is “real life,” clearly high school is to them largely make-believe, artificial.

It is easy to understand why so many students hold this view. The overwhelming majority of evaluation in schools is “objective,” requiring fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice responses. This is particularly true of lower-track

students, for whom assessment is often couched in the language of charity: “That’s all they can handle” or “They really like to know exactly where they stand.” Such work, however, is much more concerned with where the teacher stands, or where the students stand in relation to the teacher. On such measures, students are literally deprived of their own voices. They use other people’s words—or mere letters—to show how much they’ve learned. When Csikszentmihalyi and Larson analyzed the affective states of thousands of high school students, they concluded that “the average student is usually bored, apathetic and unfriendly” (205). Given students’ marginal and muted status within the ongoing drama of the classroom, boredom and apathy are hardly surprising.

### *Directing*

The thick, dark poison was everywhere now, obliterating the colours of the Streams of Story, which Haroun could no longer tell apart. (Rushdie 146)

So-called objective testing is, if anything, on the rise. As George Hillocks said in “The Focus on Form vs. Content in Teaching Writing,” “For more than the last two decades, the demand for accountability of schools and teachers has increased” (244). Education professor Greg Michie sees the “renewed emphasis on standardized test scores as the sole measuring stick for its schools, teachers, and students [as] troubling” (180). What’s most troubling to me about the precipitous rise in AP classes and standardized tests, and the increasingly numerical measures of academic achievement, is the difficulty in getting to know students as human beings, mainly because there are too many of them and not enough time in the day or week. Given overcrowded classrooms and limited class time, the first casualty is storytelling. But we must listen to the voices of students if we are to see them as human beings—if we are to see ourselves as human beings and not as clerks filling out accounts payable columns in our grade ledgers. It’s not mere coincidence that the enemy of free speech in Rushdie’s *Haroun, Khat-tam-Shud*, is a “sniveling, driveling, mingy, stingy, weaselly clerk” (155). This is not a condition I aspire to as an English teacher, and it’s not one we should be willing to accept.

Another difficulty in hearing our students’ voices is what commonly passes as classroom discourse. Within the ample dramatis personae of a crowded classroom, the odds are not with every student getting a fair share of lines. Instead, most of the conversation is teacher led. The teacher gets the “starring role” in the classroom drama, receives most of the lines, and is usually spotlighted in his or her position at center stage. Often the teacher is the only person in the room with any sense of what the play is about. Furthermore, the script of the play is usually

written—and even performed—by the teacher alone. Students are often left to fill the nonspeaking roles at worst, or the parts of secondary characters at best.

That classroom discourse reinforces the teacher-as-hero narrative is nothing new. Nearly a hundred years ago, John Dewey noted that

teachers have a habit of monopolizing continued discourse. Many, if not most, instructors would be surprised if informed at the end of the day of the amount of time they have talked with any pupil. Children's conversation is often confined to answering questions in brief phrases, or in single disconnected sentences. (*How We Think*, 185)

This disturbing trend has remained remarkably consistent. According to John Goodlad's classic study *A Place Called School*, teachers on average do 75 percent of the talking, and at the senior high level discussion of any kind takes place only 5.2 percent of the time. Notice the theatrical language in Goodlad's account of classroom behavior:

For the most part, the teachers in our sample of schools controlled rather firmly *the central role* of deciding what, where, when and how their students were to learn. . . . When students *played a role*, it was somewhat peripheral, such as deciding where they sat. At the elementary level about 55% of the students reported not participating at all in choosing what they did in class. About two-thirds of our secondary students said that they did not help make such decisions. (emphasis added, 109)

Shockingly, "students seemed to become more compliant and accepting of the teacher's role as they moved upward[,] . . . socialized into accepting the authority of the teacher" and hardly ever assuming a "decision-making role in their own education" (109).

Jerome Bruner warns that "motives for learning must be kept from going passive in an age of spectatorship" (*Making Stories*, 80), yet students still most commonly find themselves spectators in an ongoing story of classroom life that they have no part in writing. But the teacher's voice alone is insufficient unless he or she wishes to assume an omniscient voice and reduce the classroom narrative to the level of fable. As Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm argue, "The important thing [for educators] is to engage in activities with our students that allow us to get to know them as, and that communicates our care and concern for them as, whole people" (21). This, of course, cannot be done if students have no voice, if they are not invited to tell their stories.

## The Anti-Story

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“Every Stream of Story has a shadow-self, and if you pour this anti-story into the story, the two will cancel each other out, and bingo! End of story.”

“But why do you hate stories so much,” Haroun blurted, feeling stunned. “Stories are for fun...”

“The world is not for fun,” replied Khattam-Shud. “The world is for Controlling.”

“Which world?” Haroun made himself ask.

“Your world, my world, all worlds,” came the reply. “They are all there to be Ruled. And inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.” (Rushdie 160–61)

When students do write essays in school, most often they write in a stiff, stilted academic voice that sounds nothing like their own. *Engfish* might sound like a fantastical creature from the depths of Haroun’s ocean, but it is actually a term coined by education theorist Ken Macrorie to describe the “dehydrated tongue” found in a great deal of academic writing. According to Hillocks,

Research suggests that at most levels of schooling, the writing situations encountered by the great majority of students are of a single kind. The writer’s audience is almost always the teacher, and the teacher almost always sets the purpose of the writing and responds to the writing with a grade. Even though there is an immediacy to this writing, and certainly consequences for the writer, the richness of non-school settings that comes through discussion, reading, and informal talk is usually, though not necessarily, missing. (*Teaching* 84–85)

Many teachers I’ve spoken with have despaired of assigning papers of any kind, citing the enormous burden of time required to grade and respond to a set of, say, 100 same-sounding essays. Instead, they resort to Scantron-based reading quizzes that avoid writing altogether and steer students toward CliffsNotes. When they do assign papers, the writing almost universally falls under Sheridan Blau’s description of “the hegemony of the thesis-argument essay” (*Literature Workshop* 179). Most essays assigned in school are thesis-driven analyses of literature, often following the five-paragraph-theme model. Such assignments, Donald Graves argues in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, are often so restrictive that they do not allow students to be successful. This is because there is precious little room for individuality within the thesis-argument form. Graves says that students—like professional writers and teachers—should have some say in the topics on which they write so that they can assume some owner-

ship (i.e., care) about their writing. Robert Scholes argues that writing limited to technical aspects of literature, far from being benign, actually creates a wall “between the literature students read and their own humanity” (35).

Thesis-argument essays exact a toll on teachers as well: they are not interesting to grade. They all sound alike in argumentative substance and in academic voice, a generic voice far different from the polyphony of possible voices in any classroom. Such deadening discourse creates an additional wall between the humanity that teachers and students share. I, for one, never want to read another meaningless essay response to the question of whether Macbeth is a tragic hero. (Spoiler alert: he is.)

In fact, Hillocks argues that much writing done in schools is literally *meaning-less*. Writing that involves meaning, he suggests, consists of “writing that either (1) constructs a new relationship with an intended audience, as in an empathetic piece that attempts to generate an emotional response of some sort; (2) constructs a new relationship in the substance of the writing; or both” (*Teaching* 10). Most school writing falls short of this test since the teacher is almost always the audience, the generic limits of the assignments do not allow students to construct new relationships in the substance of the writing, and the academic voice of such essays eliminates the possibility of empathy.

## The Anti-Anti-Story

I am grateful to the personal writing advocates who have come before me, people like Donald Graves, Stephen Tchudi, and especially the “vernacular intellectual,” Peter Elbow. These authors have helped to blaze the trail for classroom teachers, but as I argued earlier, the increase in standardized assessment has reduced the impact of their powerful example. The research of Vivian Paley also offers a powerful counterexample since she extracts a great deal of her wisdom from mining classrooms that create and encourage stories. Paley, a MacArthur Grant-winning kindergarten teacher, reminds us that wisdom is always readily available within all our classes because “the storytelling instinct is always there waiting to be resurrected” (5). Sadly, the stories our students and our classes could tell are rarely heard because they are so rarely sought.

Having taught English classes for the past twenty-five years at every level from junior high to college composition, it’s clear to me that personal writing is tolerated less the higher the grade level. Courtney Cazden, writing about lower school classrooms, calls this kind of writing “sharing time,” and says this may “still be the only time when recounting events from personal, family, and social life . . . is considered appropriate in school” (11). This personal connection, when

it is offered at all, is usually reserved for lower or middle school children. By the time my students reach high school, they are all too aware of the divide between their lives and the life of the school.

In fact, the most commonly proffered writing advice I hear from high school and college instructors is to avoid contractions and the personal pronouns *I* and *you* in formal writing (whatever that is). I am not proud to admit that I too administered that kind of advice earlier in my career, teaching the way I was taught. The fact that professional writers almost never follow that advice is apparently beside the point. High school English and college composition students write almost exclusively to the teacher without using *I* or *you*. No wonder so much of their writing sounds artificial.

I want to create a classroom that eliminates this artificiality. Selfishly, and out of self-preservation, I decided that I would assign only papers from which I too could learn. What I was especially interested in was learning about my students as *people*, not as empty piggy banks into which I might drop golden coins of wisdom. In other words, I wanted to become a student of my students.

So I abandoned all tests and quizzes. Instead, we focused our energies on writing about ourselves and making story-sense out of our lives alongside the lives of characters we read about in class texts. I use the plural here not only because I write all the assignments with my classes, which I do, but also because I try to model my willingness to share personal stories, as I have attempted in this introductory chapter.

As an experiment, I also decided I would give no grades. Instead, I chose animal stamps— value-neutral pictures such as turtles, flowers, frogs, fish, and moose. This way, I figured, students would have to read the comments rather than rely on the grade at the end of the paper. (I chose these stamps carefully, remembering a colleague years ago who tried a similar experiment after assigning a major essay on *Moby-Dick*. Rather than give grades, he wrote subspecies of whales in large letters across the top of each paper. Ingenious, it seemed, until some students complained about having been labeled Humpback, Killer, or Sperm.)

For many of my students, the stamps did the trick. Just as I had hoped, they smiled at the cheery pictures and read the comments to figure out how successfully they had handled the assignment. These students took the gradeless environment as a license to take chances in their writing. Others, however, grew anxious without the certainty of a clear-cut letter grade. Yet their anxiety produced some surprisingly profound questions: “What does a turtle mean?” or “Is a flower worth more than a frog?” “That’s deep,” I’d reply. “Better read the comments.”

My dream of a classroom without letter grades exploded with first-quarter report cards, of course. Since I *had* to give letter grades, I decided to use the opportunity for another conversation with students outside of class. I asked students to name the grade they had in mind before I revealed the grade I had written down. We agreed in almost every case and were never more than half a grade apart in any case. This too became a chance to talk, and together we negotiated the grade. I'm no pushover, but sometimes students convinced me with examples of their effort and their progress. If not, I used the opportunity to talk more specifically still about the student's writing.

In a class on personal writing, I grade my students on (1) their participation in class—not only the frequency of their comments but also how carefully they attend to their classmates; (2) the completeness and timeliness of their drafts and warm-up assignments; (3) their willingness to try new techniques; and (4) their willingness to revise. In comments and in conversation, I focus on the skills I emphasized for the particular assignment. For example, when working on place essays (see Chapter 3), I prize concrete description and sensory detail above all else.

Making sure all assignments have potential audiences beyond me as teacher allows me to assume the stance of coach and not just arbiter. This enables me to stand on the sidelines with students rather than across the desk from them, helping them consider the best strategies for reaching their various audiences and writing aims. It also encourages artistic risk-taking (after all, *essay* comes from the word *essayer*, “to try”) rather than concentrating solely on the “quality of the final product.” I enlarge a bit on this subject later in this chapter in my “Note on How This Book Works.”

I also decided to allow students the chance to revise every paper as many times as they wished, something students took as a token of faith in their abilities and not as a reason to slack off. Students seemed to work harder than they had before, writing out of a desire for self-expression rather than toward a grade. Many more students stopped by for one-to-one writing conferences, and we found that even without grades we had something to talk about: our writing and our lives.

Robbie, a deeply imaginative student and star athlete whose father abandoned his family when Robbie was small, considered how his life would have been different had his family remained intact. The full text of his memoir appears in Chapter 5, but I quote the final section here:

It is November now. Football season's over. I sit in my room at a white desk, room dimly lit by a small desk lamp at 12:30 am. Hunched over a spiral notebook, I

wonder what to write. The room is completely silent except for the noise of the crickets outside the window, but so much is spoken. Each time I ink pen to paper I utter another concealed emotion. I haven't talked to my father in six years, and I've bottled up anger, sympathy, pity, even hate for him. Through the paper, I am having a conversation with my father, who stopped watching Packers games with me when I was eight.

*How are you?*

*What do you like to do during your free time? Do you still fish?*

*Do you work? What is your job?*

*What kind of music do you like?*

*My hair is curly just like yours.*

*Did you see when Brett Favre got a concussion during the Giants game and then came back into the game and threw a touchdown? That was awesome.*

*What do you think of the Packers' record?*

*I Love you Dad.*

How many times have we heard the cricket quiet in our own classrooms? But what a spectacular imaginative leap Robbie makes in this essay by hearing “how much is spoken” in this deep silence. Rather than treat the silence as a dead end, he creates a dialogue with his long-absent father. There is a present-tense urgency in this piece that could never be tapped into by a multiple-choice test or a generic thesis-driven essay. His father’s absence, which he wrote about later as well, was clearly the most important event in his life, yet it would never have surfaced without the invitation to make story-sense out of his life. Robbie’s story journey parallels Haroun’s: both boys search for their fathers and save themselves by (re)telling the story of their lives. We teachers need to make a similar imaginative leap, listening to our students’ stories and inviting them into the larger community of storytellers.

Even when students wrote about topics outside of their lives, I wanted them to find a personal connection to the topic and a reason to invest themselves fully in their subject. A student named Anne, for example, set out to write an exploratory essay (such as those found in Chapter 10) about school funding and educational values in communities from different socioeconomic classes. In amplifying her ideas, she added a powerful and honest personal story about the role of education in her own life:

From the time I was born on October 9, 1987, I have been molded like the ancient Terra Cotta Warriors of Xian China to become a “success.” In 1995, my father with slicked back hair and shaved chin like Michael Corleone, the Godfather, said, “You must never get anything but an A.” He brought out a piece of paper and wrote with a ballpoint pen, “I promise to work hard and get As.” He rotated the pen towards me and with only slight hesitation [I] signed \_\_\_\_\_. The next year I received nothing but As and my father presented me with a trip to London, Rome, and Paris.

In 1999, I received my first B and my contract was re-written. “Now, you must never get anything but a B or higher but strive always for the A,” my father said, knowing he had to be realistic. I had broken my contract, and instead of receiving a trip to Europe my father decided that I had to pick up a sport, which would serve as a replacement for the failure to uphold the contract. I can feel the echo of his words rumbling in my ears now: “You must learn discipline.” I choose gymnastics. At this point, my brain’s veins were spastic and on the verge of bursting. I was computer-like, and school was deathly: days of memorizing notecards and vocabulary words. Gymnastics was not much fun either, and my palms were sweaty, afraid of the vault ... [but] my father always said, “Winning is more important than friendships that don’t last. You must learn to want.”

The perverse obsession with grades in this family obliterates any sense of who Anne is apart from her grades. Perhaps this is why school is “deathly” to her: in some sense, she feels *she* no longer exists; she has become her test scores. The historiography implied by the dates this author offers also suggests a sense of detachment, as if Anne is excavating her former self here and examining it as an ancient artifact. The terra-cotta soldiers are an amazingly powerful metaphor for what schools (and families) can do to children. The statues are life-sized and lifelike and utterly unanimated.

Inviting students to write about their lives alongside the literary texts they read—creating texts of their own—holds important implications for students’ self-actualization as well. Just as Robert Frost talked of “believing himself into being” through poetry, so too does the personal essay hold ontological implications. “Stories,” Tim O’Brien remarked, “make our lives present” (180), not merely artificial abstractions. Jerome Bruner goes even further, writing that “[i]f we lacked the capacity to make stories about ourselves, there would be no such thing as selfhood” (*Making Stories* 86). So vital is this enterprise to Bruner that he believes “[i]ndividuals who have lost the ability to construct narratives have lost their selves” (86).

Personal writing is especially important at the critical developmental stage of adolescence. As developmental psychologist Dan McAdams writes:

Life becomes mythic in our teenage years. The formation and reformation of identity remains thereafter the central psychosocial task of the adult years. From adolescence onward we face this task of creating an integrative life story through which we are able to understand who we are and how we fit into the adult world. As our views of ourselves and our worlds change over time, we revise the story. (91)

The personal essay is perhaps the genre best suited to this task.

McAdams further endorses the importance of “selectively reconstructing the past” because in so doing, “We create a self that is whole and purposeful because it becomes embedded in a coherent and meaningful story” (92). In adolescence and adulthood, we begin to adopt a historical perspective on our lives and to craft “a history of the self[,] . . . an account of the past that seeks to explain how and why events transpired as they actually did” (102). The act of creating these stories helps us to forge identities and examine how we see ourselves and how others see us. Giving students the chance to voice their beliefs and views allows them, in Montaigne’s phrase, to “make friends with their minds” (qtd. in Lopate 302).

The inclusion of personal writing in the classroom can also help create what Maxine Greene calls the “curriculum as possibility,” in which students can “articulate the themes of their existence and . . . reflect on those themes until they know themselves to be in the world and can name what has been up to then obscure” (qtd. in Stock 17). In creating such a curriculum, I hope to emulate what Patricia Lambert Stock calls a “dialogic curriculum,” a curriculum in which “students are inquirers” and which offers their “most powerful means of learning” since it “utilizes students’ past experiences” (24). Students in such a classroom not only come to recognize and articulate their own identities, but they also recognize the identities—fuller, human identities—of their classmates.

Telling stories gives us the chance to understand who we are and to measure ourselves and our circumstances alongside characters who lead lives different from the lives we lead. As Mario Vargas Llosa puts it:

Literature transports us into the past and links us to those texts that have come down to us, texts that now allow us also to enjoy and dream. This feeling of membership in the collective human experience across time and space is the highest achievement of culture, and nothing contributes more to its renewal in every generation than literature. (298)

Inviting students to share their stories, to make story-sense of their lives alongside the lives of characters they read about, is an invitation to the collective membership Vargas Llosa speaks of—the community of storytellers, co-inhabitants of the literary landscape.

When Haroun saves storytelling from the forces that seek to stifle humanity, he wins for his father the title of the country's highest decoration, "the order of the Open Mouth," and he ushers in "a victory for the new Friendship and Openness . . . over our old Hostility and Suspicion. A dialogue has been opened" (Rushdie 192–93). This is what I hoped I had started in my classroom: an open dialogue and a search for possibilities.

Becca, a student in a low-track class, said, "If there's one thing I know about myself it's that I can't write poetry" and then wrote this poem:

### W

The letter "W," the first letter  
Of my last name looks like two V's  
Holding hands or kissing if flipped  
Upside down. "W" is a pair  
Of beautiful mountains with snow-  
Covered hills.  
The letter "W" turned on its side is a 3  
Or a crazy-looking E, or maybe  
Big black bats flying in the night sky.  
"W" has a lot of power, but it goes  
Unnoticed by people; it feels neglected  
And alone. The sound of "W" is the wind  
Whistling past city buildings. "W" is  
A young yellow flower blossoming.

Isn't it amazing how much Becca found within a single letter of her name? Isn't it astonishing how many images and stories Becca possesses, this girl who was convinced she couldn't write a poem? I've been moved by this poem since I first read it, and I've come to read it as something akin to a prayer. I think this is because it contains my deepest hopes for my own children, as well as for all my students—that they never feel neglected, alone, or unnoticed; that they come to know they hold a lot of power; that we see in each of them all the beauty and potential of a blossoming flower.

## A Note on How This Book Works

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The general framework of *This Time It's Personal* consists of high-interest creative nonfiction topics that give students choice in what they write. Creative nonfiction, for our purposes (and here I defer to Lee Gutkind, editor of the excellent journal *Creative Nonfiction*), is “factually accurate prose about real people and events [told] in a compelling and vivid manner” (xiii). In other words, my students and I write about the events of our lives using the tools of literary writing. There has never been a more important time to teach creative nonfiction. Within the last few decades, the world has witnessed a “memoir craze” and “an explosion of first person narrative[s]” (Gutkind xiii). The Common Core State Standards initiative has also recently weighed in: “Fulfilling the Standards for 6–12 ELA (English Language Arts) requires much greater attention to a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—than has been traditional” (5). Literary nonfiction is the focus of this book.

The assignments you’ll read about are real-world assignments—that is, they are essays and essay forms that professional essayists and journalists regularly use—and they are all directed at audiences beyond the classroom teacher. This not only reinforces the idea of writing as a social, meaningful practice, but it also allows the teacher to work as a coach, helping students to reach those audiences rather than merely acting as judge or arbiter. The assignments also build in writing as a reflective practice, giving students the opportunity to become more self-conscious writers and thinkers. As Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff have argued in *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*, “The most important kind of learning in school is learning about learning. The most important thinking is thinking about thinking” (18).

With every assignment, my students invent, compose, and revise. While we work on prewriting and brainstorming exercises, we read professional and student models of each type of essay, offering a wide range of models to underscore the importance of individuality. Students then write drafts that we workshop in class. They revise those drafts and self-analyze everything they write.

Writing these essays in stages helps me identify areas in which my students are struggling, reinforces revision as a process that is second nature to professional writers, but most important, guarantees student success. By success I don’t necessarily mean letter grades. Rather, I measure success on these assignments by how much students have grown, how much they have invested themselves in their subject matter, and how willing they are to try new styles and new techniques. Most of all, I want students to be proud of pieces they have written and to write essays that no one else in the world could have written. This last

goal might seem lofty, but it turns out to be true. When we write about our lives with the specificity of our personal experiences, no one else—not Shakespeare, not Faulkner reincarnated—is capable of relating these experiences.

## Grading and Revision

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I'd like to offer a brief word on grading and revision. Since I promise my students that every essay we will work on is genuine, that we are undertaking the same writing challenges faced by professional writers, I try to conduct my class by an ethic that treats them like professional writers. In writing marginal notes, I try to limit myself to positive comments (e.g., Nice, Terrific comparison) and questions (e.g., Can you introduce this character earlier? Does this word set the right mood for your scene?). Because I'm asking students to experiment with language in ways they never have before, I don't want to do anything to discourage experimentation. And because students often write about their most important personal experiences, I want to honor the generosity of their willingness to share these experiences. I want to respond like a fellow writer—and a fellow human being—with words rather than a letter grade. As a former colleague once drily put it, "There's nothing worse than an end comment that goes 'Sorry to hear about your grandmother. C+.'"

Granted, report card grades are a reality for most of us, but that doesn't mean essays need to be reduced to a grade. In my experience, students simply stop reading when they see a letter grade on a paper. In a recent talk at my school, Ron Ritchhart, from Harvard's Project Zero, went even further, saying that once students see a grade on a paper, all other comments are irrelevant. And is there anything more depressing than spending dozens of hours lovingly responding to students' writing only to see those same students steal a peek at the grade before they let the essays parachute into the recycling bin on their way out of class?

Recognizing the reality of grades, I'd like to offer a compromise: on papers, I favor "grids over grades," if I may steal a phrase from Peter Elbow. Rather than anguishing over minute distinctions (Is this paper a B- or a C+? Or in the deeply neurotic worlds of many English departments, a B-/C+ or a C+/B-, distinctions so esoteric that students are left not only clueless about their performance but also troubled about the sanity of their teacher!), Elbow suggests three categories: Strong, OK, and Weak. This way a teacher can quickly discern which essays are *notably* strong or weak. With just three levels, teachers can spend more time responding *as readers*.

I suggest changing the criteria for these grids to suit each particular assignment. For example, when working on the place essays (Chapter 3), I prize concrete description, sensory detail, and organization above all else, so I make sure those three categories appear on the grid. A sample grid for this assignment might look like this:

	Strong	OK	Weak
Sensory descriptions			
Concrete details/objects			
Organization			
Active verbs			
Voice/attitude			
Mechanics			

New skills we are working on go at the top of the grid, and I create the criteria with my students as they are writing their initial drafts of each new assignment. I want to make sure our writing goals agree. This quick snapshot on a half-sheet offers many advantages: it frees me up to spend my time writing substantial comments on the paper itself; it supports my stance as coach since it encourages students to ask about how they might reorganize or improve their imagery rather than to ask if a paper was a C or a C-; and it looks to the future, suggesting skills students need to work on further and where they might concentrate their efforts as they revise. And, of course, it gives me a starting point when quarter grades are due.

Course grades seem different to me from grades on papers. While I don't presume to tell teachers how they should grade, it is important for teachers to be clear about grades for the course. Elbow, for example, has more recently made the case for grade contracts, laying out guidelines for students at the start of each term. He might say, "To earn an A, you need to show up on time every day (with one freebie per term), hand in all assignments on time and completely (again one freebie), faithfully complete each nightly assignment, blog weekly, and revise at least two papers per term. Your essays must, after revision, fall mostly in the 'strong' category on the grid sheets." While I shy away from contracts, I agree that course demands must be clear to students from the outset, and I especially like Elbow's distinction between guiding comments on papers versus letter grades for a course.

Students also quickly learn that the tone of my comments reveals how successfully I think they have handled the assignment. “This is fantastic. Put it on your refrigerator!” clearly conveys something different from “The first half of this piece is engaging, but the second half lacks specificity. How can you add more sensory detail to the ending?” Like an editor responding to professional writers, I always comment with an eye toward the future in case students wish to revise their essays. As a professional writer, I have never had a piece accepted without a call for revision. Once I wrote a five-word poem that was accepted only after two successive revisions! I pay my students the same courtesy.

Sometimes when I tell fellow teachers that I allow students to revise everything they’ve written, they gasp in horror. But the number of takers is actually very small. Partly this is because we have moved on to a new assignment and students don’t want to fall behind. Partly it’s because I insist on meeting students outside of class if they wish to revise. There I make sure they’ve read all the comments I’ve written, and I ask them what they’d like to work on. Since I don’t assign grades, revision primarily gives students an opportunity to work on a particular writing challenge, although that effort might also boost a score into a higher category.

## Personal Writing: Student Models

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I have written professionally as a radio contributor to NPR-affiliate WBEZ, as a blogger for the Poetry Foundation, as a poet, as a writer of essays in education journals, and as the author of a book on teaching poetry writing called *Wordplay-grounds*. I say this not only because I hope it will bolster your confidence in the chapters that follow, but also to suggest that my personal essays can be found in a variety of places. It is my hope in this book to foreground the work of my students.

The student work in *This Time It’s Personal* comes from classes I’ve taught at the University of Chicago Lab Schools and at New Trier High School outside Chicago (an elite prep school and an affluent public high school, respectively). While these schools are highly regarded because of their lofty test scores, I hope I have made the case that what is really important is who these students are as human beings. The student writing models are strong, the kind of writing I am always looking for as a classroom teacher, because they are honest and real and often deeply personal.

The first half of the book consists of personal essay writing, exploring students’ lives as texts. The second half considers texts outside ourselves—literature, history, movies, politics, education, etc. Many of the essays work in

conjunction with essays in other chapters, and the book as a whole can be followed in sequence as a design for a writing class, such as the one I teach. Individual chapters, however, also can be used discretely as a guide to a change of pace from the usual classroom fare. Friends and colleagues have used these assignments in classes outside of English, specifically journalism, history, and American studies. The assignments might work well in other disciplines, too, and I occasionally call attention to points of intersection with other disciplines.

I recently found a list of goals I had set for myself a few years ago at the start of the school year. These goals are also tacit promises I make to my students. I return to these goals in Chapter 11, and will leave it to you to determine how well I have fulfilled them.

### **My Goals from the Beginning of the Year**

To offer assignments unlike any papers you've written before.

To offer assignments that insist on originality—assignments that no one else could have written.

To get to know you as individual people and fellow writers.

To reinforce the idea of writing as a creative process.

To demonstrate connections between writing and other disciplines (history, journalism, film, photo, painting, music)

To offer only “real world” assignments, those with audiences and purposes beyond the English classroom.

To bring in voices other than my own!

To welcome all views but also to insist that all positions (including my own) are supported by example.

To ensure that you will help determine the shape of the course (leading discussions, presenting projects and positions) and the direction of your writing.

To help everyone understand the importance of writing for its own sake, not just for the grade (since we are not reducible to a grade).

To allow everyone the chance to revise.

To ensure that you are genuinely proud of having written at least one piece of writing (maybe more!).

As a teacher, I can honestly say I look forward to reading every essay I assign. Since the assignments in this book prize individuality, no two essays sound alike. What's more, through these assignments I am able to understand my students better because I know so much more about their lives—their writing lives, yes, but also their hopes, fears, dreams, ideals, beliefs. These are not essays to fill up a grade book. They are works of art, attempts at understanding our lives and the world around us through writing.

# II

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## Examining the World-as-Text

## Everyone's Got an Opinion: Writing Op-Ed Essays

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[When we read literature] we become more intense, richer, more complicated, happier, and more lucid than we are in the constrained routine of ordinary life. When we close the book and abandon literary fiction, we return to actual existence and compare it to the splendid land we just left. What a disappointment awaits us! Yet a tremendous realization also awaits us, namely, that the fantasized life of the novel is better—more beautiful and more diverse, more comprehensible and more perfect—than the life we live while awake, a life conditioned by the limits and tedium of our condition. (303)

This passage from Mario Vargas Llosa's essay "Why Literature?" is perhaps the most eloquent defense of reading I have ever come across. Literature, and especially literary fiction, Vargas Llosa argues, helps us understand the world by bringing the issues of our lives into greater relief. Literature says nothing to the complacent, to the self-satisfied. Rather, literature offers model worlds and exemplary characters that invite us to measure ourselves and our environment against a set of ideals. Not even dystopian literature, such as *Brave New World*, makes us feel relieved that we do not live in a horrific world; rather, it reminds us how far we've fallen from our own former ideals.

In this chapter, I explicitly consider how literature helps us better understand our everyday lives. For the assignment at the center of this exploration, students write commentaries, modeled on newspaper op-ed pieces (essays found *opposite* the editorial page). These are short essays on contemporary issues that appear in almost all daily newspapers. I allow students to write on almost any topic as long as they are truly invested in it—and as long as their positions are grounded in factual detail. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, "Everyone's entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts."

Since newspapers are the dominant genre for this form, the paper topic must also be a current event. Like a newspaper editor might, I allow students to write about past, even distant, events, as long as there is a pressing occasion that makes the topic relevant again. For example, a former student once wrote about

the American hostages taken during the Iranian Revolution on the thirtieth anniversary of their release. Without the presence of this momentous anniversary, the topic would not be immediately relevant (or *newsworthy*) to readers.

Using literature as a lens through which to see current events more clearly is widely practiced in newspaper writing. A few years ago, Nicholas Kristof, a regular op-ed writer for the *New York Times*, wrote a fascinating piece on the Bush presidency called “Et Tu, George?” In this column, Kristof uses literature—specifically Virgil, Thucydides, and Melville—as ancient shades returning to cast light upon what he saw as the arrogance of the Bush administration. “At a time,” Kristof writes, “when we hear the siren calls of moral clarity, the classics almost invariably emphasize the importance of moral nuance, and appreciation for complexity, the need for humility.” The column itself is remarkable for asserting the timeliness of the timeless classics, but even more so for Kristof’s sign-off. There, he asks his readers, “Are there other classics beyond *Moby-Dick* or *The Aeneid* that you think would be appropriate analogies for President Bush and Iraq?” Hundreds of responses flooded in within the next couple of days (including, I was thrilled to learn, *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*, two works I was teaching that quarter).

It is critical to let students know that this sort of writing is found every week in newspapers and magazines, on radio and TV. And I encourage them to read additional op-ed columns as models during the two to three weeks we spend writing them. The only difference here is that we are commenting on current events through the lens of literature. As Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, “What news! How much more important to know what was never old” (76).

I have used the assignment with a number of different texts, but following is the assignment I passed out after my students and I studied *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*:

*Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* are plays about character, choices, and consequences. Through the challenges his characters confront, Sophocles raises questions about human beings and their relationships with the gods/fate, with authority figures, and with their families. While he may not have anticipated society’s problems in all their technological complexity, he did recognize gender struggles, identity confusion, sibling rivalry, and the conflict between loyalty to ourselves and loyalty to our religion or to our country. In what ways do you see Sophocles’s plays—written in the 5th century BC—still speaking to us today?

Write a commentary analyzing a current or recent issue/event/trend that suggests a theme from one of the two plays. Consider the play to be an

ancient beacon—light from a distant star, perhaps—that sheds light on an issue we are wrestling with, illuminating an angle we may be too blind to see in our modern age. Provide only the necessary background for a well-educated audience already familiar with the play’s plot. (Anyone who considers him- or herself to be well-educated knows these plays.)

## Warming Up to Commentary

Right after passing out the assignment sheet, I bring in a stack of newspapers (local papers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*) and magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* and show students where to find op-ed examples. It’s important for students to become familiar with the form, but with these examples I also want to stress the range of possible topics and the currency of this sort of writing. People practice this writing in the “real world” on a daily basis.

Writers might approach the commentary in one of two ways: students might think about issues they care deeply about and then consider literary analogues, or they might use literature as a springboard to think about political issues. One year I started with this simple warm-up exercise featuring quotes from *Oedipus*:

Read the following passages from our text and find contemporary parallels between the events of the play and current events in the world of sports, politics, entertainment, or even local/personal examples:

1. “Mock me for that, go on, and you’ll reveal my greatness” (line 502)
2. “I never look / To judge the ones in power” (592–93)
3. “I don’t know / And when I don’t, I keep quiet” (635)
4. “When my enemy moves against me quickly, / Plots in secret, I must move quickly too, I must / I plot and pay him back” (693–95)

For the first item listed, for example, students mentioned deposed Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich, singer Kanye West, and star wide receiver Terrell Owens right off the bat. For the second item, students cited fallen US soldier and former NFL star Pat Tillman, head basketball coaches like Rick Pitino, and even local school board officials. The third item suggested in-fighting in the White House, sports clubhouses, and even feuding rap stars like 50 Cent. It’s important to allow students to explore almost any area they are interested in as long as there is a potential audience.

One of the best features of commentary writing is that it forces students to think about possible publication venues. Who might want or need to hear what we have to say? As they read commentaries I pass out, as well as those they discover on their own in print or online, I ask them to think about the intended audience and the assumptions writers make about these audiences. This audience analysis then becomes a central feature in the proposals students write before drafting commentaries of their own.

### Proposals

**Commentary Topic(s):** Feel free to list more than one so long as you find corresponding passages from the play.

**Passage(s) from the text:** What lines most clearly speak to the issue you wish to address?

**Target Audience:** Who might want or need to hear your commentary?

**Purpose:** What does your audience currently believe and how would you like to change their minds?

**Genre:** Who might be interested in publishing your commentary? What makes that source ideal?

After students hand in their proposals, I return them with comments designed to help them focus their ideas about the issue and about the passages from the play with which they hope to elucidate the issue. It has always paid off to hold these proposals to rigorous standards in order to guarantee that the papers will be successful. Here are some examples from my students.

#### Michael Phelps' Greek Tragedy

No, the title of this editorial doesn't refer to the mere 6 gold medals Michael Phelps won in the 2004 Olympics in Athens. Rather it refers to just how Michael Phelps made headlines once again this week, which wasn't due to one of those dominating swimming performances we have come to expect from the Olympic champion. Rather this time it was for something completely removed from the world of sports. He has confirmed the validity of a photo released by a British tabloid that pictures him smoking from a marijuana bong. To most, this headline is shocking. Phelps' accomplishments in the swimming world, including winning a record 8 gold medals this past summer in Beijing, have made him seem rather superhuman, a swimming god among mere mortals. But Phelps would do well to remember that he is not a God, not above the law. During his 3-month ban

from the sport, he might consider reading up on the Classics, as he is starting to resemble Creon, a tragic Greek character from Sophocles' play *Antigone*.

Throughout most of this play, Phelps' fictitious counterpart, the newly crowned King Creon, is displayed as someone who has become drunk with power, believing that his word is law above that of the gods, who afford proper burial to family members. At one point in a heated argument, he even exclaims, "The city is the king's—that's the law!" Creon, just like Phelps, acts in an arrogant manner that shows an ethical and moral disregard for the laws that his society lives by. This behavior eventually costs Creon everything, stripping him of both his son and his wife. So far, Phelps' lapses in judgment have not affected his swimming, rather they have only threatened his pocketbook, as he has lost at least one endorsement deal over this scandal so far, but his public mistakes will have farther reaching consequences than risk to his income.

Phelps is probably the most dominant athlete of our time, and as such, he has become a role model to young kids everywhere. They look up to him as a model athlete, and his actions suggest to those with dreams of the Olympics that illegal drug use is okay. As much as he may believe that he has a golden ticket to do whatever he likes, including abusing the faith that kids have in him as their role model, he had better know that the public will eventually lose patience with him, regardless of his successes in the pool, just as Creon's son lost patience with him in the play.

To see this flaw in such a larger than life character like Phelps is even more surprising when his rigorous lifestyle of eating, sleeping, and swimming (and not doing much else) is considered. But it seems as though his relentless training probably caused this error in judgment, as this is not the first time he has made a stupid decision regarding drug use following an amazing Olympic performance. Though not many outside of the swimming world would be able to recall his arrest for drunk driving in 2004, shortly after his 6 gold medal performances in Athens, it, along with his latest foray into public drug use, reveal a disturbing character flaw developing in Phelps. Hopefully he will heed the dark warning given at the end of the play, "The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate, and at long last those blows will teach us wisdom." If he does take this lesson from ancient literature and change his ways, he can avoid a tragic downfall worthy only of the Classics, as so many other star athletes before him have failed to do.

—Michael, grade 12

The opening word of this essay, *No*, already shows the author's argumentative engagement with the audience. The word *mere* in the opening sentence is also nicely full of ironic attitude. The end of the first paragraph offers a nod to

the play, cagily calling Phelps a “swimming god” among mortals. In the following sentence, the author scolds Phelps (a common op-ed tone) by saying, “Phelps would do well to remember. . . .” In the conclusion, Michael deftly borrows from the chorus to “pass judgment” on Phelps. In other words, the chorus speaks for the author here in condemning the “words of the proud.”

### Battle Against the Genders

“Woman once made equal to man becomes his superior”—Socrates

Last Thursday, President Obama signed a bill, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, requiring equal pay for women. Although Lilly Ledbetter, the inspiration for the legislation, will not receive the money she deserves for her years of substandard pay, she can look to a different kind of satisfaction: “Goodyear will never have to pay me what it cheated out of me. In fact, I will never see a cent. But with the president’s signature today I have an even richer reward.” As she enters retirement, Ledbetter, and every other woman in America, can enjoy her triumph over discriminating employers.

Lilly Ledbetter finally completed a very tiresome journey that proved in times of trouble, we often look to women. And let’s be honest—most men fear this. It weakens their historical role in society as the dominant sex. So, perhaps it was not so surprising that Lilly Ledbetter discovered, after a 19-year career as a supervisor, that she was being paid less than her male coworkers at Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. *God forbid* that women earn as much as men. This is not a new story. In discriminating against women, Ledbetter’s stand against her employer recalls the misogyny in Sophocles’ play, *Antigone*. Creon, King of Thebes, could not believe that a *woman*, Antigone, had disregarded his decree. Creon argues, “We must defend the men who live by law, never let some woman triumph over us.” Goodyear has similarly cared less about fairness than about Ledbetter’s gender.

Discrimination against women has been occurring since ancient Greek times and before. Women have traveled a long road to change their demeaning fate. Lilly Ledbetter is one of a long line of women who have come forth to fight against our “superiors” for equality. Ledbetter could have reacted as did Antigone’s hopeless sister, Ismene: “Remember we are women, we’re not born to contend with men.” Instead, Ledbetter chose a much tougher route. She took her case all the way to the Supreme Court, battling a huge company that would rather fight to the death than pay a woman the same as a man.

In fact, our new President is happy that Ledbetter decided to contend with men. “It is fitting that with the very first bill I sign—the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act—we are upholding one of this nation’s first principles: that we are all cre-

ated equal and each deserve a chance to pursue our own version of happiness,” Obama proudly stated. This tangible equality is something that ancient Greek women could never have dreamed of. Creon just wouldn’t have it.

Lilly Ledbetter danced with the President at the inauguration. With a new leader in office, her rights would be considered, and personal satisfaction ultimately granted. Antigone, unfortunately, doesn’t win against Creon, and her daring and rebellious actions did not give any justice to women. Ledbetter similarly lost (her money) to Goodyear, but she at least lived to see her persistence result in a lasting future benefit for all women in the workplace.

—Margaret, grade 12

This author immediately establishes how current the event is by opening with the phrase “Last Thursday.” She succinctly relates the terms of the new law in the first paragraph before establishing a link to the play. In that second paragraph, she offers some nice editorializing attitude—“let’s be honest” and “God forbid”—to reveal her feelings on the issue of gender discrimination. The second of those phrases also offers a way into the play, as Antigone chooses her duty to the gods over her civic duty. The conclusion of this essay returns to the opening, contrasting their fates and the effects Ledbetter and Antigone had on their respective populaces.

### **Blind Truth**

The American people and the international community have spoken and our President has failed to listen. The signs have been clear: the mid-term elections, the Iraq Study Group, retired generals, and National Intelligence Estimate; it is time to end our occupation of Iraq. Despite the overwhelming support for a troop withdrawal (65% of Americans) the President has announced he will send 21,000 more troops to Iraq. His latest plan yet again shows his inability to compromise and listen to anyone but himself, much like Oedipus in the Sophocles play. Like President Bush, Oedipus is ruling a country distraught with the status quo, yet fails to listen to others’ expertise that tell him he killed Laius, which is causing the chaos in Thebes. They both discount others’ wisdom and trust their gut because the truth is too difficult to stomach.

These men were not always weak and close-minded leaders. In the days following 9/11, President Bush showed the strength and courage needed to heal a nation, and with formidable national and international support he fought to keep our country safe. Oedipus too was revered by his people. Amongst the turmoil in Thebes he was summoned to help his people, “Your country calls you savior now for your zeal, your actions years ago” (161). These men are capable of great feats, but fail as Commander-in-Chiefs when they go it alone.

But to truly understand the gravity of both situations, one must look back to the root cause, the lies surrounding both the invasion of Iraq and the killing of Laius. They have been told so well, they were seen as conventional wisdom. Oedipus began to understand his actions when Creon explains why the truth has gone untold, “She [The Riddling Sphinx] . . . persuaded us to let the mystery go” (166). Vice President Cheney is this nation’s Riddling Sphinx because from early on he moved focus away from faulty intelligence. Cheney reassured us invading Iraq would be like stealing candy or health insurance from a baby, there was nothing to worry about. On September 14th, 2003, on “Meet the Press” our Vice President reassured the American people that our troops “would be greeted as liberators” and he has continuously told us staying in Iraq is making us safer. Woops. Common sense and bipartisan research tells us both of Cheney’s claims have been dead wrong.

Well Mr. President, Creon has arrived, the truth is clear. Your policy was flawed and your new escalation will be no different. The wisdom that lies in Creon and Tiresias has appeared in front of you in the form of the Iraq Study Group Report and the National Intelligence Estimate. Now it’s up to you, George, will you listen? Your country hopes you will.

Like Oedipus you are currently refuting the wise men around you. The truth hurts, there’s no doubt about it, but you must once again show your strength and leadership and employ common sense. The more you refute the truth the more it will come, and the more troops you send the more violence you will create. As we wait in the constant eve of the troop escalation, be like Oedipus, Mr. President, and accept the truth. Listen. Listen to the evidence, the international community, and your country. Accept responsibility for your actions and act now to end this crisis in the Middle East. This takes courage and strength, but our soldiers’ lives depend on it.

—Henry, grade 12

This essay displays both a strong voice (phrases like “woops” and “dead wrong”) and a clear sense of conciliation. The author applauds Bush’s Oedipus-like strength of character in the chaotic period just after 9/11. He does this to project a reasonable and balanced position for his readers and so that he can take Bush to task for his subsequent failures. The final paragraph offers an important conceit in many op-eds: direct address. The author switches to a second-person address, admonishing Bush and encouraging him to swifter action in bringing the war to an end.

While reading plays about arrogant people in power, it is common for students to analyze the actions of current political leaders. The Bush administration

was a common target for eight years, and disgraced Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich came along just in time for some terrific essays. I don't want to brag, but my home state of Illinois leads the nation in jailed politicians. University of Illinois at Chicago political science professor Dick Simpson says that since 1970, more than 1,500 Illinois politicians have been convicted on corruption charges. Luckily, bad behavior is not solely local. Political leaders and celebrities nationwide keep on obliging writers with fodder for terrific essays.

Because of this assignment's emphasis on publication and audience, I encourage students to send these commentaries out to local newspapers or to our own school newspaper. These pieces also make for great blog posts (more on that in Chapter 8). But I don't judge the success of the assignment on publication. Rather, I'm glad students have joined an ongoing conversation on an issue they care deeply about. Students are beginning to explore the world around them as a text they can not only analyze but also help shape.

Students often see little connection between their school lives and the lives they lead outside of school. Thesis-driven essays often further this disconnection by emphasizing form over content and by depersonalizing the relationship between writer and audience. By inviting students to mine their personal experiences, teachers can help students not only understand literature better, but also begin to make story-sense out of their own lives. All writing (and all reading) is ultimately autobiographical.

In *This Time It's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction*, John S. O'Connor encourages us to care as deeply about the texts of our students' personal lives as we do the lives of literary characters and the subject matter we teach in all classes. Rather than allow students to view school passively, as mere consumers of other people's stories, we need to explicitly invite students into the larger community of storytellers. This book features a diverse range of creative nonfiction writing assignments with authentic audiences—including writer's autobiography; writing about place; memoirs; op-ed essays; blogs; oral histories—and many vibrant examples of student writing.

"John O'Connor uncovers an encouraging truth: high school students can still become the masters of their own stories, as when they were young. They are now ready to reach more deeply into their unique experiences, if only their teachers would ask. O'Connor, with great poetic skill, shows us how this can be done."  
—Vivian Gussin Paley, author of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* and *The Boy on the Beach*

"John S. O'Connor has long coaxed beautiful writing from his students, teaching them how to explore and express themselves in ways that deepen their thinking about what they know. O'Connor's new book, *This Time It's Personal*, is a thorough and engaging guide to making creative nonfiction the stuff of great classes. It is also a manifesto that rightly proclaims students' need to write."  
—Ted C. Fishman, bestselling author, *China, Inc.* and *Shock of Gray*

"John O'Connor's new book on the teaching of writing is an important contribution to our field, rescuing classrooms from the empty formulas and dreary pedantry that infect most academic writing in schools. His inspiring and pedagogically sophisticated program of writing instruction carefully guides teachers in developing lessons through which students will learn how the challenges of writing can be intellectually transformative and personally gratifying, while also ensuring student success in any academic or knowledge-making community."  
—Sheridan Blau, Teachers College, Columbia University, author of *The Literature Workshop*

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