What the Best Writing Teachers Do, How Students Can Learn From Them

You get report cards, and so should your teachers. You don't need a great writing teacher, or even a good one, to become a good writer yourself -- but it sure helps. And becoming a good writer will help you be a better student, a better worker, a better citizen and a better person.

So what does a good writing teacher look like? If you talk to the experts, they are likely to tell you that you have a better chance of landing a good writing teacher in elementary school, less of a chance in middle school, even less in high school and least in colleges and universities (and don't get me started on graduate and professional schools).

Don't take it from me. Listen to Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, in his recent study "Our Underachieving Colleges."

"Real proficiency," writes Bok, "requires sustained practice ... . Undergraduates will never learn to write with clarity, precision, and grace unless they have repeated opportunities to keep on writing and get prompt feedback from the faculty."

While some college writing programs are outstanding, writes Bok, "the field as a whole suffers from widespread neglect."

So what is a student to do? Here is a checklist of behaviors practiced by the best teachers I know. I learned them from some of the nation's greatest writing teachers, the likes of Donald Murray, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, James Slevin and many others. Feel free to examine these standards, discuss them with other students and share your opinions with parents and teachers.

The best writing teachers:

- **Encourage students to write every day.** Students should spend some time writing in class, where the teacher can see them write or not write.

- **Do not mark up and grade every assignment.** Grading papers is thankless drudgery for teachers; trying to interpret those marks is punishment for students. The good writing teacher develops a rich variety of ways of assessing student work.

- **Write, on occasion, with and for the students.** A writing teacher cannot just talk about writing. The teacher needs to be in the game, demonstrating how writers solve problems.

- **Teach writing as a process.** By now an old idea, but still undervalued by teachers who tell students what to write about and then correct all the students' mistakes.

- **Confer with student writers throughout the process.** The teacher should spend some class time on being a resource to the student writers, an inquisitive editor who asks good questions and listens.
• **Connect reading and writing.** The idea is not just to read literature for content and theme, but to come to understand the strategies professional authors use and pass them on to students.

• **Get students to talk, talk, talk about reading and writing.** Writing workshops require moments of concentrated silence, but it’s not all "shut up and sit down." Teachers must inspire classroom conversation about how reading and writing make sense.

• **Offer appropriate praise and encouragement -- as well as correction.** Teachers, especially journalism teachers, seem much better at communicating what is wrong with a text than what is right, what needs work rather than an appreciative understanding of what works.

• **Give opportunities for revision.** Good teachers attend to the three big parts of the process: prevision or rehearsal; vision or early drafting; and revision.

• **Never use writing as a form of punishment.** Remember what happened in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* to the evil pink nightmare, headmistress Dolores Umbridge, who concocted the most wicked form of writing punishment -- letters carved in blood on the backs of their hands.

• **Teach skills, like spelling and grammar, within the context of writing.** Teachers may be required to teach skills through specific lessons and drills. Fair enough, but at least use real writing to test whether students have mastered the elements of English.

• **Believe that all students, not just the "stars" can improve their writing.** Writing coach Jack Hart argues persuasively that we teach reading as a democratic social skill, something that every person should learn; but we continue to frame writing as if it were a fine art.

Good teachers deserve your support and encouragement. But you deserve the opportunity to practice the three behaviors that mark all literate people in society: to read with insight, to write with power, to talk about how meaning is made. Don't wait for these opportunities. Demand them. Power to the students!