



Before Papers Come Paragraphs
Introductory Unit:
Page One—The Very Beginning

The Denim *Beret*:
a writing school
for teens

LESSON 3

Elbow Grease and Black Berets: The Dual Nature of Writing

This sample begins after preliminary information.

Introduction

As a kid, I both loved and despised writing. On one hand it was sheer joy...as long as I was left alone to follow my muse in my own way. In fact, for me a new notebook was as delightful a treat as candy, and filling it with my stories and poems was one of my favorite ways to play. In fact, I often preferred staying in the cafeteria to write during recess, while my classmates opted for the playground. Yes, I suppose I was a little weird!

The joy I found in writing drained out of me in English class, though, the one place it should have been nurtured. In elementary school I enjoyed most of my assignments, because grades did not yet matter to me and the work was usually fun. In junior high,

however, that began to change, as the assignments became more difficult, more strictly evaluated, and less interesting. By the time I was in college, I found writing to be as much of a chore as most of my peers did. While it is true that my teachers sometimes gave creative freedom, too, their focus was on teaching us how to write with clarity, logic, and thoroughness.

I responded to this straitjacket by becoming a little like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a famous literary character with a split personality. Left to myself, I was free-spirited, whimsical, and confident on the page. In school, however, I became a slave to the rules of writing, always more focused on “doing it right” than on remaining true to my creative spirit. I was so anxious to please my teacher that all my confidence leaked out of my pen and completely missed the page. Any power my writing might have had was lost. Although it was technically good enough to earn mostly A’s, my voice became wooden and stilted. Worse, as time passed, my playful side began to dry up, too, and I didn’t write as much for fun. It wasn’t that I no longer wanted to. I couldn’t. Regrettably, I was long out of college before I was able to overcome my massive writer’s block and enjoy myself again.

Lesson

Looking back on my own experience, it is my hope that academic writing will be different for you. This is why I chose to spend a whole lesson on the topic. Before you settle down to study any major subject, it is important to step back and really look at it, to understand it and prepare yourself for a very deep dive. Writing, in particular, should be approached with care, because it is rich in power and possibility. Have you ever heard the saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword?” It’s true!

Those who wield the pen and know how to use it have the ability to change our world in ways the sword never can. While the sword can force change by placing the strong in positions of authority over the weak, the pen can move hearts and change minds. It can call people to action, lead souls to faith, educate the ignorant, fill minds with new ideas, and carry stories through time and space. In the hands of a masterful writer, the pen is a mighty tool.

So that you can learn to make use of this tool yourself, it is important to understand that writing has two natures—two personalities, so to speak—and you need to be able to

handle both well if you want to be a good writer. In the title to this lesson I mentioned “elbow grease” and “black berets.” To me, these are symbols of the two natures of writing. On the one hand, elbow grease stands for the “craft” of writing. This includes its rules, structures, forms, and techniques. On the other hand, black berets—those oh-so-French little hats—stand for the “art” of writing, the creative and beautiful aspects that have the power to touch the world. In writing, just as in any art, being attentive to both “craft” and “art” is necessary for producing excellent work.

End of sample