LEAVING OTHER LIVES

The selections here examine how different people, places, times, and cultures affect who and what any individual becomes. This chapter explores reasons for going (or not going) to college, how formal education may or may not prepare students for adult life, the values of learning on one’s own, and personal experiences of overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.

READING SELECTIONS

from *Up from Slavery*
Incurring My Mother’s Displeasure
from *One Writer’s Beginnings*
from *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*
Saved
Miss Rinehart’s Paddle
50% Chance of Lightning
Somewhere in Minnesota
LD
School’s Out: One Young Man
Puzzles Over His Future Without College
Eighth-Grade Final Exam: Salina, Kansas, 1895
This Was the Assignment: Disability Culture
This Was the Assignment: College Ain’t Cheap
Up from Slavery

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) was a U.S. educator who urged blacks to attempt to uplift themselves through education and economic advancement. He was born in Franklin County, Virginia, the son of a slave. From 1872 to 1875, Washington attended a newly founded school for blacks, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University). In 1879, he became an instructor at Hampton. The school was so successful that, in 1881, Washington was appointed principal of a black school in Tuskegee, Alabama (now Tuskegee University).

The sight of it seemed to give me a new life. I felt that a new kind of existence had now begun—that life would now have a new meaning.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. What are some clues to the time and place?
2. The author had no idea where Hampton was or how much tuition cost. What circumstances might have led the author to have such a desire to go to college?
3. Recall a time when you felt proud of yourself for learning, simply for the sake of acquiring knowledge. What led to this?

Notwithstanding my success at Mrs. Ruffner’s I did not give up the idea of going to the Hampton Institute. In the fall of 1872 I determined to make an effort to get there, although, as I have stated, I had no definite idea of the direction in which Hampton was, or of what it would cost to go there. I do not think that any one thoroughly sympathized with me in my ambition to go to Hampton unless it was my mother, and she was troubled with a grave fear that I was starting out on a ‘wild-goose chase.’ At any rate, I got only a half-hearted consent from her that I might start. The small amount of money that I had earned had been consumed by my stepfather and the remainder of the family, with the exception of a very few dollars, and so I had very little with which to buy clothes and pay my traveling expenses. My brother John helped me all that he could, but of course that was not a great deal, for his work was in the coal-mine, where he did not earn much, and most of what he did earn went in the direction of paying the household expenses.

Perhaps the thing that touched and pleased me most in connection with my starting for Hampton was the interest that many of the older coloured people took
in the matter. They had spent the best days of their lives in slavery, and hardly expected to live to see the time when they would see a member of their race leave home to attend a boarding school. Some of these older people would give me a nickel, others a quarter, or a handkerchief.

Finally the great day came, and I started for Hampton. I had only a small, cheap satchel that contained what few articles of clothing I could get. My mother at the time was rather weak and broken in health. I hardly expected to see her again, and thus our parting was all the more sad. She, however, was very brave through it all. At that time there were no through trains connecting that part of West Virginia with eastern Virginia. Trains ran only a portion of the way, and the remainder of the distance was traveled by stage-coaches.

The distance from Malden to Hampton is about five hundred miles. I had not been away from home many hours before it began to grow painfully evident that I did not have enough money to pay my fare to Hampton. One experience I shall long remember. I had been traveling over the mountains most of the afternoon in an old-fashioned stage-coach, when, late in the evening, the coach stopped for the night at a common, unpainted house called a hotel. All the other passengers except myself were whites. In my ignorance I supposed that the little hotel existed for the purpose of accommodating the passengers who traveled on the stage-coach. The difference that the colour of one’s skin would make I had not thought anything about. After all the other passengers had been shown rooms and were getting ready for supper, I shyly presented myself before the man at the desk. It is true I had practically no money in my pocket with which to pay for bed or food, but I had hoped in some way to beg my way into the good graces of the landlord, for at that season in the mountains of Virginia the weather was cold, and I wanted to get indoors for the night. Without asking as to whether I had any money, the man at the desk firmly refused to even consider the matter of providing me with food or lodging. This was my first experience in finding out what the colour of my skin meant. In some way I managed to keep warm by walking about, and so got through the night. My whole soul was so bent upon reaching Hampton that I did not have time to cherish any bitterness toward the hotelkeeper.

By walking, begging rides both in wagons and in the cars, in some way, after a number of days, I reached the city of Richmond, Virginia, about eighty-two miles from Hampton. When I reached there, tired, hungry, and dirty, it was late in the night. I had never been in a large city, and this rather added to my misery. When I reached Richmond, I was completely out of money. I had not a single acquaintance in the place, and, being unused to city ways, I did not know where to go. I applied at several places for lodging, but they all wanted money, and that was what I did not have. Knowing nothing else better to do, I walked the streets. In doing this I passed by many food-stands where fried chicken and half-moon apple pies were piled high and made to present a most tempting appearance. At that time it seemed to me that I would have promised all that I expected to possess in the future to have gotten hold of one of those chicken legs or one of those pies. But I could not get either of these, nor anything else to eat.
CHAPTER ONE Where We’re Coming From

I must have walked the streets till after midnight. At last I became so exhausted that I could walk no longer. I was tired, I was hungry, I was everything but discouraged. Just about the time when I reached extreme physical exhaustion, I came upon a portion of a street where the board sidewalk was considerably elevated. I waited for a few minutes, till I was sure that no passers-by could see me, and then crept under the sidewalk and lay for the night upon the ground, with my satchel of clothing for a pillow. Nearly all night I could hear the tramp of feet over my head. The next morning I found myself somewhat refreshed, but I was extremely hungry, because it had been a long time since I had had sufficient food.

As soon as it became light enough for me to see my surroundings I noticed that I was near a large ship, and that this ship seemed to be unloading a cargo of pig iron. I went at once to the vessel and asked the captain to permit me to help unload the vessel in order to get money for food. The captain, a white man, who seemed to be kindhearted, consented. I worked long enough to earn money for my breakfast, and it seems to me, as I remember it now, to have been about the best breakfast that I have ever eaten. My work pleased the captain so well that he told me if I desired I could continue working for a small amount per day. This I was very glad to do. I continued working on this vessel for a number of days. After buying food with the small wages I received there was not much left to add to the amount I must get to pay my way to Hampton. In order to economize in every way possible, so as to be sure to reach Hampton in a reasonable time, I continued to sleep under the same sidewalk that gave me shelter the first night I was in Richmond. Many years after that the coloured citizens of Richmond very kindly tendered me a reception at which there must have been two thousand people present. This reception was held not far from the spot where I slept the first night I spent in that city, and I must confess that my mind was more upon the sidewalk that first gave me shelter than upon the reception, agreeable and cordial as it was.

When I had saved what I considered enough money with which to reach Hampton, I thanked the captain of the vessel for his kindness, and started again. Without any unusual occurrence I reached Hampton, with a surplus of exactly fifty cents with which to begin my education. To me it had been a long, eventful journey; but the first sight of the large, three-story, brick school building seemed to have rewarded me for all that I had undergone in order to reach the place. If the people who gave the money to provide that building could appreciate the influence the sight of it had upon me, as well as upon thousands of other youths, they would feel all the more encouraged to make such gifts. It seemed to me to be the largest and most beautiful building I had ever seen. The sight of it seemed to give me a new life. I felt that a new kind of existence had now begun—that life would now have a new meaning. I felt that I had reached the promised land, and I resolved to let no obstacle prevent me from putting forth the highest effort to fit myself to accomplish the most good in the world.

As soon as possible after reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute, I presented myself before the head teacher for assignment to a class. Having been so long without proper food, a bath and change of clothing, I did not, of course, make
a very favourable impression upon her, and I could see at once that there were
doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting me as a student. I felt that
I could hardly blame her if she got the idea that I was a worthless loafer or tramp.
For some time she did not refuse to admit me, neither did she decide in my favour,
and I continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all the ways I could with
my worthiness. In the meantime I saw her admitting other students, and that added
greatly to my discomfort, for I felt, deep down in my heart, that I could do as well
as they, if I could only get a chance to show what was in me.

After some hours had passed, the head teacher said to me: “The adjoining
recitation-room needs sweeping. Take the broom and sweep it.” It occurred to me
at once that here was my chance. Never did I receive an order with more delight.
I knew that I could sweep, for Mrs. Ruffner had thoroughly taught me how to do
that when I lived with her.

I swept the recitation-room three times. Then I got a dusting-cloth and I dusted it
four times. All the woodwork around the walls, every bench, table, and desk, I went
over four times with my dusting-cloth. Besides, every piece of furniture had been
moved and every closet and corner in the room had been thoroughly cleaned. I had
the feeling that in a large measure my future depended upon the impression I made
upon the teacher in the cleaning of that room. When I was through, I reported to the
head teacher.

She was a ‘Yankee’ woman who knew just where to look for dirt. She went into
the room and inspected the floor and closets; then she took her handkerchief and
rubbed it on the woodwork about the walls, and over the table and benches. When
she was unable to find one bit of dirt on the floor, or a particle of dust on any of the
furniture, she quietly remarked, “I guess you will do to enter this institution.” I was
one of the happiest souls on earth. The sweeping of that room was my college
examination, and never did any youth pass an examination for entrance into Harvard
or Yale that gave him more genuine satisfaction. I have passed several examinations
since then, but I have always felt that this was the best one I ever passed.

I have spoken of my own experience in entering the Hampton Institute. Perhaps few, if any, had anything like the same experience that I had, but about that
same period there were hundreds who found their way to Hampton and other
institutions after experiencing something of the same difficulties that I went
through. The young men and women were determined to secure an education
at any cost.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. Washington learns several important lessons on his journey to Hampton.
What are some of them?

2. Washington says about a reception for him in Richmond, “This reception was
held not far from the spot where I slept the first night I spent in that city, and
I must confess that my mind was more upon the sidewalk that first gave me
shelter than upon the reception, agreeable and cordial as it was.” What might such a statement say about Washington?

3. Washington says of his first assignment from the head teacher, “The sweeping of that room was my college examination, and never did any youth pass an examination for entrance into Harvard or Yale that gave him more genuine satisfaction. I have passed several examinations since then, but I have always felt that this was the best one I ever passed.” What were some of the reasons this was so important to him?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Write a scene in which Washington, who is sleeping under the boardwalk on his way to Hampton, meets a man who attends college. Or, write a scene between Washington and another African-American man who has no aspirations for college.

2. Washington says of first seeing Hampton, “I felt that I had reached the promised land.” Why was education so important to him? Do you feel it is as important for you?

3. Find *Up from Slavery* and read Chapter 8, “Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen-House.” After reading the piece, compare/contrast Washington as a student and a teacher. What insights about education arise from your writing?
Incurring My Mother’s Displeasure

FROM THE SCHOOL DAYS OF AN INDIAN GIRL Zitkala-Sa

Zitkala-Sa (1876–1938) was a Sioux Indian. “Incurring My Mother’s Displeasure” appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1900. It is a part of her larger work, The School Days of an Indian Girl.

Thus, homeless and heavy-hearted, I began anew my life among strangers.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. What are some clues to the era?
2. The language and tone of this essay are very formal. Why might that be so?
3. Speculate on what causes prejudice among ethnic groups. What are some stereotypes, past or present, of Native Americans?

In the second journey to the East I had not come without some precautions. I had a secret interview with one of our best medicine men, and when I left his wigwam I carried securely in my sleeve a tiny bunch of magic roots. This possession assured me of friends wherever I should go. So absolutely did I believe in its charms that I wore it through all the school routine for more than a year. Then, before I lost my faith in the dead roots, I lost the little buckskin bag containing all my good luck.

At the close of this second term of three years I was the proud owner of my first diploma. The following autumn I ventured upon a college career against my mother’s will. I had written for her approval, but in her reply I found no encouragement. She called my notice to her neighbors’ children, who had completed their education in three years. They had returned to their homes, and were then talking English with the frontier settlers. Her few words hinted that I had better give up my slow attempt to learn the white man’s ways, and be content to roam over the prairies and find my living upon wild roots. I silenced her by deliberate disobedience.

Thus, homeless and heavy-hearted, I began anew my life among strangers.

As I hid myself in my little room in the college dormitory, away from the scornful and yet curious eyes of the students, I pined for sympathy. Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone West, to be nourished by my mother’s love, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice.

During the fall and winter seasons I scarcely had a real friend, though by that time several of my classmates were courteous to me at a safe distance. My mother had not yet forgiven my rudeness to her, and I had no moment for letter-writing.
By daylight and lamplight, I spun with reeds and thistles, until my hands were tired from their weaving, the magic design which promised me the white man's respect.

At length, in the spring term, I entered an oratorical contest among the various classes. As the day of competition approached, it did not seem possible that the event was so near at hand, but it came. In the chapel the classes assembled together, with their invited guests. The high platform was carpeted, and gaily festooned with college colors. A bright white light illumined the room and outlined clearly the great polished beams that arched the domed ceiling. The assembled crowds filled the air with pulsating murmurs. When the hour for speaking arrived all were hushed. But on the wall the old clock which pointed out the trying moment ticked calmly on.

One after another I saw and heard the orators. Still, I could not realize that they longed for the favorable decision of the judges as much as I did. Each contestant received a loud burst of applause, and some were cheered heartily. Too soon my turn came, and I paused a moment behind the curtains for a deep breath. After my concluding words, I heard the same applause that the others had called out.

Upon my retreating steps, I was astounded to receive from my fellow students a large bouquet of roses tied with flowing ribbons. With the lovely flowers I fled from the stage. This friendly token was a rebuke to me for the hard feelings I had borne them.

Later, the decision of the judges awarded me the first place. Then there was a mad uproar in the hall, where my classmates sang and shouted my name at the top of their lungs; and the disappointed students howled and brayed in fearfully dissonant tin trumpets. In this excitement, happy students rushed forward to offer their congratulations. And I could not conceal a smile when they wished to escort me in a procession to the students' parlor, where all were going to calm themselves. Thanking them for the kind spirit which prompted them to make such a proposition, I walked alone with the night to my own little room.

A few weeks afterward, I appeared as the college representative in another contest. This time the competition was among orators from different colleges in our state. It was held at the state capital, in one of the largest opera houses.

Here again was a strong prejudice against my people. In the evening, as the great audience filled the house, the student bodies began warring among themselves. Fortunately, I was spared witnessing any of the noisy wrangling before the contest began. The slurs against the Indian that stained the lips of our opponents were already burning like a dry fever within my breast.

But after the orations were delivered a deeper burn awaited me. There, before that vast ocean of eyes, some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a "squaw." Such worse than barbarian rudeness embittered me. While we waited for the verdict of the judges, I gleamed fiercely upon the throngs of palefaces. My teeth were hard set, as I saw the white flag still floating insolently in the air. Then anxiously we watched the man carry toward the stage the envelope containing the final decision.
There were two prizes given, that night, and one of them was mine!
The evil spirit laughed within me when the white flag dropped out of sight,
and the hands which furled it hung limp in defeat.

Leaving the crowd as quickly as possible, I was soon in my room. The rest of
the night I sat in an armchair and gazed into the crackling fire. I laughed no more
in triumph when thus alone. The little taste of victory did not satisfy a hunger in
my heart. In my mind I saw my mother far away on the Western plains, and she was
holding a charge against me.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. In what ways is Zitkala-Sa “homeless”?
2. Why would the narrator physically and spiritually separate herself from her
   people in order to go to college? What are some details from the story that
   support your opinion?
3. Read or reread the selection from Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery.
   How is Zitkala-Sa’s experience at college similar to Washington’s? How is it
different?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Imagine what happens when the narrator finally returns to her tribe. Write a
   reunion scene between Zitkala-Sa and her mother.
2. Recall a time when you purposely disobeyed your parents. What circumstances
   led to this? Write about the moment when you knew you would go against
   their wishes. What was the outcome?
3. The narrator feels isolated from her classmates because of their prejudice.
   Have you ever felt isolated from classmates, friends, or family? Write a scene
   describing your isolation or someone else’s.
One Writer’s Beginnings

Eudora Welty (1909–2001) received her bachelor of arts degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1929. She won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction with *The Optimist’s Daughter* in 1969. *One Writer’s Beginnings* was nominated for the 1983 National Book Critics Circle Award.

I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to.

**CRITICAL THINKING POINTS:** *As you read*

1. Pay attention to the things that are detailed in this essay. Why do you think the author chose the objects she did?
2. Pay attention to all the action in this essay. Why do you think she chose the actions she did?
3. Pay attention to the different ways in which the boys and girls are educated. How is this a sign of the times?

In our house on North Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi, where I was born, the oldest of three children, in 1909, we grew up to the striking of clocks. There was a mission-style oak grandfather clock standing in the hall, which sent its gong-like strokes through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and pantry, and up the sounding board of the stairwell. Through the night, it could find its way into our ears; sometimes, even on the sleeping porch, midnight could wake us up. My parents’ bedroom had a smaller striking clock that answered it. Though the kitchen clock did nothing but show the time, the dining room clock was a cuckoo clock with weights on long chains, on one of which my baby brother, after climbing on a chair to the top of the china closet, once succeeded in suspending the cat for a moment. I don’t know whether or not my father’s Ohio family, in having been Swiss back in the 1700s before the first three Welty brothers came to America, had anything to do with this; but we all of us have been time-minded all our lives. This was good at least for a future fiction writer, being able to learn so penetratingly, and almost first of all, about chronology. It was one of a good many things I learned almost without knowing it; it would be there when I needed it.

My father loved all instruments that would instruct and fascinate. His place to keep things was the drawer in the “library table” where lying on top of his folded
maps was a telescope with brass extensions, to find the moon and the Big Dipper after supper in our front yard, and to keep appointments with eclipses. There was a folding Kodak that was brought out for Christmas, birthdays, and trips. In the back of the drawer you could find a magnifying glass, a kaleidoscope, and a gyroscope kept in a black buckram box, which he would set dancing for us on a string pulled tight. He had also supplied himself with an assortment of puzzles composed of metal rings and intersecting links and keys chained together, impossible for the rest of us, however patiently shown, to take apart; he had an almost childlike love of the ingenious.

In time, a barometer was added to our dining room wall; but we didn’t really need it. My father had the country boy’s accurate knowledge of the weather and its skies. He went out and stood on our front steps first thing in the morning and took a look at it and a sniff. He was a pretty good weather prophet.

“Well, I’m not,” my mother would say with enormous self-satisfaction. He told us children what to do if we were lost in a strange country. “Look for where the sky is brightest along the horizon,” he said. “That reflects the nearest river. Strike out for a river and you will find habitation.” Eventualities were much on his mind. In his care for us children he cautioned us to take measures against such things as being struck by lightning. He drew us all away from the windows during the severe electrical storms that are common where we live. My mother stood apart, scoffing at caution as a character failing. “Why, I always loved a storm! High winds never bothered me in West Virginia! Just listen at that! I wasn’t a bit afraid of a little lightning and thunder! I’d go out on the mountain and spread my arms wide and run in a good big storm!”

So I developed a strong meteorological sensibility. In the years ahead when I wrote stories, atmosphere took its influential role from the start. Commotion in the weather and the inner feelings aroused by such a hovering disturbance emerged connected in dramatic form. (I tried a tornado first, in a story called “The Winds.”)

From our earliest Christmas times, Santa Claus brought us toys that instruct boys and girls (separately) how to build things—stone blocks cut to the castle-building style, Tinker Toys, and Erector sets. Daddy made for us himself elaborate kites that needed to be taken miles out of town to a pasture long enough (and my father was not afraid of horses and cows watching) for him to run with and get up on a long cord to which my mother held the spindle, and then we children were given it to hold, tugging like something alive at our hands. They were beautiful, sound, shapely box kites, smelling delicately of office glue for their entire short lives. And of course, as soon as the boys attained anywhere near the right age, there was an electric train, the engine with its pea-sized working headlight, its line of cars, tracks equipped with switches, semaphores, its station, its bridges, and its tunnel, which blocked off all other traffic in the upstairs hall. Even from downstairs, and through the cries of excited children, the elegant rush and click of the train could be heard through the ceiling, running around and around its figure eight.

All of this, but especially the train, represents my father’s fondest beliefs—in progress, in the future. With these gifts, he was preparing his children.

And so was my mother with her different gifts.
I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me. She'd read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in her rocker together, which ticked in rhythm as we rocked, as though we had a cricket accompanying the story. She'd read to me in the dining room on winter afternoons in front of the coal fire, with our cuckoo clock ending the story with “Cuckoo,” and at night when I'd got in my own bed. I must have given her no peace. Sometimes she read to me in the kitchen while she sat churning, and the churning sobbed along with any story. It was my ambition to have her read to me while I churned; once she granted my wish, but she read off my story before I brought her butter. She was an expressive reader. When she was reading “Puss in Boots,” for instance, it was impossible not to know that she distrusted all cats.

It had been startling and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by people, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass. Yet regardless of where they came from, I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them—with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself. Still illiterate, I was ready for them, committed to all the reading I could give them.

Neither of my parents had come from homes that could afford to buy many books, but though it must have been something of a strain on his salary, as the youngest officer in a young insurance company, my father was all the while carefully selecting and ordering away for what he and mother thought we children should grow up with. They bought first for the future.

Besides the bookcase in the living room, which was always called “the library,” there were the encyclopedia tables and dictionary stand under windows in our dining room. Here to help us grow up arguing around the dining room table were the *Unabridged Webster*, the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia*, the *Lincoln Library of Information*, and later the *Book of Knowledge*. And the year we moved into our new house, there was room to celebrate it with the new 1925 edition of the Britannica, which my father, his face always deliberately turned toward the future, was of course disposed to think better than any previous edition.

In “the library,” inside the mission-style bookcase with its three diamond-latticed glass doors, with my father's Morris chair and the glass-shaded lamp on its table beside it, were books I could soon begin on—and I did, reading them all alike and as they came, straight down their rows, top shelf to bottom. There was the set of Stoddard's Lectures, in all its late nineteenth-century vocabulary and vignettes of peasant life and quaint beliefs and customs, with matching halftone illustrations: Vesuvius erupting, Venice by moonlight, gypsies glimpsed by their campfires. I didn't know then the clue they were to my father's longing to see the rest of the world. I read straight through his other love-from-afar: the Victrola Book of the Opera, with opera after opera in synopsis, with portraits in costume of Melba, Caruso, Galli-Curci, and Geraldine Farrar, some of whose voices we could listen to on our Red Seal records.
My mother read secondarily for information; she sank as a hedonist into novels. She read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him. The novels of her girlhood that had stayed on in her imagination, besides those of Dickens and Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, were *Jane Eyre*, *Trilby*, *The Woman in White*, *Green Mansions*, *King Solomon's Mines*. Marie Corelli's name would crop up but I understood she had gone out of favor with my mother, who had only kept Ardath out of loyalty. In time she absorbed herself in Galsworthy, Edith Wharton, above all in Thomas Mann of the Joseph volumes.

*St. Elmo* was not in our house; I saw it often in other houses. This wildly popular Southern novel is where all the Edna Earles in our population started coming from. They're all named for the heroine, who succeeded in bringing a dissolute, sinning roué and atheist of a lover (St. Elmo) to his knees. My mother was able to forgo it. But she remembered the classic advice given to rose growers on how to water their bushes long enough: “Take a chair and St. Elmo.”

To both my parents I owe my early acquaintance with a beloved Mark Twain. There was a full set of Mark Twain and a short set of Ring Lardner in our bookcase, and they were the volumes that in time united us all, parents and children.

Reading everything that stood before me was how I came upon a worn old book without a back that had belonged to my father as a child. It was called *Sanford and Merton*. Is there anyone left who recognizes it, I wonder? It is the famous moral tale written by Thomas Day in the 1780s, but of him no mention is made on the title page of this book; here it is *Sanford and Merton in Words of One Syllable* by Mary Godolphin. Here are the rich boy and the poor boy and Mr. Barlow, their teacher and interlocutor, in long discourses alternating with dramatic scenes—danger and rescue allotted to the rich and the poor respectively. It may have only words of one syllable, but one of them is “quoth.” It ends with not one but two morals, both engraved on rings: “Do what you ought, come what may,” and “If we would be great, we must first learn to be good.”

This book was lacking its front cover, the back held on by strips of pasted paper, now turned golden, in several layers, and the pages stained, flecked, and tattered around the edges; its garish illustrations had come unattached but were preserved, laid in. I had the feeling even in my heedless childhood that this was the only book my father as a little boy had had of his own. He had held onto it, and might have gone to sleep on its coverless face: he had lost his mother when he was seven. My father had never made any mention to his own children of the book, but he had brought it along with him from Ohio to our house and shelved it in our bookcase.

My mother had brought from West Virginia that set of Dickens; those books looked sad, too—they had been through fire and water before I was born, she told me, and there they were, lined up—as I later realized, waiting for me.

I was presented, from as early as I can remember, with books of my own, which appeared on my birthday and Christmas morning. Indeed, my parents could not give me books enough. They must have sacrificed to give me on my sixth or seventh birthday—it was after I became a reader for myself—the ten-volume set of *Our Wonder World*. These were beautifully made, heavy books I would lie down with on the floor in front of the dining room hearth, and more often than the rest volume 5, *Every Child's*
CHAPTER ONE Where We’re Coming From

Story Book, was under my eyes. There were the fairy tales—Grimm, Andersen, the English, the French, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”; and there was Aesop and Reynard the Fox; there were the myths and legends, Robin Hood, King Arthur, and St. George and the Dragon, even the history of Joan of Arc; a whack of Pilgrim’s Progress and a long piece of Gulliver. They all carried their classic illustrations. I located myself in these pages and could go straight to the stories and pictures I loved; very often “The Yellow Dwarf” was the first choice, with Walter Crane’s Yellow Dwarf in full color making his terrifying appearance flanked by turkeys. Now that volume is as worn and backless and hanging apart as my father’s poor Sanford and Merton. The precious page with Edward Lear’s “Jumblies” on it has been in danger of slipping out for all these years. One measure of my love for Our Wonder World was that for a long time I wondered if I would go through fire and water for it as my mother had done for Charles Dickens; and the only comfort was to think I could ask my mother to do it for me.

I believe I’m the only child I know of who grew up with this treasure in the house. I used to ask others, “Did you have Our Wonder World?” I’d have to tell them The Book of Knowledge could not hold a candle to it.

I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me—and as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting—into knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling, by way of the alphabet. They taught it to me at home in time for me to begin to read before starting to school. I believe the alphabet is no longer considered an essential piece of equipment for traveling through life. In my day it was the keystone to knowledge. You learned the alphabet as you learned to count to ten, as you learned “Now I lay me” and the Lord’s Prayer and your father’s and mother’s name and address and telephone number, all in case you were lost.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. What kinds of people are the narrator’s father and mother? How do you know that?
2. Compare and contrast what the father and the mother feel is important in an education.
3. What kinds of skills does Welty believe were important for her to learn as a writer?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Fill in the blank and write your own essay: “One ________________‘s Beginnings.”
2. Use Welty’s essay as a model to write your own description of the house in which you grew up.
3. Welty says, “It had been startling and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by people.” What in your life has held that kind of power over you? Why?
In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, I had sat on my father's shoulders, my hands secured in his hair, and I listened to him talk about how we might have a brother, how we would become educated, and how our lives would go places far beyond the horizons we saw—in America.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. What role does education play in Yang's life? As first-generation Americans, why is school so important for Yang and her siblings?
2. What surprises you about Yang's childhood?
3. What elements of this memoir might be categorized as an "immigrant story"?

... We had been in America for almost ten years. I was nearly fifteen, and Dawb had just gotten her driver's license. The children were growing up. We needed a new home—the apartment was too small. There was hardly room to breathe when the scent of jasmine rice and fish steamed with ginger mingled heavily with the scent of freshly baked pepperoni pizza—Dawb's favorite food. We had been looking for a new house for nearly six months.

It was in a poor neighborhood with houses that were ready to collapse—wooden planks falling off, color chipping away, sloping porches—and huge, old trees. There was a realty sign in the front yard, a small patch of green in front of the white house. It was one story, with a small open patio and a single wide window framed by black panels beside a black door. There was a short driveway that climbed up a little hill. No garage. It looked out of time. The house should have been on the prairie, in the early days of Minnesota. It looked liked it belonged to Laura and Mary Ingalls and a time when girls wore cotton skirts with little flowers
and bonnets to keep the sun away and carried pails with their sandwiches inside. The team of two old trees in the front yard dwarfed the house. From the car, my imagination took flight. I never thought I would get a chance to live in a house that belonged to storybooks.

I asked my mom, “Are you sure this is only $36,500?”

“It was really $37,000 on the paper, but Dawb asked the man to lower the price for us and he agreed.”

“It looks like at least $70,000 to me.”

I couldn’t wait to get out of the car. We had been looking for houses a long time—some we had liked well enough; most we couldn’t afford. Now, this one that looked like a real antique was only $36,000. The deal was incredible. It felt like a miracle.

Together, we had scoured the city looking for a suitable home. My mother, father, and Dawb in the front, and the rest of us in the back, all our knees touching. We had looked all summer long, driving up and down the avenues, the corridors, the smaller streets, and the busy thoroughfares of St. Paul. On the days of fruitless hunting, my father would drive us past the mansions on Summit Avenue for inspiration. We were awed and discussed the merits of owning the structures before us, humongous and intimidating, haunting and invincible. We marveled at the bricks and the green lawns and the ivy climbing up the walls and windows.

Dawb and I posed creative arguments for why owning such a behemoth would never work for our family. These were the homes that we saw on television, the ones with the ghosts and the fun dramas, the ones with the 1980’s movie stars and their loose fitting suits. These were the homes with the secret drug addicts and the eating disorders. We’d much rather live in places where men carried beverages in brown bags and walked lopsided up and down the sidewalks and a child could kick an empty beer bottle just as conveniently as a rock. We had fun with our talk, but sometimes Mom and Dad got annoyed. These houses were supposed to inspire us to work extra hard in school.

The small house before us would work. It would be our first piece of America, the first home we would buy with the money our parents earned. We were full of eagerness. Some of our cousins had purchased houses already; others were looking, just like us. It felt like we were joining the future with the past, our dreams and our lives coming together. This would be the home that the children would dream about for years to come.

Up close, we could see that the wood of the house was falling apart in places. White paint had been applied to the parts where the old paint had chipped. The floor of the porch was rotting. The black panels on either side of the window made it look bigger that it was. But that afternoon there was a feeling like the house was special, like it would be ours for a long time. I walked through the front door, into a space that was small, like an elevator. Then I made a left and entered our first home of America: 437 East York Avenue.

The house had the simplest design I have ever encountered. After the elevator-sized reception area, there were three bigger rooms all connected, each with a
small bedroom to the right. There was single bathroom in between the second and third bedrooms. The first room was a designated living room. The second was an “anything-you-need-me-to-be” room (that would be used to fill capacity as a bedroom, playroom, study room, and eating room). The third was a kitchen with enough room in the center for a round dining table (a remnant of the old owners). Off the kitchen there was a door leading to an old pencil sharpener nailed in the wall. The realtor had said that the sharpener still worked. Also off the kitchen there was a small room with just enough space for a washer and drying machine and the requisite heavy-duty sink. The total area of the house was 950 square feet, and it was built in 1895. It was called a two-and-a-half bedroom house because the middle room had no closet. The entire structure smelled old, like the thrift shops we were frequenting less and less.

My mother and father were in disagreement over the house. My mother kept on hoping for better. My father's position was that we had to make do with what was before us. But they both felt that they could not afford better for us.

My father said, “We can hide from the rain and the snow in here.”

“Ah-huh,” we answered in various octaves.

“Someday maybe we can do better.”

We all knew he was referring to education. Someday when Dawb and I became educated, and the kids grew up and did well in school too, and my mother and father no longer had to work so hard just to get enough food and pay the heating bill. That is the someday my father was waiting for. It was the someday we were all waiting for.

We moved into the house in the fall, my first year of high school. Dawb was already attending Harding High School, an inner-city school where nearly fifty percent of the student body was multicultural—many of whom were Hmong. Naturally, I would attend Harding with her. She had helped me choose my classes; I would take all the International Baccalaureate classes that I could get into, and where I couldn't, I'd take the advanced placement or college prep courses. I had gone to a small junior high school, a math and science magnet in a white neighborhood with a few Hmong kids. Then I had done well in my classes; I discovered a formula I thought quite sacred: do the homework, go to class every day, and when in class, follow the teacher with your eyes. I was still whispering in school, but the teachers took it in stride. I felt ready for the life changes that high school would bring my way.

I was feeling a strong push to reinvent myself. Without my realizing, by the time high school had begun, I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I had been on simmer for too long. I wanted to bubble over the top and douse the confusing fire that burned in my belly. Or else I wanted to turn the stove off. I wanted to sit cool on the burners of life, lid on, and steady. I was ready for change, but there was so little in my life that I could adjust. So life took a blurry seat.

. . . .Dawb and I had decided long before that when the time came, we would strive for the University of Minnesota. We were hearing of Hmong doctors and lawyers, both men and women, all excelling in America, building successful lives.
for themselves, their mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. I had never actually met a Hmong doctor or lawyer, but they had clan names I recognized as clearly as I did my own: Vue, Thao, Vang, Xiong, Lee, Lor, Moua, Cha, Hang, Chang, Khang, Her, Chue, Pha, Kong, and Khue. Dawb and I wanted to add to the success of our clan in this growing list of Hmong people who had made lives for themselves and their families in America. We wanted to make the life journey of our family worth something. Our ambitions had grown: we contemplated changing not simply our own lives but the lives of poor children all over the world. And the key, we believed, was in school. But how far could we strive in school was unknown. We didn't tell anyone about our secret dreams.

Dawb had teachers who supported her all the way through. She had the kind of intelligence that a teacher could see (she looked every part the interested learner), could hear (her English had no accent), and could support (she soaked up information and processed it into her world for her use). I was lost, perpetually biting my lower lip: I didn't speak well or easily, and the link between what we were learning from books and living in life was harder for my mind to grasp.

In high school, this changed. I met a teacher who changed the way I saw myself in education. Her name was Mrs. Gallentin, and she opened up a possibility that I was special. She taught ninth grade English, where we read Romeo and Juliet and Nectar in the Sieve, as well as other literary classics. I sat near the front of the class and absorbed the books. Mrs. Gallentin had a red face and a dry sense of humor. She had little patience for kids who giggled or were fussy in their seat—students who didn't pay close enough attention to lessons and did not do their assignments on time. I had overly curvy, confident handwriting that was hard to read, and I did not have a computer, so reviewing my work was a slow process. She may have noticed me initially because of this, and her interest was compounded by both my silence and my serious approach to literature.

Mrs. Gallentin became impressed with me because I could tell the important parts of a book. I knew how to anticipate the questions on her tests. At first, I was convinced I could read her mind. But after a few thought experiments in class, I realized I was picking up understanding from the books, not from her. It was in this class that I wrote my first real essay in response to the question: Is the story of Romeo and Juliet a story of love or lust?

It took me all night long to think about the essay. I had no personal experience with love or lust. Some of my friends said that they were in love, but I was not convinced. The phone conversations they had with their boyfriends were mostly just listening to each other's breathing. After many false beginnings, I wrote about what mattered to me. I wrote about the love I knew: Love is the reason my mother and father stick together in a hard life when they might each have an easier one apart; love is the reason you choose a life with someone, and you don't turn back although your heart cries sometimes and your children see you cry and you wish out loud that things were easier. Love is getting up each day and fighting the same fight only to sleep that night in the same bed beside
the same person because long ago, when you were younger and you did not see so clearly, you had chosen them.

I wrote that we'll never know if Romeo and Juliet really loved because they never had the chance. I asserted that love only happened in life, not in literature because life is more complex. As soon as I wrote this essay, I started worrying about it—what if she didn't like it, what if she didn't agree, what if I had it all wrong. That was my first understanding of how writing worked, how it mattered to the writer, personally and profoundly.

I had written the essay out by hand first. I stayed up all night typing the essay on our gray typewriter at the dining table (it was the only surface in our house that was steady enough for us to really spread out our books and papers), slowly, with my index fingers (mistakes were costly). The sound of slow keys being clicked, first the right and then the left, eyes looking from keyboard to the page. Flexing careful fingers every few minutes. Trying to find a rhythm and a beat in the clicking of the keys, the mechanical whirl at the end of each line, the changing of paper. It took me a long time to think it through and follow the letters to the words, but the writing calmed something inside of me, it cooled my head: like water over a small burn in the pit of my mind. I watched eagerly as the third then fourth then fifth filled with typed letters.

My mother and father came home early in the morning. They had changed their work schedules entirely to the graveyard shift (the nominal increase in their wages was necessary to maintain the new house). They saw my eyes closing over my work and became convinced that I was their hardest working daughter. My heavy eyes followed the way they walked so tired around the kitchen, and I grew confident that I really did know love—that I had always known it. By morning, the exhausting work of writing was done. I turned it in to Mrs. Gallentin.

Mrs. Gallentin caught me in the hall later that day and said that my essay was beautiful. She said that I wrote more than an answer to the question; I was telling her the ways in which questions come from life and end in life. I had never thought of myself as a good writer. I liked stories, and in elementary school I had written gory tales about intestines coming out. I thought I was good at math and science (what my junior high school had been good at), but Mrs. Gallentin said that I had talent for literature. I didn't see it, but it pleased me to hear her say this. In the course of a semester, she opened up a real possibility that I could excel in high school and college because they were all about good reading and good writing.

I began to see a truth that my father had been asserting for a long time, long before America. In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, I had sat on my father's shoulders, my hands secured in his hair, and I listened to him talk about how we might have a brother, how we would become educated, and how our lives would go places far beyond the horizons we saw—in America. I looked at our lives, and how could I not believe? Beyond all the spoken wishes, a dream had even come true: eight years into America and we owned a house of our own.
CHAPTER ONE  Where We’re Coming From

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. Why does Yang say, “These houses were supposed to inspire us to work extra hard in school”?
2. How does Mrs. Gallentin change Yang’s life?
3. For the World War II and baby boomer generations, the American dream included owning one’s home. How do you think “the American dream” has changed for your generation?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Research the history of Hmong immigration to the United States and share your information with classmates.
2. Yang says that she found a formula for success that she called sacred: “do the homework, go to class every day, and when in class, follow the teacher with your eyes.” Why might this approach work for her (and for others)? Find research to support the relevance of her approach.
3. The United States is a country made up of immigrants. Talk to your parents or grandparents about your own family’s history. Write down what you find.
While serving seven years in prison on a burglary charge, Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little; 1925–1965) experienced a life-changing conversion to Islam, honed his reading and writing skills, and emerged as a dynamic political leader of Black Muslims. He was assassinated in 1965.

. . . months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. What do you know about Malcolm X? How does that “back story” influence your reading of this excerpt?
2. List some of the various motivations Malcolm X has for learning.
3. Malcolm X says, “Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened.” What are some of the elements of that world?

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad.”

Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I’ve said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn’t contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.
I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks.

I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary's first page right now, that “aardvark” springs into my head. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

I was so fascinated that I went on—I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet—and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors—usually Ella and Reginald—and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

The Norfolk Prison Colony's library was in the school building. A variety of classes was taught there by instructors who came from such places as Harvard and Boston universities. The weekly debates between inmate teams were also held in the school building. You would be astonished to know how worked up convict debaters and audiences would get over subjects like “Should Babies Be Fed Milk?”

Available on the prison library's shelves were books on just about every general subject. Much of the big private collection that Parkhurst had willed to the prison was still in crates and boxes in the back of the library—thousands of old books.
Some of them looked ancient: covers faded, old-time parchment-looking binding. Parkhurst, I’ve mentioned, seemed to have been principally interested in history and religion. He had the money and the special interest to have a lot of books that you wouldn’t have in general circulation. Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection.

As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand.

I read more in my room than the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum number of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten P.M. I would be outraged with the “lights out.” It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.

Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when “lights out” came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approaching footsteps, I jumped into bed and feigned sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes—until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets I had slept less than that.

1965

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. What kind of a teacher do you think Malcolm X would have been in the classroom? What in this piece leads you to believe the way you do?
2. Malcolm X refers to skipping words he didn’t know while he was reading as one of his “book-reading motions.” What are some others and are they as easily remedied?
3. What might have Malcolm X learned in the streets that served him well in this experience?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Malcolm X says, “I didn’t know which words I needed to learn.” Pick a page at random from a dictionary and write about any words you “need” to learn.
2. Compare and contrast this piece with the selection from *Up from Slavery* presented in this book. What do you think accounts for the similarities and differences in these pieces?

3. Compare and contrast this piece with the selection from *Lummox: Evolution of a Man* later in this book. How does Magnuson’s “conversion” in jail compare to that of Malcolm X? How important are some of the differences? Why?

**STUDENT RESPONSE TO “SAVED”**

After reading “Saved” by Malcolm X, I had a lot of different thoughts about motivation, and how either positive or negative experiences in our lives can either push us to do better or push us to do worse. I think an important thing I have learned is that it’s always best to make the negative experiences of your life (like the things Malcolm X went through in the reading) work for you in a positive way. For example, Malcolm realized that his penmanship wasn’t very good, and instead of letting this discourage him, he noticed room for improvement, and practiced in order to improve. Also, he used his time in prison as a positive experience to work on himself and accomplish things, rather than to feel sorry for himself and give up. I think these are very important concepts because if you let your weaknesses or bad experiences dictate your life in a negative way, you will never come back from them.

This reading made me think about my own life and what motivates me. My biggest motivators are to get my degree, not to disappoint my family, and not to fail or get suspended in the future. Instead of looking at the fact that I have failed in the past and letting it intimidate or discourage me, I will use it to my advantage by remembering it and doing things to prevent it in the future. Overall I liked the reading, and thought it proved a very good point that we can all probably relate to.
Miss Rinehart’s Paddle

Jeri McCormick teaches creative writing at senior centers and Elderhostel programs. Her poems have appeared in Poetry Ireland Review, Cumberland Poetry Review, and Rosebud. Her book of poems, When It Came Time, was published in 1998 by Salmon Publishing in Ireland, and she is one of the authors of Writers Have No Age: Creative Writing For Older Adults (2005).

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. Were you the kind of student who got into trouble or the kind who did everything right?
2. The poem is saturated with violent images. What are some of them?
3. Name some of the kinds of power that teachers have over students.

The long hard rumor
had hit us years before
but there was nothing we could do
to fend sixth grade off.
One September morning
we filed into Miss Rinehart’s room
to face the thick glasses,
heavy oxfords, spit curls.

The weapon occupied
her middle drawer
and was rarely used on girls,
though Betty Jo got five whacks
for her haphazard map of Brazil —
the Amazon all smeared and off-course,
Rio de Janeiro inland by inches.

I sat through six months
of imagined failures,
ended up a jittery stooge
with all A’s, the best parts in plays
and only now wonder
about the other side of power.

1991
CHAPTER ONE Where We’re Coming From

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. What might the author mean when she calls herself “a jittery stooge / with all A’s, the best parts in plays”?

2. What did you feel as you read this poem? Was it painful, funny, or sad to read? What made it so?

3. Recall elementary or middle school teachers who were especially “mean.” What made them mean? What did you fear about them?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Many of us can recall memorable episodes from elementary, middle, or high school classrooms that changed the way we feel about teaching and/or learning. Think of such an episode. What makes it a memorable moment? What changes did the event lead to?

2. Talk to your parents and grandparents about their experiences in school. Write an essay comparing your experiences in school to those of your parents or grandparents.

3. Physical discipline is rarely practiced much anymore in this country. What other kinds of discipline do teachers and/or school systems employ? Which methods do you think are the most effective?
50% Chance of Lightning

Cristina Salat

Cristina Salat is founder of Kulana, a racially diverse artist’s sanctuary in the rain forests of Hawaii. An author and filmmaker, her work has been published by Bantam Books, Children’s Television Workshop, and Popular Photography.

Well, what’s the point of being gay if I’m never going to be with anybody?

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. Watch for the different responses Robin and Malia have toward college. What are they? Were you eager to apply to college and leave home, like Malia, or not quite ready, like Robin? Why?

2. Speculate about how Robin’s mother died. What details in the story led you to that theory?

3. Are the people you know more like Malia (concrete goals, even down to the type of car she hopes to drive) or more like Robin (abstract wishes, such as simply “be happy”)? Are you more like Malia or Robin? In what ways?

“I wonder if I’ll ever have a girlfriend.” Robin stamps her sneakers against the wet pavement, tired of waiting.

Malia laughs. “Is that all you think about?”

“Well, what’s the point of being gay if I’m never going to be with anybody?” Robin shifts the big umbrella they are sharing to her other hand. Fat silver drops of rain splatter above the plastic dome. She wishes the bus would run on time for once.

“Independent women. We vowed, remember? No guy chasing,” Malia says.

Robin shoots Malia a look.

“Or girl chasing,” Malia adds quickly.

“You can’t talk,” Robin says, trying not to feel each strand of her hair as it frizzes. “You have someone.”

“That’s true.” Malia smiles.

Robin looks at the gray, wet world through her clear umbrella. It’s hat weather. Black baseball hat and hair gel. She uses both, but nothing really helps on damp days like this. “It’s silly to worry how you look. Rain can make you alive if you let it!” Robin’s mother used to say. She loved stormy weather almost as much as Robin didn’t.
“It’s Friday! How come you’re so quiet?” Malia asks. “You’re not obsessing about your hair, are you? It looks fine. I’d trade you in a second... so don’t start in about my perfect Filipino hair!” She grins, reading Robin’s mind.

Robin can’t help smiling. They’ve known each other a long time.

“Guess what!” Malia changes the subject. “Tomorrow is me and Andrew’s six-month anniversary. That’s the longest I’ve ever gone out with anybody.”

Robin sighs. “You guys will probably get old together.” And I’ll be the oldest single person on the face of the planet, she thinks gloomily.

Malia’s forehead wrinkles into a slight frown. “No. I’m leaving. I can’t wait to get out of here.” A large electric bus lumbers to the curb and stops with a hiss. “I sent my applications out yesterday. NYU, Bryn Mawr, Hampshire, and RIT, in that order,” Malia says as she boards.

They squeeze onto the heated bus between packed bodies in steaming overcoats. The bus lurches forward.

“Where did you decide?” Malia asks, grabbing onto a pole near the back.

Robin shrugs.

Malia raises one eyebrow. “It’s almost Thanksgiving. You are still going to try for NYU and Hampshire with me, aren’t you?”

“I guess,” Robin says. “I haven’t had time to decide anything yet.” It’s not like she hasn’t been thinking about it.

College catalogs are spread across the floor of her bedroom. All she has to do is figure out where she wants to spend the next four years of her life. New York? Massachusetts? Zimbabwe? There’s an endless stream of choices.

“You better make time,” Malia says. “You shouldn’t wait until the deadlines.”

“Give me a break, okay?” Robin stares past the seated heads in front of her.

“Cranky, cranky.” Malia elbows Robin’s arm.

A woman wipes one hand across a steamed window for an outside view and pulls the bus cord. She vacates her seat and Malia and Robin squeeze past someone’s knees to claim it. With Malia balanced on her lap, Robin turns her head toward the window and watches the city swish by. She tries to picture herself next fall, suitcases packed, excited to be going. She’s almost eighteen; she should want to leave home. A new room. New city. New friends.

I can’t leave, not yet! The air in the bus is thick and warm; it’s hard to breathe enough in. Outside the window, sharp edged buildings and signs fly past. Robin’s head feels light and disconnected. She presses her face against the cold glass. She doesn’t have to leave. She can apply to San Francisco State or USF right here in the city. Or she won’t go at all. Malia’s mom didn’t go to college. Robin’s dad didn’t go either, but he wants her to. “You’re smart, like your mother,” he’s always saying. But what if she doesn’t want to go?

It’s okay, Robin repeats to herself. No one can make me.

Outside the window she watches a small, mixed terrier approach the curb, sniffing the ground. Its fur is wet and matted, standing up in points. The dog steps into the stilled, waiting traffic. Robin scans the sidewalk for the dog’s person. Don’t they know it’s dangerous to let their puppy wander into the street?
Robin stares through the window, her mind racing. Maybe it’s lost. She could help. She could get off the bus and . . . A car honks loudly. Something inside her shrinks up. Malia’s weight is heavy on her lap. The dog looks up and scampers back to the curb as traffic surges and the bus rumbles forward. Robin cranes her neck. She should get off, before it’s too late. But she can’t.

“What is it?” Malia asks, feeling Robin’s shift.

Robin forces herself to lean back in the seat and breathe slowly. She’s being stupid. The dog won’t get run over. Its owner is probably just down the block.

They hang their jackets over the chair in Malia’s small, neat room and Robin drops her baseball cap onto the desk.

“You want to see my list of goals?” Malia asks. “I read in _New Woman_ if you know exactly what you want, you’re more likely to get it.” She hands Robin an open, spiral-bound note-book and drops next to her on the bed.

MALIA MANANSALA

*Goals for Now*

- Get into a good college, far away
- Major in computer science or business
- Get another part-time job for clothes, makeup, etc.
- Have fun!

*Eventually*

- Dressy job where I make a lot of money and get respect
- Nice apartment with classy things
- Old BMW or Jeep Cherokee (depending where I live)
- Great friends
- Marry someone loyal, sexy, and successful

“Money.” Robin shakes her head. “Even if we get scholarships, we’re going to be paying off college loans forever.”

Malia nods. “That’s why I need a big career. I’m not going to suck up to some man for money. You should make a goal list,” she suggests, handing over a pen.

“Need a snack.”

Robin flops onto her side. Why not? At the top of a clean page, in slow, careful letters, she writes:

*Goals*

- Figure Out Who I Am
- Be Proud of Myself
- Fall in Love
- Do Something Good
Robin frowns at her list. How does Malia know exactly what she wants? “Hand it over.” Malia comes back into the room with a tray of hot cocoa and microwaved pork buns.

“Okay, but it’s not like yours.”

“Do something good?” Malia makes a face. “Can you be more specific?”

“Hey, I didn’t pick on your list!”

“I don’t get it. When you want to do something, you just do it. This year you start telling everyone, ‘I’m a lesbian, deal with it.’ Why can’t you be like that about college?”

“It’s different,” Robin says, thinking, I didn’t tell everyone. My mother never got to know. Her mom drove a red Ho CRX with African pendants dangling from the rearview mirror. She took the highway a lot, to avoid city traffic. Route I South. Robin yanks her mind away.

“You are going to do more with your life than just be a lesbian, aren’t you?” Malia prods.

Robin gets to her feet, shaking the damp bottoms of her baggy jeans away from her ankles. “Can I borrow something dry?”

“Come on. Seriously. What kind of job do you want?” Malia sounds like Robin’s mom and dad used to—always excited about plans.

“I don’t know. Something to help people,” Robin says, looking through the closet.


“No,” Robin says, a faded memory seeping into her mind. She used to play medicine woman when she was little, healing stuffed toy rabbits and her plastic Ujima dolls with bowls of grass-flower soup. “I always pictured myself in a fun office,” she tells Malia, “where people or animals would come when they didn’t feel well.”

“You want to be some kind of doctor!” Malia enthuses.

Robin shakes her head. Playing medicine woman was a kid thing. “You know I can’t stand blood and guts.” Robin focuses her attention in the closet, taking out a black lace top and black leggings.

“How about a therapist? You could help people’s minds.”

“And listen to people complain all day?” Robin asks as she changes.

Malia sighs, shutting the notebook. “Well, what do you want to do tonight? I told Andrew I’d call him by four. Oh, I forgot! My mother and the jerk are going out after work. They won’t be home till late. Do you want to have a party?”

“Yes!” Robin says. “Go rent some movies. I’ll call for a pizza and invite everybody.”

Andrew arrives first with a soggy Safeway bag tucked into his aviator jacket. “Hey, Robbie!” he says, unpacking jumbo bottles of root beer and 7UP on the living-room table.

The doorbell rings again. Robin runs to let in Malia’s friend Dan, who has brought his sister, Cybelle—a junior—and another girl. Malia has plenty of friends. Most of them are at least part Filipino.
Being a mix (African and Polish), Robin doesn’t care who her friends are. She only has a few anyway, though she knows lots of people. When her mother died at the end of sophomore year, nobody knew what to say, so they acted like nothing happened. Robin still hangs out with the same people, but just because it’s something to do; not because she cares.

When Malia returns from the video store, fifteen people are sprawled on the couch and floor with paper plates of mushroom and garlic pizza.

“Party woman,” Andrew teases Malia, leaning down for a kiss. “You’re soaked.”

“It was only drizzling when I left. Sorry I took so long. I couldn’t decide!” Malia takes two video cassettes out of a plastic bag. “I got a vampire movie and The Best of Crack-Up Comedy.”

“I love vampires!” Cybelle adjusts one of the five rhinestone studs on her left ear. “Let’s get scared first.”

“Go change,” Andrew tells Malia. “I’ll set up the movie.” He nudges her toward the bedroom.

Robin watches, wondering if anyone will ever care like that about her. For some reason the wet dog she saw from the bus pops into her mind. Nobody cared enough to keep it safe.

“Hi. You’re Robin Ciszek, right?” A white girl in ripped jeans and a “Save the Planet” sweatshirt sits down next to Robin on the couch. “I read your article in the school paper! I’m April, Cybelle’s friend. I never thought what it feels like to be gay until I read your essay. Do you know a lot of gay people, or was the story mostly about you?” April’s slate colored eyes are wide and curious.

Robin takes a big bite of pizza. It’s still hard to believe she wrote an article about being gay and submitted it to the school paper. She must have been crazy.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking,” April says quickly. “I’m just interested.”

“The story’s mostly about me,” she tells April. “I don’t know a lot of other gay people.”

“I guess you will next year,” April says. “My sister goes to UC Berkeley, and she says there’s like three different gay groups on campus.”

Robin feels her shoulders clench up. Is college the only thing anyone can talk about? Of course, it’ll be worth it to be out of high school just to get away from the stupid notes guys are taping on her locker door: ALL YOU NEED IS A REAL MAN and ROBIN C. AND MALIA M. EAT FISH.

Personally, I’m glad I don’t have to think about college for another year,” April continues.


April looks away, embarrassed. “It’s dumb. I have this cat. I don’t want to leave her.”

“Guess what I brought!” Cybelle calls out as Andrew dims the living-room light. She takes a half-full bottle of brandy from her tote bag.

“I’ll have a little of that,” Malia says, coming back into the room in overalls and a fluffy white sweater. “To warm me up.”

“Quiet—it’s starting,” Gary yells from the easy chair as a bold, red title flashes across the television screen.
“I want to sit on the couch,” Tara giggles. “Move over, Danny.”

April moves toward Robin to make room for another person. Her hip rests against Robin’s. The couch armrest presses into Robin’s other side.

“Oh, hold me, Andrew!” Cybelle teases Malia as eerie music fills the darkened room. Malia laughs.

April’s leg relaxes against Robin’s. Out of the corner of one eye, Robin looks at the girl sitting next to her. April is watching the screen. Robin’s thigh sizzles.

Robin nonchalantly eases sideways until their arms and legs are touching. A faint scent of perfume tinges the air. April doesn’t move away. Robin’s whole left side buzzes. She sinks into the couch, holding her breath. It would be so amazing if—

If what? Just because this girl liked the article doesn’t mean she’s interested. Robin moves her leg away, mad at herself. On screen, a shadowy figure suddenly whirls around and grins evilly. April leans softly against Robin.

Warm drops of sweat trickle down Robin’s side. The room feels dark and red. Robin could reach out, take April’s hand, trace one finger over the knuckle bumps and pale, freckled skin. . . .

Halfway through the vampire movie, Robin has to go to the bathroom, bad. She is tempted, but restrains herself from squeezing April’s leg as she gets up.

Away from everyone, she splashes cold water on her face, smiling. Could April really be interested? I could go back and sit away from her to see if she follows me. Feeling hot and wild, Robin unlocks the door. It doesn’t budge. She pulls harder, leaning backward, and opens it a foot.

“Hi, Robin.” Cybelle grins, peeking around the corner.

“What’s with you? Get away from the door,” Robin says.

“Okay.” Cybelle runs one hand through her porcupine patch of short, black hair. “C’mere. I want to ask you something.” Cybelle pulls Robin into Malia’s room. She shuts the door without flicking on the light.

“Smell my breath,” she says, leaning close.

A warm rush of brandy air tickles Robin’s face.

“I can’t go home wasted. Do I smell like pizza or alcohol?” Cybelle asks. Her lips touch the side of Robin’s mouth.

“What are you doing?” Robin asks.

Cybelle nuzzles Robin’s face, tracing her lips along Robin’s. “Don’t you like me? Kiss me back.”

Robin’s heart stutters. Is this for real? Cybelle slides one hand under Robin’s hair and grips the back of her neck, kissing harder.

I’ve wanted this for so long, Robin thinks, awkwardly moving her arms around Cybelle. It’s weird not being able to see. Robin touches sharp shoulder blades through the thin cotton of Cybelle’s turtleneck.

I should have helped that dog. The thought scuttles into Robin’s head. Why is she thinking about that now!
Cybelle sucks on Robin's lower lip. I should have gotten off the bus and helped. I could have taken it to the pound, or home. Why didn't I do something? Cybelle's small tongue slides into Robin's mouth. Why am I doing this? I've seen Cybelle around school and never wanted to. She's got a boyfriend. She'll probably tell everyone, “I made out with the lesbian at Malia's house,” for a laugh.

Robin shifts sideways. “I have to go.”
“What?”
“I'm going back to the living room.” Robin feels for the wall switch and flicks on the light.


“I want to see the rest of the movie,” Robin says, pulling away. It's a lame excuse, but what else can she say? “I want to kiss somebody I'm really into, and you're not it”? Cybelle stops smiling and drops Robin's arm. “Oh sure,” she laughs. “You're scared! Writing that story and you don't even know what to do! What a joke.” She yanks open the door and walks out before Robin can respond.

Robin follows Cybelle to the living room and watches her take the small, open spot on the couch next to April. She glares at the back of Cybelle's spiked head. Who does she think she is? I don't have to make out if I don't want to!

Whirling around, Robin heads back to the bedroom and jams her feet into her sneakers.

“You okay?” Malia asks, coming in.
“Sure.” Robin doesn't look up.
“Are you leaving? What's going on?”

“Nothing I want to talk about right now.” Robin zips up her jacket. They walk to the front door. Robin flings it open. She can't wait to be outside.
“Call me tomorrow, okay? Hey.” Malia grabs Robin's jacket.

Robin looks back over her shoulder. “What?”
“We're best buddies forever, right?”

If Malia moves to New York and Robin stays here . . . Nothing's forever.

“Sure,” Robin says, looking away.
Malia smiles and reaches out for a hug. “I'm sorry you didn't have a good time. Let's go shopping tomorrow morning, just you and me. Okay?”

As soon as Robin steps away from Malia's house, she realizes she's forgotten her baseball cap. Angrily, she pops open her umbrella. It doesn't matter. There's a bus stop at the corner and she's just going home.

Water drops drum against the plastic shield above her head as cars zip by, their rubber tires splashing against wet asphalt. Robin glares at each car that passes. She will never own one. What if that dog got run over? She should have helped. A bolt of light illuminates the night. Robin looks helplessly down the empty street for a bus. She hates being out alone after dark, even when it's not very late.

Whenever someone worried, her dad used to say: “There's a fifty-fifty chance of something good happening.” Robin's mother loved that saying. Her father hasn't
said it much lately. It’s hard to believe in good stuff when you’re dealing with the other fifty percent. At least she ended the thing with Cybelle. That’s something. Robin might want experience, but she’s not desperate.

Thunder swells, filling the night. Robin cranes her neck, looking down the street. No bus. So it’s fifty-fifty. Should she wait here, hoping no weirdos show up and bother her before the bus comes, or should she start walking in this lousy weather? Her parents used to take walks in the rain. They were nuts . . . but happy.

Robin starts to walk. A sharp wind whips by, threatening to turn her umbrella inside out. Okay, why not? She has nothing to lose. Robin clicks the umbrella shut. Rain falls cold against her face and settles onto her thick hair, expanding it. She walks fast, with the wooden umbrella handle held forward, staying near the street-lamps. Water trickles down her face and soaks into her clothing. She licks her lips. The rain tastes strangely good.

When she reaches the place where she saw the dog, Robin stops and studies the black road. A few torn paper bags. No blood or fur. It could be dead somewhere else. Or it could be off foraging in a garbage can or sleeping under a bush.

I’m sorry I didn’t get off the bus to see if you needed help, she thinks. Next time I will. I hope you’re safe. But maybe the dog didn’t need help. Maybe it wasn’t even scared. Maybe it was totally pleased to be out exploring and taking care of itself. Robin decides to picture the terrier that way.

From down the block a bus approaches, grumbling to a stop a few feet ahead. Robin hurries over. As the doors squeal open, she looks behind at the dark, empty street. She is afraid, but she doesn’t want to be. Slowly, Robin turns away.

It is a long walk home under the wide, electric sky.

At the warm apartment on Guerrero Street, Robin finds her father asleep on their living-room couch. A paperback novel is spread open across his chest and his glasses are pushed up onto his forehead. Standing over him, dripping onto the brown shag rug, Robin feels tender and old. She removes his glasses and places the book on the glass coffee table, careful not to lose his page.

In her room, Robin drops her wet clothing to the floor and changes into an old set of flannel pajamas. Then she sits down at her drafting-table desk. Nothing’s forever, and that’s just the way it is. Moving college applications aside, she lifts two thick San Francisco phone books from the floor.

Robin thumbs through the thin A–L yellow pages slowly. There is something she can do. Something right.


Holistic Health Center
Dedicated to the well-being of body and mind
Licensed: nutritionists, massage therapists, acupuncturists
Courses in herbal healing, yoga, natural vision, Tai Chi
Medicine without blood and guts. Smiling to herself, Robin reaches for some loose-leaf paper and a pen. There’s a new life out there, waiting for her. She just has to find it. She moves A–L aside and flips open M–Z. By ten P.M. three loose-leaf pages are filled with numbers and addresses. At the top of the first page, she writes: Call for info.

Robin stretches and climbs into bed with her new list. She rubs the soles of her bare feet against the chilled sheets. Maybe life is like rain. Alive if you let it be; lousy and depressing if you don’t. She rolls onto her stomach. Under the information for the Shiatsu Institute, the College of Oriental Medicine, and the School for Therapeutic Massage, she writes: Tell Malia to get April’s number from Dan. Call her?!?!?!

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. Malia thinks that if people know exactly what they want, they’re more likely to get it. Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?
2. Compare Robin’s and Malia’s lists of goals. Who do you think is more likely to be satisfied? Can you judge this simply from someone’s goals? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Robin doesn’t get on the bus when it stops for her? What does the dog seem to represent to her? What details in the story led you to that conclusion?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Make two lists of your own goals: one abstract like Robin’s and one concrete like Malia’s. For instance, an abstract goal would be “work with people,” whereas a concrete goal that is an extension of that would be “get a degree in elementary education.”
2. There are advantages and disadvantages to having a life’s plan like Malia does. Make a list of advantages concerning having your goals and life mapped out. Now make a list of disadvantages concerning having your goals and life mapped out.
3. Robin is harassed with notes on her locker after her article appeared in the school newspaper. Recall a time when you were teased for your ethnic background, sexual preference, or simply the way you talked or walked or something you did. Write about your experience.
Somewhere in Minnesota

Peter Klein wrote this poem as an undergraduate student. His work has appeared in The Cortland Review, The North American Review, Blackbird, and elsewhere.

your dark eyes focused / on a brilliant future.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS:  As you read

1. Who do you think is the “you” in this poem?
2. Because of poetry’s condensed nature, every word is important. Choose some words that you feel are “important” to this poem. Why do you think so?
3. Why might the lines end where they do? How would the poem be different if the lines were longer or shorter?

somewhere in Minnesota
there is a photograph
mailed from denver
to an uncle in duluth
who left it in a diner
on a table by the salt
it marked a woman’s place
in a drugstore fiction
where it lay for years
until her freshman son
found it told his friends
the subject was his steady
then threw it in a lake
this picture was of you
your mortar board smile
gleaming softly beneath
the photographer’s light
your dark eyes focused
on a brilliant future.

1979
CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. What might the author mean by such phrases as “your mortar board smile” or “your dark eyes focused / on a brilliant future”?

2. How do the places in which the photo ends up contribute to your reading of the poem? What do these places have in common?

3. Why do you think the history of the photograph is important to the narrator?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Page through your own high school yearbook. Write a brief impression of the memories the pictures call to mind. Be as specific as you can in communicating these impressions.

2. Look at your parents’ or grandparents’ high school graduation photos and write about the people as they appeared then compared to the people as you know them now.

3. Find yearbooks in your college library from ten or twenty years ago or older. What seems to be different about the people and the university then? What seems to be still the same?
Jeff Richards was born and raised in Washington, D.C. He has an MA in creative writing from Hollins College.

His twisted brain was no disability. It was a gift.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. What do you associate with the term “LD”?
2. How can labels, such as “LD” or “gifted,” help or hinder students in school?
3. Students with “invisible” disabilities often go unnoticed by other students. What would be the benefits and disadvantages of that kind of disability?

Our minds are twisted but they are perfectly good minds. We are artistic, sensitive, impulsive, socially and emotionally immature. Spaced. We are angry, passive, withdrawn or overly extroverted. We tell stories in random order without references, and our academic skills are very slow in developing. At least that's the way we are when we are young, according to Neela Seldin, a specialist in LD who compiled the above list of our characteristics. When we grow older, we either adapt or don't adapt. Some of us drop out of high school and clerk at Kmart. Some of us graduate with Ph.Ds in nuclear physics and work for NASA. Some of us are well known: Harry Belafonte, Cher, Vince Vaughn; or leaders in their fields: Dr. Donald Coffey, a cancer researcher at Johns Hopkins; Dr. Florence Haseltine, a pioneer in women's health issues; Gaston Caperton, the educator and former governor of West Virginia; and Roger W. Wilkins, the civil rights activist. According to the company of Winston Churchill, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, all of them either LD or afflicted by one of LD's numerous cousins, like dyslexia. Da Vinci often wrote from right to left. He had difficulty completing projects, leaving scores of complex plans and designs for posterity to try to assemble. Ms. Seldin describes the young disabled student as one who “can't make choices” and “can't stay with an activity.” “Distractible, impulsive.” The type to sketch out and set aside. . . .

Was I really that stupid? Was I unable to calculate fractions or percentages? Or understand what I read? I enjoyed comic books. Fantastic Four. Archie. Spiderman. Even the high-brow Classic Comics. One of my fondest memories was going to the drugstore to buy those comics with my dad, who seemed to enjoy them as much as I did even though he wasn't LD. I hated Dick and Jane. Who didn't? But comics aside,
I have to admit now, I could not read worth a damn. I was no whiz at fractions. And besides the baseball statistics I computed and recorded in a spiral notebook, I knew little of percentages. Though the terminology didn’t exist at the time, I was LD.

My parents were upset at my failure to move to the next level but were undaunted, as concerned parents tend to be. They arranged for me to be tested at a diagnostic center. They enrolled me in summer school and endless tutoring sessions, and transported me to Longfellow School for Boys where I repeated sixth grade. I remember I was very depressed. I wanted to run away, join the circus or the merchant marine. I didn’t want to leave my neighborhood buddies to go to this bizarre school in Bethesda full of boys who dressed up in blue blazers and ties everyday.

The summer before I went to school, they gave us a reading list—Penrod and Tom Sawyer, the usual collection of coming-of-age classics. I remember sitting in the bedroom of our rented beach house feeling the sticky, salt air, looking up occasionally from where I was bent over a book to see the yellow curtains blowing in the window. I’d hear the far-off waves against the shore, the wind in the pines, and I’d feel like I’d just woken up from a long sleep. I could read. I could really read. And later on, after I had finished another book, I would sit down at my desk and write exhaustive synopses and commentaries.

I hated my parents when they enrolled me at Longfellow but, when I went there and my new teacher read an excerpt from one of my book reports and said I had some good ideas, I accepted the possibility that they might be onto something. My teacher could understand my writing; I could understand him and follow his instructions; I did my tests and did my homework without copying from the encyclopedia. For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel like a fraud.

However, I wasn’t instantly cured of LD. It is a disability and not a disease. My mind is still twisted and always will be. What is different is that I learned how to deal with it. I’m easily distracted, so when I was in a college class I concentrated by taking elaborate notes. Many students borrowed my notes since I missed almost nothing of what the professor said. I think they benefited more than I did given my problems with memory. So I tested poorly. I made up for this in out-of-class assignments where I had time enough to think about what I was going to say. On these papers, teachers would act surprised and wonder if I was the same person who wrote the exams. My professors did not understand that I had a twisted mind, that I was as smart as anyone else, that I came to the same logical conclusions as everyone but it took me longer to get there because I was distracted by the interesting terrain I traveled on the way.

Today my daughter’s teachers know what mine did not. This is both good and bad. It is good that they’ve found the terminology. The Internet has hundreds of Web sites that relate to Learning Disability, some of which define LD with as many as forty-eight different characteristics. Hannah has only a handful of these, many of them similar to mine: “academic skills very slow in developing, strong discrepancies in skills and knowledge, artistic, sensitive, excellent vocabulary but poor production, wants to tell but cannot retrieve words, mishears or doesn’t hear, and problems with various motor development–related skills.” I am amazed, on the one
hand, by what a good job the nebulous “they” have done in codifying my disorder,
but, on the other, I am frightened by what they plan to do with all this ammuni-
tion. They are, after all, tinkering with the human mind, my daughter’s mind, in
particular, and I don’t find this reassuring.

I believe they are at the very beginning of understanding LD, but don’t yet know
how to treat it. Or if it is treatable. Or if it is a disability. Or a difference, which is closer
to my view. When Hannah was in first grade she received a report card much like my
own from Miss Probey. Only Miss Probey was a nice lady, even nicer when she turned
into Mrs. Bernard in the middle of the year. Hannah’s teacher was a prison guard. She
looked like Miss Honey in Matilda, but acted more like Miss Trunchbull so let’s call
her Ms. Honeybull. Ms. Honeybull’s range of normal was ludicrous. Only about three
students could fit into it, two of whom were on Ritalin, the third naturally passive. She
was always berating the students for one thing or another and keeping them in from
recess for minor slipups such as talking out of turn in class or not keeping in line when
the students walked from one classroom to another. Once, she even beat one of the
students with a ruler for not identifying the location of the Nile River on a map. One
of Ms. Honeybull’s favorite victims was Hannah.

Hannah with her pretty, round Irish face like her mother’s, thin lips, and long
hair to her shoulders, flyaway hair like mine. She’s been a vegetarian since she was
five. She hates that we own a leather couch though she does grudgingly sit on it.
When her skin touches the leather, sometimes she’d say, “This is disgusting,” and
eyeball us half in jest as if we are murderers.

When we received Ms. Honeybull’s report card, we were upset that Hannah
flunked absolutely everything. We knew she was having difficulty in her academic
subjects but we had received no prior warning that it was this bad, even in art
which she loves. How could she flunk art or, even more inexplicable, deportment?
We were aghast with the accusation that she didn’t show consideration and respect
for others, that she didn’t play or listen to her peers, or cooperate or share, or con-
trol herself, and on and on. This was antithetical to every experience we had ever
had with our daughter. Only a kid who burned down the school deserved grades
like this, said my wife. We arranged a conference with Ms. Honeybull. She de-
defended her views. We defended ours. Nothing much was accomplished. As we left
the conference room, Ms. Honeybull blurted out, “Your daughter is unteachable.”

“How I understand,” I might have said but didn’t. It wasn’t that Hannah was
unteachable. It was that Ms. Honeybull was incapable of reaching Hannah. Connie, my
wife, thought it went beyond that. “They’re trying to push her out of school.” Which
seems obvious to me now as I look back on it. We did what my parents did when we
were growing up. We tested Hannah. We hired a tutor. We looked for other schools.

By the fall of the next year Hannah was enrolled in the Lab School of Washington,
one of the premier schools in the world for children and adults with learning dis-
abilities. Unlike Ms. Honeybull, the teachers are trained to deal with a wide range of
students, using art, theater, dance, woodworking, hands-on experiential methods to
teach academic skills. For instance, in order to build a cabinet in woodworking you
must know math.
Sally Smith, the founder and director of LSW, is the recognized leader in the field of learning disabilities. In addition, she is the head of the graduate program in LD at American University, author of five books on the subject and countless articles. As tough a character as you’re likely to find, she could squeeze blood out of a turnip. So the school is well endowed. But not exclusive. Most of the students are funded and come from the public schools. The waiting list to get in is endless, as is the waiting list for teachers who want to teach there. But the real judge of LSW’s success is that 90 percent of the students go on to college.

Hannah is thriving in this environment. She is much further along in her reading, writing, and arithmetic than I was at her age. She is happy. The teachers never punish her. They never single her out, except for praise. They have given her the award for good behavior practically every week she has been there. If she accumulates enough of these awards over a certain period of time, she is allowed to have lunch with the handsome gym instructor that all the girls swoon over.

In the fall the Lab School gives a gala at which they honor successful people with LD. I think it was the year they invited the Fonz that a paleontologist from Johns Hopkins, Dr. Steven M. Stanley, said in his speech to the overflow audience at the Omni–Shoreham Hotel that he thought he wasn’t disabled. I don’t remember his words exactly but they confirmed my belief. His brain, like my own, was twisted. It took him through that same illogical Alice in Wonderland world that I go through daily, and when he came out on the other side, usually he came out with a scatter-brained idea. But sometimes when he came out, his ideas were great, the very same ideas, he thought, that made it possible for him to rise to the top of his field. His twisted brain was no disability. It was a gift. What Hannah has, what I have, what my mom had, and what our ancestors had were gifts. And yet, I’m still apprehensive for Hannah. Will she be at the Lab School forever? Or will they recommend a transfer to a more traditional school once she catches up developmentally with her peers? Either way, I wonder how well she will do in college and beyond. Will she be able to compete in the real world? My concerns are no doubt little different from other parents’. Yet other parents do not have to go to the expense, the extra time, and the heartache that Connie and I do. Somehow I feel cheated that we are forced to send Hannah to a special school with kids who are basically the same as she. I wonder why this is so, why she must be isolated from the average student population, the $1 + 1 = 2$ Crowd.

2000

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. Richards writes, “My professors did not understand that I had a twisted mind, that I was as smart as anyone else, that I came to the same logical conclusions as everyone but it took me longer to get there because I was distracted by the interesting terrain I traveled on the way.” How does he “prove” himself in college?
2. Richards makes the point that being LD might be a disability or simply a difference. What might be the impact of each alternative point of view? What is associated with each word?

3. How is Richards better able to parent Hannah because he has a similar disability?

**SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING**

1. Research the effects on a generation of people—most often boys and young men—heavily medicated by drugs such as Ritalin.

2. How might public schools incorporate some of the ideologies of the Lab School?

3. Research what kinds of services are available for students with disabilities on your campus.
School’s Out: One Young Man Puzzles Over His Future Without College

Laura Sessions Stepp, a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist for The Washington Post, has written for fifteen years about the lives, legends, and culture of youth. She is the author of Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence (2001) and Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both (2008).

“You see these clothes I’m wearing?” he asks. “I bought them. These shoes I’m wearing? I bought them. That car out there? I’m paying for it.”

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read
1. What are some stereotypes about high school students who choose not to go to college? Where do those stereotypes come from?
2. What kind of town does Ben Farmer live in? How does that influence him and his choices?
3. Keep a list of reasons you feel Ben did not go to college.

Ben Farmer at 19, steering his silver Camaro Z28 down Main Street on a Friday night, glances at the Dairy Freeze and thinks about the buddies he graduated from high school with last year. They’re off at college, probably partying tonight, the beer, the girls, at Virginia Tech, Radford, wherever.

He passes a karate studio, beauty supply store and boarded-up movie theater with a marquee begging passersby to “Shop Altavista First.”

He could be at college. He had the grades, he’s got the brains, but here he is, listening to the cough in his 330-horsepower engine and worrying about his spark plugs.

“There was a lot of unknowns about college,” he says after he thinks about it. “It was going to be this big, tough, hard, hard time in which all you’d do is write papers, which I don’t like to do.” So for now he assembles air conditioning ducts in a factory, for $7 an hour, which is as much as his mother makes in her new job at the bank, her first sit-down job in all the years she’s been raising him.
Nobody in his family ever went to any kind of college. His mom wanted him
to go. She helped him with the application and the financial aid forms. But he didn’t
go, he took a $7 job in a town with a lot of $7 jobs, a little river town in central
Virginia, where the Southern railroad met the Norfolk and Western, spawning a
furniture factory, textile mill and other small manufacturers.

Ten to 12 hours a day, he hammers sheet metal, then goes home to shower off
the dirt and fibers. Some nights he heads out to the driving range to hit golf balls.
Weekends, he drives over to South Boston to watch guys do what he would like
most to do, race stock cars. He has thought about signing on with a NASCAR pit
crew, a great job except you’re never home.

Altavista is home. He knows everybody, he’s already got a job, and now he’s met
a girl, named Apryl East. He’s having visions of a little house one day with a two-car
garage, “going to work and going on vacation, not worrying where your next meal is
coming from.”

So now he’s thinking of asking his boss at Moore’s, an electrical and mechanical
construction firm, if the company will pay him to take night classes at the local
community college and then move him indoors to a better-paying job, a sit-down
job. Apryl, who goes to Virginia Tech, encourages this line of thinking.

The fall after Ben and 70 others graduated from the local high school, 2.5 million
American seniors enrolled in either a two-year or a four-year college.

Almost a million did not. They were overwhelmingly poor, male and white.
Much to the surprise of social scientists who traditionally have looked for educa-
tional problems among minorities, low-income black and Hispanic men are more
likely to go to college right out of high school than white guys like Ben. So are
young women of any background. If Ben had a twin sister, she’d likely be enrolled.

There are Ben Farmers all over: in the coal towns of Pennsylvania, the subur-
ban sprawl west of Sacramento and especially in the rural South. They’ve always
been there, hidden in the pockets of America where they pump gas, assemble
machine parts and put their pay on the family’s kitchen table. They do work that
needs to be done—building houses, running backhoes, riveting airplanes, survey-
ing land and fixing the BMWs of upscale college types who occasionally might call
them rednecks. America might well lose all its advanced-degree business school
graduates with less pain than it would lose these young men.

They’re proud of the work they do. At the same time, they’ve found it harder
and harder to acquire full-time jobs with decent pay increases and good health
insurance. Their earnings, adjusted for inflation, have fallen or stalled. Altavista,
population 3,400, has several thousand people commuting there to work, so there
are jobs. But fewer and fewer: Altavista has lost 1,300 jobs in a little over a year.

Other young Altavista men in Ben’s position fear they’re headed nowhere in a
society that prefers paper-pushers to pipe fitters. They don’t want to manage
accounts payable for a living, or scan X-rays for cancerous tumors. They’re proud
of doing hard, physical work. But people around them say that white-collar jobs,
available only with a college diploma, are the only way to win at life. This attitude,
says Patricia Gandara, a professor of education at the University of California, Davis, can make these young white men feel invisible.

“Latinos and African Americans have horrendous problems, too, but at least they have a group identity,” says Gandara, who studies low-income, primarily minority youths. “These poor white males don’t know where in the culture they fit. Some are really alienated and angry.”

Ken Gray, a professor of workforce education at Pennsylvania State University, worries about them, too. “No one’s interested in the Bubbas,” he says.

Ben is no Bubba, more an easygoing, smart kid with a goatee and a vague future. Off work, he wears American Eagle polo shirts, khakis and Nike sandals.

“You see these clothes I’m wearing?” he asks. “I bought them. These shoes I’m wearing? I bought them. That car out there? I’m paying for it.” It’s a matter of pride and obligation that richer people can’t understand.

He has friends whose parents pay their school expenses, their apartment rent. One of his pals lives off campus in a nice two-bedroom apartment with a big leather couch and an air hockey table.

“On some days I wish I were him,” Ben says. On other days? All he’ll say about his buddy is this: “If you asked him how much his cell phone bill is, he wouldn’t know.”

Ben’s a guy whose mother taught him to “always keep good credit and pay your bills on time.” You get his drift.

His father, Walter, a truck driver who left Ben and Ben’s mom when Ben was 3, hasn’t played much of a role in his life. But Walter’s parents, Marvin and Frances, sure have. Until his early teens, he’d spend the school months in Altavista with his mom, Patsy Moore, and all summer with Marvin and Frances, big NASCAR fans who followed the circuit.

“I think I disappointed Granny the most not going to college, and Mom second,” he says.

His mom, eating dinner with Ben in his favorite restaurant, El Cazador, says she’s still wondering why he didn’t go to college. Hasn’t he learned from her example?

Researchers would say that some kids never want to venture much farther along life’s path than did the people they know and love best. Moore, a sweet woman of 42, doesn’t understand this, as she explains to Ben over a taco salad that he helped her choose.

“You’ve seen me struggle from week to week,” she says. “You can’t want that.”

No, he doesn’t want that. But what does he want? More pressing still, what can he realistically expect to attain?

Ben has loved hot rods since he was a baby. He ran Matchbox cars over his grandmother’s rug for hours at a time before he could walk, and as he got older he took up dirt bikes with a bunch of boys his age who lived in the country near his granny.

“We stayed outside all the time,” he recalls.

As they got older, their little group carved a dirt track in woods of scrub pine and began racing cars and trucks. Ben’s two best friends eventually acquired race
cars and the gang started spending time at Big Daddy's South Boston Speedway, a NASCAR-sanctioned short track. Ben began to dream of becoming another Tony Stewart or a pit crew chief.

His teachers couldn't understand this fascination. He's such a good student, they'd sigh, as if you couldn't be interested in both math and Chevys, which happen to have a serious relationship through mechanical engineering. He pulled down As and B's in high school, taking calculus and Latin. But his teachers didn't foresee a career in engineering, they just seemed to see a car-crazy kid.

One problem they didn't count on: His friends' families all had more money than his, and to dress the way they did and do the things they did, Ben had to get a job.

So at age fifteen he found one at the Amoco Food Shop south of town. He stopped playing high school basketball and started stocking shelves. Making money became something of an obsession. Not big money, though. That would have required college.

When Ben's friends started talking about four-year colleges, Ben would go silent. When they took the SAT in their junior year, Ben didn't. “I thought to myself, where would I find the money?”

His mom encouraged him to try a two-year school, and so he got an application to Danville Community College. But his heart wasn't in it. The message of his guidance counselor and some of his teachers, he says, was that four-year colleges or universities were the only goal worth aiming for.

Those who hold bachelor's degrees have a hard time understanding why anyone wouldn't want one. At Ben's high school, administrators took pride in the fact that they send proportionately more graduates to four-year colleges than other schools in the area. They talked about former students who chose Columbia, Duke or the University of Virginia. For Ben, even $8,000 to $10,000 a year for in-state tuition, room and board didn't seem in the cards.

Other young men in Ben's position report similar experiences.

“They were good at giving out papers to kids going to college, but didn't pay no attention to students going to community college,” says Jason Spence, who makes bulletproof vests on the night shift at BGF Industries. Jason and Ben both remember sitting through school assemblies where the same students won award after award, scholarship after scholarship—to four-year schools.

Ben's mother recognized she needed someone to help jump-start her son, but when she sought out school authorities, she says, she received only an offhand kind of attention. “I'd never done this before. They told me I could take Ben to Danville and Lynchburg. It wasn't very helpful.”

Ben says he asked at school if, on career day, organizers could bring in someone who worked in the racing industry. With several local drivers around, it would have been easy to find someone, but nothing happened.

“You feel like kind of an outsider,” he says.

He might not have felt that way a decade ago, because young men and young women here could still come right out of high school and go to work for family-run...
industries offering decent starting wages and chances for promotion. They didn’t need higher education to enjoy job security at places like Lane Furniture, famous for its cedar chests. But once the Lane family lost direct control of the company in the late 1980s, things started to change. Gradually the manufacturing of cedar chests and dining sets moved to the cheap labor market of China, and fewer and fewer workers filled the million-square-foot brick and wood complex that had dominated, indeed was, Altavista’s skyline.

Last year, on Aug. 31, the last hope chest rolled off the assembly line. Other industries in the area started folding or cutting back, and by this past spring, the unemployment rate in central Virginia had hit a 10-year high. When a health supplements lab in town advertised for 40 new jobs, the cars lined up for interviews the first morning snaked for blocks through town.

Ben worried about his mother—she’d get a job, then be laid off under a last-hired, first-fired policy. “She’s had a string of bad luck,” he says.

Rather then head for college in the hope of improving their chances for a good job, Ben and other young men like him sought out jobs right away that offered health insurance, pension plans and savings programs.

Max Everhart, who lives around the corner from Ben, was one of them. Also a bright young man, he went to work at a machine bearings plant for $10 an hour plus benefits. “It’s a good job,” Max says. “I’m lucky to have it.”

Ben felt the same way when he got hired four months ago at Moore’s. With 300 employees, it’s one of the few companies in town that is growing. In its vast, open garage he bends, shapes and glues ducts with men like Smoky Hudson and Melvin Mann, who have been doing this kind of work for 30 years. He has learned to respect them.

These guys “really work for their money,” he says. “They get their hands dirty.”

T.O. Rowland, a 33-year-old welder at Moore’s, tells Ben he earns as much money as his wife, a schoolteacher with a master’s degree. This makes Ben wonder again: Why do people make such a big deal over college?

This is a question that resonates only in some quarters of the educational establishment. Ken Gray, the Penn State professor, says: “The real opportunities for youth are grossly distorted by colleges. Seventy-one percent of jobs don’t require anything beyond a high school education.”

But that doesn’t mean people can’t or shouldn’t keep learning, acquiring new skills. In Altavista, Central Virginia Community College runs a satellite center in the former Lane executive building here. The idea is to reach people in high-layoff areas. Center director Linda Rodriguez says the response from older workers, especially older female workers, has been terrific.

But young men like Ben aren’t coming in.

When she approached high school authorities about coming to visit classes, she was met with some of the same lack of enthusiasm for community college that Ben’s mom did. School authorities said there was no time in the calendar for her visits—the students were too busy taking tests—and offered a one-time assembly instead.
One evening last winter, as Ben arrived at the Amoco store to start his shift, the store manager pushed a paper napkin over to him across the counter. “Someone left this for you,” he said.

On the napkin next to the beef jerky, the name Apryl East was scribbled along with a phone number. Ben smiled, remembering the blonde with the cornflower-blue eyes and infectious laugh who had stopped by a couple of weeks earlier. She was after him. Sweet.

Eight months later, the blonde is riding with him in his Camaro as they return from a football game between his old high school and hers in nearby Gretna, where she led cheers and played piccolo in the marching band. Now she’s a senior at Virginia Tech, planning on teaching elementary school.

Apryl swears that her best friend left the napkin without her knowledge. Ben doesn’t know whether to believe her but he also doesn’t care.

He eventually did call her, they went out to a movie. Now a wallet photo of the two of them is propped next to the odometer in his beloved car.

Increasingly, their conversation involves the years to come, and tonight is no exception. Ben ran into a guy at the game whose girlfriend is taking courses in motorcar management at a community college.

“That kinda makes me want to try it,” he tells Apryl.

He could choose to stay on at Moore’s and go to school at the same time, “maybe get a job on computers” at Moore’s. He also has had a couple of conversations with NASCAR driver Stacy Compton. Perhaps, while he’s still young, he should just chuck everything—except Apryl—and enlist Compton’s help signing on with a racing crew. The sponsors and money for his own car might follow.

“I am so not sure,” he says.

Apryl has accepted his confusion, for now.

“I’d like you to go to college,” she tells Ben, “but it’s okay with me if you don’t.”

Her three best friends are all at different universities. But neither her dad, a supervisor at Moore’s, nor her mom, a secretary in a printing shop, attended college, and they’ve been happy together. From what she has observed at home, college isn’t crucial to the married life she dreams of.

What is important, she has told Ben gently, is that he get his behind in gear. He can always try one avenue and move to another if he doesn’t like it. He’s not yet 20, she reminds him.

Where will he find the motivation?

“From me,” she says. She laughs but she’s serious. “I’m going to get out of college, come back home and tell him to do it. I can be his little mentor.”

A few hours before Ben picks her up for the game, over lunch at a downtown diner, she admits that when she learned that Ben wasn’t in college, “I was shocked. I told my mom he didn’t get the right kind of guidance.”

So why does she stick with him? “He’s got a great personality. He’s funny.” Unlike her previous boyfriend, “he treats me well. Oh, and another thing I like about him? My dad and he have bonded. He says when we have kids, he wants to be the kind of dad he never had.”
She takes a breath, then adds, “Ben’s everything I ever wanted.” She laughs again, then cups her hand over her mouth as if she has revealed just a little too much.

2002

**CRITICAL THINKING POINTS:** *After you’ve read*

1. Do you have any friends who are not in college? Is it difficult to explain to them what it is like? Why or why not?
2. If you could predict a future for Apryl and Ben, what might it be? Why?
3. If you were going to give Ben some advice, what would it be?

**SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING**

1. Compare and contrast your life now to the life you might have had if you had not gone to college.
2. In so many ways, Ben is a product of the environment and people around him. Imitating the “feature reporter” tone of this essay, write a similar one with you as the subject.
3. “No one’s interested in the Bubbas,” this essay asserts. Is that true? Why do you think the way you do?
Eighth-Grade Final Exam: Salina, Kansas, 1895

Various tests from the days of yore occasionally make the rounds of Internet information loops. This exam was taken from the original document on file at the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society and Library in Salina, Kansas.

What is the cost of a square farm at $15 per acre, the distance around which is 640 rods?

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. How well do you think you would do on this test? Why?
2. Do you think your teachers could pass it? Why or why not?
3. Are there any questions for which your answer might be correct today but not in 1895? Why?

Grammar
(Time, one hour)

2. Name the Parts of Speech and define those that have no modifications.
3. Define Verse, Stanza and Paragraph.
4. What are the Principal Parts of a verb? Give Principal Parts of do, lie, lay and run.
5. Define Case, Illustrate each Case.
7–10. Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.

Arithmetic
(Time, 1.25 hours)

1. Name and define the Fundamental Rules of Arithmetic.
2. A wagon box is 2 ft. deep, 10 ft. long, and 3 ft. wide. How many bushels of wheat will it hold?
3. If a load of wheat weighs 3942 lbs., what is it worth at 50 cts. per bu, deducting 1050 lbs. for tare?

4. District No. 33 has a valuation of $35,000. What is the necessary levy to carry on a school seven months at $50 per month, and have $104 for incidentals?

5. Find cost of 6720 lbs. coal at $6.00 per ton.

6. Find the interest of $512.60 for 8 months and 18 days at 7 percent.

7. What is the cost of 40 boards 12 inches wide and 16 ft. long at $20 per inch?

8. Find bank discount on $300 for 90 days (no grace) at 10 percent.

9. What is the cost of a square farm at $15 per acre, the distance around which is 640 rods?

10. Write a Bank Check, a Promissory Note, and a Receipt.

U.S. History
(Time, 45 minutes)

1. Give the epochs into which U.S. History is divided.
2. Give an account of the discovery of America by Columbus.
3. Relate the causes and results of the Revolutionary War.
4. Show the territorial growth of the United States.
5. Tell what you can of the history of Kansas.
6. Describe three of the most prominent battles of the Rebellion.
7. Who were the following: Morse, Whitney, Fulton, Bell, Lincoln, Penn, and Howe?
8. Name events connected with the following dates: 1607, 1620, 1800, 1849, and 1865.

Orthography
(Time, one hour)

1. What is meant by the following: Alphabet, phonetic orthography, etymology, syllabication?
2. What are elementary sounds? How are they classified?
3. What are the following, and give examples of each: Trigraph, sub-vocals, diphthong, cognate letters, linguals?
4. Give four substitutes for caret ‘u’.
5. Give two rules for spelling words with final ‘e’. Name two exceptions under each rule.
7. Define the following prefixes and use in connection with a word: Bi, dis, mis, pre, semi, post, non, inter, mono, super.
8. Mark diacritically and divide into syllables the following, and name the sign that indicates the sound: Card, ball, mercy, sir, odd, cell, rise, blood, fare, last.
9. Use the following correctly in sentences: Cite, site, sight, fane, fain, feign, vane, vain, vein, raze, raise, rays.
10. Write 10 words frequently mispronounced and indicate pronunciation by use of diacritical marks and by syllabication.

Geography

(Time, one hour)

1. What is climate? Upon what does climate depend?
2. How do you account for the extremes of climate in Kansas?
3. Of what use are rivers? Of what use is the ocean?
4. Describe the mountains of N.A.
5. Name and describe the following: Monrovia, Odessa, Denver, Manitoba, Hecla, Yukon, St. Helena, Juan Fernandez, Aspinwall and Orinoco.
6. Name and locate the principal trade centers of the U.S.
7. Name all the republics of Europe and give the capital of each.
8. Why is the Atlantic Coast colder than the Pacific in the same latitude?
9. Describe the process by which the water of the ocean returns to the sources of rivers.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you've read

1. Perhaps too easy an answer as to why much of this material is so foreign to you is that you were never “taught it.” What are some of the reasons that is so?
2. Which sections of the test do you think you would do the best at? The worst? Why?
3. Which individual questions would be the hardest and the easiest for your class to answer? Why?
SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Design your own test (or section of a test) to give to eighth grade students in 1895. Try not to “trick” anyone or to concentrate on objects or areas that would be unfamiliar to them.

2. What are some of the most difficult tests you have taken in school? What made them difficult? Were they fair or unfair tests? What made them fair or unfair?

3. If you were to design a fair but difficult test for a course you are taking this semester, what kinds of questions might you ask? Why?
This Was the Assignment: Disability Culture

Peter Gimbel

This was the assignment: What cultural group do you belong to? What are the characteristics of that group? Consider who and what you are, based on race/ethnicity, ability, lifestyle, religion, and so on. (For instance, are you a part of “girl power” culture, “hip-hop” culture, “small town culture,” “black culture”?). What does it mean to be a part of that culture?

Peter Gimbel holds a bachelor’s degree from Brown University and a master’s degree in social work from the University of Houston. He is a social worker at a nonprofit organization in New Jersey that promotes independent living for people with disabilities.

I feel more at home in disability culture than I do in mainstream, white culture.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. Pay attention to Gimbel’s definition of “disability culture.”
2. Many disabilities are “invisible.” Which do you think would be more difficult: to have an “unseen” disability or to have a disability that might be more obvious, such as a physical disability?
3. Why does one’s “cultural identity” matter? Why is this something a person reflect upon?

I am a white male with a disability. The culture of my birth is commonly abbreviated with the acronym W.A.S.P.: White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Over time, however, I have come to identify myself more as a person with a disability than as a white person, and I feel more at home in disability culture than I do in mainstream, white culture.

My cultural identity as a person with a disability is predicated on having a progressively worsening genetic disorder (Duchenne muscular dystrophy). Because I was able to walk until the age of 11, I was largely able to pass for able-bodied. Even after I began to use a wheelchair, I was told that a cure for muscular dystrophy would likely be discovered soon. My well-intentioned parents mistakenly collaborated with me in viewing my disability as a temporary setback that need not be integrated into my sense of identity.

Disability culture includes a range of beliefs and values as diverse as the members who make up this group. “Disability” is the only minority group that anyone
can join . . . to become a part of it, all one has to do is acquire a disability. Because
disability is such an open-ended cultural group, it includes a highly varied popula-
tion who come from all cultures, races, ethnicities and nationalities. As a result, it
is hard to define the beliefs and values of disability culture.

However, there are certain interests that unite nearly all people with disabilities.
These interests comprise the reform of social policy toward people with disabilities,
the reform of the medical system, the removal of institutional and architectural
barriers to equality, and other concerns that affect daily life with a disability. The
most unifying axiom of disability culture: the personal is the political.

Most people with disabilities are acutely aware that public policy affects their
well-being in very real ways. Medicare and Medicaid services are critical, but so are
other functions of government, such as protecting workers with disabilities from
discrimination and making sure that buildings from courthouses to restaurants
meet standards of wheelchair accessibility.

What I like most about the values of disability culture is the redefinition of
the disability community as a minority with legitimate social and civil rights.
This helps me to view myself as an empowered individual rather than a victim of
circumstance.

Because of my identity as a person with a disability, I experience prejudice on
an almost daily basis. It is so commonplace in my life that it is reduced to back-
ground static: I hardly even notice it anymore. This prejudice is subtle, but it is very
present. I am always stared at in public places. Waiters, retail workers, and strangers
on the street refer to me as “buddy,” even when they would never address an able-
bodied adult male in this way.

I also experience overt discrimination. I once had a waiter “forget” to take my
order because he assumed that my (able-bodied) wife had ordered for both of us.
I was even turned down for a social work internship whose tasks were well within
my capabilities. I was told that having someone write case notes for me in a mental
health clinic violated confidentiality, with no opportunity for discussion of how this
problem might be resolved (for example, as at my current placement, by having the
person helping me sign a confidentiality agreement).

Aside from my own cultural group as a person with a disability, I understand
the culture of white people of the upper economic class. I was born into this class,
but was partially removed from it as I became more visibly disabled. In this cultural
context, males are expected to go into finance, corporate law, or other prestigious
and highly lucrative jobs. Because of my disability, I have been largely “released”
from these expectations.

2007

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. In your experience, is it common for people to be part of more than one
   “culture,” as Gimbel describes?
2. Gimbel says he has been “released” from some expectations as a white male because of his disability. What might he mean?

3. Gimbel writes, “Disability culture includes a range of beliefs and values as diverse as the members who make up this group.” Can you think of other groups (or groups that you’re part of) for which this is true?

**SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING**

1. Write your own response to this assignment.
2. Research the history of civil-rights laws that protect people with disabilities.
3. Contact your school’s services for students with disabilities office, and interview its coordinator. Report back to your class on the kinds of services provided.
This Was the Assignment: College Ain’t Cheap

Alexander J. F. Thornton

This was the assignment: In 750 words or less, explain why you (as the most deserving person on the planet) should win a $10,000 prize for tuition and books. This contest was sponsored by mental_floss magazine, Borders and Merriam-Webster.

A former nursing major, Alexander J. F. Thornton is currently studying criminal justice at Winona State University and is part of his school’s ROTC program.

I have excelled in both math and science my whole life, and nursing seems to be a good fit for me even if I have testicles.

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: As you read

1. Pay attention to the details Thornton includes about himself and about male nurses. Why do you think he chooses what he does?
2. Do you think it’s harder to write a short essay or a long essay? Why?
3. Why is it often difficult for students to write about themselves and their experiences?

I am the most deserving person on the planet to win this scholarship because I am a guy, and I want to become a nurse. That would make me a “male nurse.” I’m sure in 2009, no one would ever say “female engineer” or “female astronaut” or even “male kindergarten teacher,” but nearly everyone I know still puts MALE in front of “nurse” when they talk about my future career. When I graduate with a bachelor’s degree in Nursing in the spring of 2013, I will join a fraternity of male nurses, like Gaylord “Greg” Focker from Meet the Parents, Walt Whitman—a Civil War nurse better known as America’s poet, James Derham—a former slave of doctors who became a nurse and used his wages to buy his freedom, or even the sole “buff guy” transplant nurse in the movie John Q. I’m guessing all of them probably had to deal with the stereotypes of being a nurse. Not smart enough to be a doctor? Are you gay? Do you just want to hang out with women, you pussy?

The last stereotype is partly true. I’ve been accepted to Viterbo University, a premier nursing school in the Midwest where seventy percent of the students are female, and a great place for me to get a date. Viterbo is a private college in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, home of the largest six-pack of beer in the world (City Brewery lists each huge can at 14,691,592 fluid ounces—equal to over 1.2 million regular cans of beer)
and famous for its Oktoberfest celebration the last week of September. I’ve also been accepted to Winona State University, also known around the Midwest for its nursing program and with a male to female ratio of four to six, it’s another good place to find a girlfriend. Winona, Minnesota was named after the Native American Princess “We-Noh-Nah,” and it’s the home of Sugar Loaf, a rocky limestone bluff that outlines the town. I will decide which school I’ll attend based on the amount of scholarship money I earn.

Throughout early American history nurses were mostly male, but in 1901 the U.S. Army Nurse Corps was formed and only allowed female nurses. Military nursing went from being predominantly male to exclusively female. That means during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, men could only serve as medics, not nurses. Even if a male soldier was already a Registered Nurse, he wouldn’t be assigned as a nurse in the field.

Today nursing offers a well-paying, competitive, fast-paced career. The job hunt should be easy for me given the shortage of nurses in the U.S. Hopefully I will encounter flexibility while choosing which hospital or city I would like to work in. My ultimate goal is to become a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA). I figure if I’m putting people to sleep they won’t know whether I’m male or female.

In the U.S. today just under 6% of all Registered Nurses are male. Despite the stereotypes this is a great profession for guys like me. I have excelled in both math and science my whole life and nursing seems to be a good fit for me even if I have testicles. Am I the most deserving person on the planet to win this scholarship? I really think so.

2009

CRITICAL THINKING POINTS: After you’ve read

1. Which of Thornton’s facts do you find most interesting? Why those?
2. What are other professions associated with one gender or the other?
3. Would you award Thornton a scholarship based on his essay? Why or why not?

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING

1. Write your own response to this assignment.
2. Research scholarships at your school and elsewhere. Find and apply for at least three that seem to be a good fit for you.
3. Find a professor or a student on your campus who is in a field dominated by the opposite sex (a female computer science professor or a male elementary education student). Interview that person about his or her experiences in a male or female dominated field.
Further Suggestions for Writing— “Where We’re Coming From”

1. What do you expect to miss the most and least about high school and/or home? Why?
2. What kind of high school student were you? What traits would you like to keep as a college student? What would you like to change and why? What could you do to facilitate this?
3. Recall a time when you were thrust into a situation where you did not quite fit in. Describe your experience. How does it compare to starting college?
4. Recall some recent experience that was new, different, foreign, and perhaps even frightening. Reflect on what you learned or how your preconceptions changed. What idea(s) gradually dawned on you?
5. Think of some significant accomplishment in your life. Write about how curiosity, discipline, risk taking, initiative, and/or enthusiasm contributed to that accomplishment. Did other qualities contribute as well?
6. Think of a time when you lacked the verbal skills you needed to communicate effectively. It may have been conducting a college interview, writing a letter to a friend, or expressing your ideas in class. Write about how it made you feel and how you coped with the problem.
7. If you participated in any organized programs in high school, describe what that activity did or did not teach you.
8. Identify a talent you have or information you possess that is unique, such as tap dancing, scuba diving, or how to make maple syrup. Write at least a page about why this is important to you and why others should know about it.
9. Aesop says, “Never trust the advice of a man in difficulties.” No doubt you’ve received advice before coming to college. What makes for good advice? For bad? What kind of advice were you given? Which will be the easiest or the hardest for you to follow? Why?
10. Choose one of the pieces of advice in this chapter and try to convince someone that it is particularly good or bad advice.
11. Think of a problem with your high school, perhaps within a team, student organization, or group of friends. Propose some specific solutions for this problem.
12. Working in a group, examine how our society guides students to college. Did you feel that you received “the right kind of guidance”? Why or why not?
13. Some students seem eager to answer questions in class, to join the discussion, while others do not. How do you usually react in these situations? Why?
14. Interview two or three experienced students about their first year. What kinds of pressure and problems did they have? How did they handle them? Seek their advice on things you are concerned about.
15. Most people want to succeed at what they do, and college is no exception. Why and how much do you want to succeed at college? What does success at college mean to you?
16. What co-curricular activities do you plan to pursue in college? How do these activities relate to your academic or career plans?
17. Choose a campus organization you are thinking about joining and investigate it. Prepare a report on this organization to deliver to the class.
18. Find something interesting, odd, or unique about it and present your findings to the class.
19. Go to an on-campus event of any kind that you have never experienced before, such as a symphony, a ballet, a poetry reading, or a debate. The possibilities are endless. With an open mind, summarize, describe, and/or evaluate it. Do you think you would ever attend another event of this kind? Why or why not?
20. Prepare for a crucial situation that is likely to happen to you as a college student this semester. Imagine exactly what might happen and write a description of it. Explain why this situation is likely to be so crucial. Include all the possible outcomes, from the best to the worst, and figure out what you might do to prepare for the situation before it occurs.
21. Contrast “Saved” with “One Writer’s Beginnings.” What are some of the reasons these pieces display the differences they do? What support do you have for your position?
23. Research and write a brief report about the Dawes Act (or General Allotment Act) of 1887. How do the philosophical and political implications of this act further your understanding of Zitkala-Sa’s “Incurring My Mother’s Displeasure”?
24. Read *Be True to Your School* by Bob Greene (1988) and/or *Please Don’t Kill the Freshman: A Memoir* by Zoe Trope (2003) or similar high school memoirs. How does either of these high school experiences compare to yours or to each other? Why do you think that is so?
25. Read *Bullseye: Stories and Poems by Outstanding High School Writers* edited by Pawlak, Lourie, and Padgett (1995) and/or *Coming of Age in America: A Multicultural Anthology* edited by Frosch and Sotto (1995) and/or *Early Harvest: Student Writing from the Rural Readers Project* edited by Rachele Syme (2000), or similar collections. Which pieces seem to be the most honest to you? Why?
After reading these experiences from these points of view, what insights and/or new awareness do you have?

27. Read *Don’t Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years* by Johnson and Schelhas-Miller (2000) and/or *Empty Nest . . . Full Heart: The Journey from Home to College* by Andrea Van Steenhouse (2002) and/or *Letting Go: A Parents’ Guide to Understanding the College Years* by Coburn and Treeger (2003), or a similar guide for parents of college students. After reading these experiences from these points of view, what insights and/or new awareness do you have?

28. Choose at least three films from the list at the end of this chapter. What do they seem to say about high school? What support do you have for your position?

29. Choose one of your responses to “Some Possibilities for Writing” in this chapter and do further research on some aspect of the topic. Write about how and why this new information would have improved your previous effort.

30. Find the original text from which one of the selections in this chapter was taken. What led you to choose the text you did? How does reading more from the text affect your original reading? Is there more you would like to know about the text, its subject, or its author? Where might you find this further information?

**Selected Films—“Where We’re Coming From”**

*Almost Famous* (2000, USA). Cameron Crowe’s semi-autobiographical tale of a high-school boy who is given the chance to write a story about an up-and-coming rock band as he accompanies it on their concert tour. Comedy/Drama. 122 min. R.

*American Graffiti* (1973, USA). The action takes place over one typical night for a group of high school graduates. Co-written and directed by George Lucas (the auteur behind the *Star Wars* trilogy). Comedy. 110 min. PG.

*American Primitive* (2008, USA). Tells the story of the havoc in a teenage girl’s life when she discovers her widowed father is gay. Drama. 83 min. R.

*Assassination of a High School President* (2008, USA). At a Catholic high school, the popular girl teams up with a sophomore newspaper reporter to investigate a case of stolen SAT exams. Comedy, 93 min. R.

*Boyz N the Hood* (1991, USA). The film follows the stories of childhood friends who grow up in a Los Angeles ghetto. Drama. 107 min. R.

*The Breakfast Club* (1985, USA). Forced to spend a Saturday detention in school, five disparate high school kids find that they have more in common than they ever realized. John Hughes directed. Comedy/Drama. 97 min. R.

*Breaking Away* (1979, USA). Oscar winner (for best original screenplay) about a teen just out of high school searching for his identity through bicycle racing. Filmed on location at Indiana University. Comedy/Drama. 100 min. PG.
Can’t Hardly Wait (1998, USA). It's graduation night for a group of high school seniors, and each of them must face the future while learning to let go of the past. Comedy. 100 min. PG-13.

Class (1983, USA). Two prep school roommates come up against class differences and a salacious secret neither one is fully aware of. Comedy/Drama. 98 min. R.


Do the Right Thing (1989, USA). Spike Lee’s film of racial tensions that finally boil over in the Bed-Stuy district of Brooklyn during the hottest day of the summer. Comedy/Drama/Crime. 120 min. R.

The Education of Little Tree (1997, Canada). A heartwarming adaptation of the acclaimed best-seller about an eight-year-old Cherokee boy in Tennessee’s Smoky Mountains during the 1930s. Drama, 112 min. PG.

Election (1999, USA). An obnoxious overachiever running for student body president is opposed by an unlikely candidate egged on by a vindictive teacher. Comedy. 103 min. R.

Elephant (2003, USA). A violent incident rocks the students and faculty at a high school in Portland, Oregon. Drama. 81 min. R.

Fame (1980, USA). Follows four students through their years in the New York City High School for the Performing Arts. The kids fall into four clearly defined stereotypes: brazen, gay and hypersensitive, prickly, and shy. Drama. 134 min. R.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982, USA). Based on the factual book by Cameron Crowe, who returned to high school as an adult masquerading as a student for a year. Featured the film debuts of Forest Whitaker, Eric Stoltz, Anthony Edwards, and Nicolas Cage. Comedy. 90 min. R.


Heathers (1989, USA). In a half-hearted attempt at popularity, Veronica mixes with popular girls Heather I, II, and III, until she meets the darkly rebellious Jason Dean, who shows her that the flip side to popularity can be murder. Dark Comedy. 102 min. R.

Hoop Dreams (1994, USA). Recruited to attend an elite high school by professional basketball player Isaiah Thomas, Arthur Agee and William Gates are filmed for nearly five years as they struggle through successes and failures on their way to college. Documentary. 170 min. PG-13.

Hoosiers (1986, USA). A coach with a dark past and the town drunk pair up to train a small-town high-school basketball team in Indiana for the state championships. Drama. 115 min. PG.

Juno (2007, USA). Faced with an unplanned pregnancy, an offbeat young woman makes an unusual decision regarding her unborn child. Drama, 96 min. PG.

Kids (1995, USA). A young skater sets out to deflower as many virgins as possible, but things go badly when one gets tested for HIV. Drama. 91 min. R.
Mystic Pizza (1988, USA). Three young women of blue-collar Portuguese descent work in a pizzeria in the coastal town of Mystic, Connecticut, and one dreams of going to Yale. Romantic comedy. 104 min. R.

Napoleon Dynamite (2004, USA). A listless and alienated teenager decides to help his new friend win the class presidency in their small western high school, while he must deal with his bizarre family life back home. Comedy, 82 min. PG.

O (2001, USA). An update of Othello with a teen cast, taking place in a white prep boarding school in the South. The only black student, Odin, is the star basketball player. Drama. 95 min. R.

October Sky (1999, USA). Based on the memoir Rocket Boys by Homer H. Hickam Jr., this true story begins in 1957 with the Soviet Union's historic launch of the Sputnik satellite. Homer sees Sputnik as his cue to pursue a fascination with rocketry, but winning the science fair is his only ticket to college and out of life in a West Virginia coal-mining town. Drama. 108 min. PG.


The Outsiders (1983, USA). Based upon S. E. Hinton's popular novel, The Outsiders follows the lives of a group of high-school-aged boys who sit on the margins of society. Drama. 91 min. PG.

Real Women Have Curves (2002, USA). The story of Ana, a first generation Mexican-American teenager, whose traditional, old-world parents want her to help provide for the family and give up her scholarship to Columbia. Drama. 87 min. PG-13.

Rebel Without a Cause (1955, USA). A James Dean classic. Dean stars as a troubled teen who comes to a new town hoping to start over and finds both friends and enemies. Drama. 111 min. N/R.

Risky Business (1983, USA). With his parents out of town, entrepreneurial Tom Cruise decides to spend the time waiting to hear from colleges dancing in his underwear and organizing a prostitution ring. By the time he gets to college, he's a wiser man. Comedy. 99 min. R.

Rushmore (1999, USA). The king of Rushmore prep school is put on academic probation. Comedy. 133 min. R.


Sixteen Candles (1984, USA). Samantha Baker's angst-ridden love-life, as well as her sixteenth birthday, is lost in the uproar caused by her older sister's wedding. Comedy/Drama. 93 min. PG.

Thirteen (2003, USA). A thirteen-year-old girl's relationship with her mother is put to the test as she discovers drugs, sex, and petty crime in the company of her cool but troubled best friend. Drama. 100 min. R.

For critical thinking points on these films, see Appendix (p. 277).