

and change" (35). Like Duffy, hooks talks about an encouraging experience with her writing.

In "Bonehead Writing," Craig Vetter focuses on the struggle to write. Bemoaning its difficulty, Vetter characterizes writing as "a blood sport, a walk in the garden of agony" (37). The difficulty of writing is that it is thinking, much like the thinking that hooks had to do to write her autobiography. Writing is not just a skill of stringing together clauses and semicolons, nor spelling words correctly. Vetter contends that our writing records our thinking. And because it is critical thinking, no one can teach a person to write. In fact, he will tell you that your school is stealing students' money.

In "Writing is Not a Skill," Stanley Aronowitz agrees with Craig Vetter, that writing is more than just mastering "techniques and rules" (39). Aronowitz argues that writing is not just a skill, but also an art and a form of thinking. Because writing entails critical thinking and imagination, it is an art. If an instructor sees writing as simply a set of skills, that instructor limits the art of writing and prevents it from being a meaning-making process. Aronowitz challenges instructors in all disciplines to teach the writing of their disciplines as the art of making meaning.

Aronowitz's argument on skill and art in writing takes us back to the beginning articles that claim how we perceive writing impacts, not only how we succeed at writing, but also how we are taught writing. Your teacher's attitude toward writing influences how he or she teaches, which in turn impacts you as a writer. As you read these pieces, examine your attitude toward writing and your teachers' attitudes. How well do these authors' attitudes and beliefs fit with yours? Look for the arguments laid out by these authors. How are they trying to persuade you? Do you buy it? Why or why not?

I Won't Use Writing as Punishment. I Won't . . .

ROY PETER CLARK

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Prize-winning authors for more than thirty years, and has spoken about the writer's craft on The Oprah Winfrey Show, National Public Radio, and Today. He writes a regular column, "Writing Tools," for PowerOnline. Clark is the author or editor of several books on journalism and writing. His most recent work is Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer. A version of "I Won't Use Writing as Punishment. I Won't..." appeared in the St. Petersburg Times. Clark explores the impact on students when writing is used as punishment.

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[Author's note: More than 20 years after I wrote this essay, I wish I could say that it was too old-fashioned or obsolete to reprint. Heck, it was even written on a typewriter. Alas, the use of writing as punishment is still with us. One California high school teacher just sent me a message to complain that the math teachers at her school were giving writing assignments to students who misbehaved. In a delicious act of insurgency, the English teachers threatened to punish students with math problems if the math teachers didn't desist.

Another teacher wrote a moving message in which she described how a child, undergoing counseling and rehabilitation, was made to copy monotonous paragraphs for her misdeeds. Imagine the good it might do for such a child to use writing in encouraging ways.

And if such evidence were not enough, we have another icon of literacy testifying to the grotesque consequences of using writing as punishment. I mean none other than the great Harry Potter. In the fifth book and movie in the series by J.K. Rowling, Harry is punished by the world's most horrible teacher, Dolores Umbridge. The toadlike tyrant gives Harry detention for telling a terrible truth, that the evil Voldemort is back. Umbridge gives Harry a special pen and makes him write "lines" over and over, that he must not tell lies. With each stroke of the pen an excruciating bloody line forms on the back of Harry's hand, a wound that never fully heals.

I hope that Harry writes his own memoirs some day. But don't count on it.
ROY PETER CLARK - JULY 24, 2007]

One day Sam Ficarrota strolled into the library of Sandy Lane Elementary in Clearwater, where he is principal, and found two sweet-faced children doing research for a term paper. One was reading up on chipmunks, the other on hummingbirds.

Ficarrota rules his school with the tender passion of an Italian nobleman, exchanging lines of poetry with members of his

staff and talking effusively about the need to introduce children to a world of truth and beauty.

He pulled a volume from the library shelf and displayed it for the children, two fifth-grade girls named Carrí Lantto and Becky Miller. The book contained the plays of Shakespeare, written in language that children could understand. He convinced them that *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and *King Lear* would be more engaging than chipmunks and hummingbirds.

In the days that followed Becky and Carrí devoured the plays, wrote reports on the life and works of Shakespeare and introduced the Bard to their classmates.

RECENTLY, Ficarrota introduced the girls to me. We talked about the universality of Shakespeare's plays, his marvelous plots and intriguing characters and even got down to the nitty gritty, chatting about the humiliation of Bottom and the blinding of Gloucester.

We then walked into Becky and Carrí's classroom, where about 75 students waited to show me their work. They had been writing every day since the beginning of the school year for their teacher, Mary Osborne.

She has them explore ideas for stories, carefully plan their work, write rough drafts, rework the story after consultation, make changes and corrections and publish their work in a class booklet. Mark Beery handed me his story on "Teenagers and Drugs." He writes: "It is easier to prevent drug abuse than to stop the practice after it has started. If you know what drugs do to you, then you will have a better chance of not taking them. I wrote this opinion paper because teenagers need to know what drugs can do to them." The final version of his story was stapled to 11 other drafts! Each draft brought the paper closer to publication, and Mark was as proud of his efforts as he was of his final story.

Mrs. Osborne has so thoroughly converted her class to the values of good writing that the class is carrying her standard into Bonnie Lewison's second-grade class. Groups of fifth graders take the younger children to the library, where they write stories together. The older kids consult with the second graders, evaluating the stories and suggesting revisions. The fifth graders have compiled a "yucky list" to help the little ones avoid common second-grade errors and have even created a handy model of the writing process in language that second graders can understand.

THESE LITTLE miracles of collaboration are being worked throughout Pinellas County by teachers turned on to the teaching of writing. From Bay Point in the south to Ozona in the north,

I have seen students and teachers writing their way toward excellence in education.

The *Pride Awards* now recognize the outstanding student writers in the county; "Alligator Express" has provided space in this newspaper for the work of hundreds of students; and Writer's Camp, a team effort of The Poyner Institute and the school system, will bring together 20 teachers and 60 students for a summer of writing and learning.

An important part of this effort is a modest proposal by Dr. J. Howard Hinesley, executive assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, to eliminate writing as a form of punishment.

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In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, his vision of a dehumanized future society, doctors take infants and load them into rooms filled with pretty books and flowers. Attracted to the bright colors, the infants crawl over to these, feel the silky petals and crumple the bright pages. Then something happens. A nurse throws a switch, and: "There was a violent explosion. Shriiller and ever shriiller, a siren shrieked. Alarm bells maddeningly sounded. The children started, screamed; their faces were distorted with terror."

The mad scientist behind this experiment explains: "They'll grow up with what the psychologists used to call an 'instinctive' hatred of books and flowers. . . They'll be safe from books and botany all their lives."

With Huxley's parable in mind, imagine a scene in which a fifth grader is misbehaving. He's throwing spitballs, or dropping books on the floor, or laughing in the library, or giving the finger. IMAGINE THE teacher saying, "Johnny, because you've been bad, you have to draw a picture." Or, "You have to do a scientific experiment." Or, "You have to play something on the piano."

These forms of discipline seem absurd. Yet for years teachers have told Johnny, "Because you were bad, you have to write." Perhaps a student will have to write an essay under the title "Why I Must Not Laugh in the Library." Perhaps the teacher will work over the paper with a red pen, marking every flaw in crimson hieroglyphics. The exercise leaves one indelible mark on the psyche of the student: WRITING IS PUNISHMENT.

Most adults I know suffer some form of writing neurosis. I feel it, even as I type these words on my Royal Standard. And how would you feel, oh reader, if you were given a writing assignment today, knowing that your work would be published next

Sunday on this page? When is the last time you wrote anything, even a letter? What force keeps you from writing?

I sit on airplanes next to strangers and tell them that I "teach writing." Sometimes they look like they want to hold up a cross to keep me at bay. A sour expression passes over their faces as if they would have me, like Jonah, jettisoned from the plane. "Oh," they keen, "I tried to write—once."

I want to respond, imitating Sigmund Freud, "Tell me, even did you begin to have zese feelings about your writing?" My guess is that you can trace the writing neurosis to childhood. Something happened—or did not happen—in elementary school. It is there the twig is bent, or broken, by the association of writing and punishment.

IN PURE Skinnerian terms it works this way: Teachers try to modify the behavior of students by creating negative consequences for misbehavior. In one school, for example, students who misbehave badly are given a choice between suspension or writing an essay (the death penalty or life imprisonment). The unintended side effect of this process is to create in the mind of the student a perpetual association between suffering and the act of writing, in the same way that the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange* was conditioned to hate Beethoven.

A teacher recently described how her colleague in a Miami high school gets students to show up for exams. If they show up, they get to take an objective test, multiple choice, and the like. If they miss the test, the makeup is an essay exam. In other words, writing is the punishment for missing a test. Attendance for his exams is almost perfect. "Do anything, sir, but don't make me write."

My daughter once had a teacher who gave writing as punishment. She would come into the house, slam her books on the table, and proceed to her room to write 50 times: "I must not talk in the library." I noticed that the next time she went to her desk to undertake a real writing assignment, she did so with less enthusiasm. She was coming to associate the act of writing with punishment.

WATCHING HER made me recall my early school days. We often received writing as punishment, and we developed clever defense mechanisms against different types of punishment assignments.

If the teacher told us to write 100 times, "I will not talk in the library," we would write one word at a time.
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etc.

If the teacher asked us to write a hundred-word essay, we would inflate each sentence with clutter and redundancy, and count the words after every sentence: "The library should always be a quiet place, a very quiet place, a place where no talking goes on, a place where people come to study because there is always quiet there, at least in my opinion." Two more sentences like that, and the snow job is complete.

Sometimes a teacher would tell us to write an essay that would be "two sides of a piece of paper" in length. Ha, ha. It was always fun to outsmart her by writing in our most immature cursive, puffing out the length and width of each letter so that a few worthless sentences filled up the space.

THE TENDENCY to equate writing with punishment is so deeply ingrained in our educational system that it has been reflected in popular culture. During a recent episode of the television comedy *Different Strokes*, an otherwise enlightened teacher gives Arnold and his classmates a 100-word essay to write as punishment for misbehaving in the hallway.

In a nostalgic reminiscence of his Indiana childhood, Jean Shepherd remembers a teacher this way:

Miss Bodkin, after recess, addressed us: "I want all of you to write a theme. . . ." A theme! A rotten theme before Christmas! There must be kids somewhere who love writing themes, but to a normal air-breathing human kid, writing themes is a torture that ranks only with the dreaded medieval chin-breaker of Inquisitional fame. A theme!

In a recent film version of Shepherd's story, Miss Bodkin is portrayed in a dream sequence as a cackling witch who marks student papers with an F.

Fred Hechinger of the *New York Times* reported the story of a father, a professional writer, who complained to a teacher after his child was made to write a punitive essay. "Only once have I written an angry letter to one of my children's teachers, and that was when our son was made to write an essay as a penalty for some transgressions in class." The teacher admitted that she never considered the consequences of using writing as punishment.

The issue was addressed by Linda Lewis, principal of Lenay Elementary School in Bellevue, Neb., in an article in *Principal* magazine. During job interviews for three candidates, she asked each teacher how discipline could be maintained in the classroom. "I make them write something for me," said one. "I have offenders copy pages from the dictionary," said the second. A "fresh-faced 1981 college graduate" said, "Oh, I make them memorize poetry."

"Is it any wonder," says Lewis, "that English teachers find it difficult to whip up kids' enthusiasm for writing?"

In the *Times*, Hechinger argues that "the joy of writing is not dead in today's children unless it is killed in the bud by adults."

WHAT THEN is the appeal for some teachers and administrators in using writing as punishment?

It is easy to control, requiring little supervision. Students can be stuck in a room and required to write till their hands fall off.

It creates the illusion of an educational and counseling purpose. Students who write essays about why they should not smoke are thought to benefit from the exercise.

It seems a humane alternative to suspension or paddling.

None of these justifies the practice. Because there is often little supervision, students are not encouraged to carefully plan these essays. Students may not be required to consult with teachers, to discuss the issues and strategies of the essay, to write several drafts, to polish and correct their own work and to share it with others. When writing becomes punishment, all the positive elements of learning—organization, discovery and communication—disappear.

Moreover, there are dozens of alternatives to beating or suspending kids, many of which are now being explored in the county through an "assertive discipline" program. One of the best ways to create a positive, disciplined atmosphere for learning is to teach writing the way Mary Osborne does at Sandy Lane. Her students always seem too busy to be bad. This goes for her weaker students as well as her Pride Award winners because Mary has discovered, like so many other teachers, that writing is for all students.

THE WEAKEST students, those who most often received writing as punishment and who most fear the act of writing, need most desperately to discover the value of their own words. Fear of

writing, argues John Daly of the University of Texas, “is related to low self-concept and low self-confidence” as well as various kinds of academic failure.

Recently I spent two weeks teaching a group of sixth graders who had been grouped together at the “basic skills” level. Students in this group sometimes refer to themselves as “the dumb class.”

Students in this class expected little of themselves and each other. They distrusted me at first. They seemed a bit beaten down and demoralized. They did not laugh at my jokes, and I often saw a look of collective hopelessness on their faces.

When I asked them about their writing, many answered in one-word responses and spoke so softly they could not be heard. Some students wrote their names in the tiniest script as if they were trying to hide their identities in the farthest corner of the paper. Their body language was defensive. They were trying to protect themselves from me. Over the years they had developed sophisticated strategies for avoiding teacher scrutiny.

I TRIED to break through these barriers by being unshakably positive in my response to their work. I told them that by the end of two weeks, each student will have written the best story of his or her life, published it in a class booklet, and read it aloud in front of the principal. They looked at me as if I were an oily used car salesman.

But it worked. Some students wrote three or four drafts, and one student wrote four complete stories. They read their work to each other and perhaps for the first time in their lives, began to take charge of their own education by revising and correcting their own work. They wrote about pets, friends, games, and trips. Some students wrote deeply personal narratives, which revealed much about their learning problems. I saw looks of satisfaction and triumph when, on the final day, they read their stories aloud and the principal applauded.

We will experience more and more of these triumphs as the good writing movement sweeps from school to school, from classroom to classroom, and from student to student. We should be teaching the Golden Rule. And we should embrace the Silver Rule as well: “Thou shalt not give writing as punishment.” If you disagree, your punishment is to write it out 100 times.

Thinking and Writing Questions

1. Why, according to Clark, do teachers assign writing as a form of punishment? Why don't teachers give us math problems as a form of punishment?

2. Examine the structure of Clark's piece. Even though the title says it's about writing as punishment, why might he start and end the piece with examples of teachers and students working on authentic writing? What purpose does Clark accomplish with this structure?
3. The authors in Chapter Two speak about the practice of writing as a process of making many choices as one decides what and how to compose. What happens to a writer's ability to make decisions and choices when the writer is told to write one hundred times, “I will not talk in class”?
4. Clark argues that when writing is associated with punishment, a neurosis can develop that leads many to avoid writing. Students tell us of their attempts to write big, using bigger fonts and wider margins. To what lengths have you gone to avoid writing?
5. Clark writes that Mrs. Osborn has “thoroughly converted her class to the values of good writing” (5). What are these “values of good writing”? How is this different from the value placed on writing when it is used as punishment?

Writing about General Apache

DICK HARRINGTON

Educator Dick Harrington taught college composition, college-prep writing, American literature, and poetry writing for thirty-one years at Piedmont Virginia Community College. Since retiring, he gives workshops to college and university faculty worldwide on developing teaching practices that result in student success. Dr. Harrington is working on a piece of literary non-fiction about Kevin Crowe, a wood-firing potter in Nelson County, Virginia. As a guitar player for Troublesome Creek String Band on their CD “Fast as Time Can Take Me,” Harrington has been invited to play his guitar as far away as Denmark. In “Writing about General Apache” Harrington recounts the stories of two writers: how his student General Apache came to write stories about his experiences in Vietnam and how Harrington struggles to write a story about his student General Apache.

MY poem “General Apache Talks with His Writing Teacher” is a true story though I can hardly portray the degree of pain and triumph of this man, this student, this Vietnam vet who in the war had come to be known as General Apache. He took developmental