First Time Up

Dethier, Brock

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WHY YOU’VE MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE

It is time to give away the secret: teaching writing is fun.

Donald M. Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing

I know, it’s pretty cheesy to start a book with a line stolen from someone else’s opener. You may think I’m just being lazy, but that isn’t my only motivation. As a new composition teacher, you need to get used to borrowing, whether from veterans like me, founding fathers like Murray, or your officemate whose class ends just before yours begins. If you think you’re going to do everything your own way, not follow anyone’s footsteps, you’ll blow fuses before you turn in your first set of grades. Teaching composition is, and as far as I can tell always has been, a cooperative venture: comp teachers share ideas across the hall, across the country, across generations. Give credit when you can, but always remember, in a very real sense, you are not alone.

Murray’s quote may have pissed you off when you first read it. You may be nauseous from fear, frantic with last-minute preparations, panicked about everything you don’t know. Murray’s words may sound like sadistic gloating.

But they’re true. Think about it. Although you may be new to the department, you probably already know, or know of, people who finished their graduate study years ago but stick around, teaching a course or two as an adjunct when they can. Most of them eventually move on—it’s a rare department that will let adjuncts stay indefinitely. Some find “real” jobs that pay real money. Some go back to school. Some take the plunge to full-time writing. But they don’t quit teaching comp because they’re bored. People stick to it, come back to it from much better-paying jobs, because it’s fascinating. And fun.

Administrators, students, and the job itself may create headaches and make it difficult for you to enjoy yourself. But that’s why you bought this book. I wrote it to reduce the barriers and hassles and mysteries of the job, to help you get to the “fun” part as quickly as possible.
WHAT’S FUN ABOUT IT?

Getting the teaching rush. Adrenaline’s a powerful drug with impressive effects. You may be sick, worn out, irritated, distracted, but when you walk into your classroom, even years after you’ve conquered your novice butterflies, you’ll get a burst of energy that will carry you through. It may be hours before you remember, “Oh yeah, I barely slept last night.” Unless you’re unusual, you won’t be nervous after a few months (or maybe years) of teaching, but you’ll still get “up” for every class.

Being your own boss. In most places, you get to teach what you want. As Steven L. VanderStaay puts it, “Teachers are professionals in the sense that they are not so much told how to do their job as appointed to decide for themselves how best to do it” (96). You’ll rarely teach more than twelve hours each week, and you’ll control your other work hours: you’ll determine when to grade papers, prepare for class, or have conferences, so you can ski or play Grand Theft Auto during the day and work until 2 a.m. if you want. Even if the writing program gives you a book or a syllabus and administrators observe you frequently, to a large extent, you’ll be on your own. And that freedom gives you the opportunity to enjoy many other sources of fun, including:

Being creative. If you’re a creative writer, you may worry that you have to shelve your creativity while you teach your expository writing classes. But teaching a good comp course requires as much creativity as writing a short story, and few activities produce more and better writing. Writing teachers should write as much as they have time for, in front of students and on their own, both to sharpen their own skills and to make fresh and personal the frustrations and triumphs that their students are experiencing. Teachers who have never thought of themselves as “creative” soon find themselves coming up with clever, original ideas for almost every class. How can you interest your students in punctuation? How can you help a young writer develop an anecdote into an essay?

Answering such questions daily can make even your subconscious creative. In the midst of working on this book, I had a teaching anxiety dream (yes, even veterans get them). This one had all the elements: I had forgotten the class—an American lit survey; I couldn’t get to my office; I couldn’t find the classroom; students jammed the halls; I hadn’t ordered the books. But even in the nightmare, I thought like a creative teacher—I figured we’d read James Fenimore Cooper’s The Pioneers first, and I’d
explain to my class that I hadn’t ordered the book because it was so readily available in so many editions that I decided to let them save money and buy an old copy wherever they could.

**Peeking into other lives.** Yes, writing teachers are voyeurs. Benevolent voyeurs. We witness the inner workings of minds at one of the great transitional moments of life. We watch as writers discover that their parents’ divorce actually improved their lives, that the religion they grew up with doesn’t work for them any more, that the gun control debate has two rational sides, that they really are as smart as “kids” half their age. We’re bystanders, and sometimes coaches, as students plan their futures and make sense of the lives they’ve led.

And what fascinating lives to peer into! Do you remember what you were like at eighteen, nineteen, twenty? Or when you went back to school after years at home or on the job? It’s a time of rapid, radical change, and comp teachers get to sit in the bleachers, cheer, and sometimes affect this tumultuous race toward maturity. If you’re a people watcher, there’s no better vantage point.

**Learning.** If you’ve gotten this far in the educational system, you probably enjoy learning, not because you get to become some kind of “better person” in the abstract, but because you enjoy doing things you’ve never done and being places you’ve never been. You may think that, because you’re a teacher, your learning will be limited to pedagogy, but with an enthusiastic student guide, you can imagine yourself as an archaeologist, a computer programmer, an Olympic skier. If you let students choose their own topics, you may learn from a single stack of papers what it takes to be a good cheerleader, how to spike your dirtbike tires to race on ice, and how it feels to be gay in a fundamentalist household. If you respond to that first stack with “Who gives a shit?,” you’re probably in the wrong business. When most of your dinner conversations start with “I had this student paper on . . . ,” you’re hooked.

**Continuously improving.** You can always get better as a writer or teacher. We never completely figure out either activity. That can be a frustrating fact for people determined to master their art, but it’s also a major attraction of what we do. No two classes, courses, or activities are identical. It’s always new, and we can always improve.

I’m not big on setting goals; instead, I like to work in particular directions. Students can advance during a semester in so many different ways—in their ability to articulate complex concepts or use lists or write
with sophisticated syntax or learn where commas go. I’m happy to help students advance on any number of fronts, just as I’m trying to learn in a dozen directions at any one time myself.

In business, the old concepts of benchmarks and goals have largely been replaced by continuous improvement—constant monitoring of and tinkering with the system to improve it. Don’t imagine that all your students will reach a particular level. Just be happy if they all advance.

Helping. Many in our current political and social climate view altruism as a weakness of suckers and bleeding hearts, and some new teachers seem genuinely embarrassed to say, “I want to help people.” But that desire motivates every teacher to some degree. Teaching comp provides opportunities to get a kick out of helping people on every level, from being the first friendly, personal face that new college students see, to making a student’s day by responding sympathetically to a computer disaster story, to helping a student get over a lifetime hang-up about semicolons. Our job offers plenty of thanks, if we listen for them and learn how to hear them.

Teaching something useful. Our expertise is practical and universally applicable, and it will never become obsolete. With slight twists in our life stories, some of us could have ended up teaching Greek architecture or calculus, and no doubt we would have derived much teacher satisfaction from those other subjects. But because our subject is one of those “basics” that people think everyone else should return to, we don’t need to worry about whether composition will go out of fashion or whether the need for our services will suddenly disappear or whether we’re teaching something so arcane our students will never use it unless they end up as teachers themselves. There’s plenty to ponder when embarking on a career in composition, but you don’t need to worry about the importance of the subject.

Enjoying power. I’m particularly drawn to people in our profession because so many of them are peace-loving, anti-authoritarian sensitive feminists who would never think of using power as some of our predecessors did—to get sex or favors from their students. But that doesn’t mean we have to hate power. In fact, the attractiveness of power may be one of the biggest surprises for new comp teachers. Some people hate the dictatorial, illegitimate uses of power so much that they may not have considered the benevolent, fun ways they can use power. When you set firm guidelines and deadlines for the first paper, you may be amazed that students don’t rise up and revolt. Unless your rules are outrageous or
you draw a particularly unfortunate group of students, few will complain. They will accept your power and your use of it, and in the long run they will be glad that you used your authority to motivate their self-discipline. And when a student emails to tell you that the resumé or “statement of purpose” essay “worked,” got the job or the acceptance, or your insights on how to play the system were accurate, you’ll be glad for the power you have.

*Having an effect.* Power can get students to do the work, but only power used wisely and well can produce the kinds of effects we want to have. Few things are more gratifying than a student’s saying with astonishment, “I didn’t know I could do that.” When you see students’ attitudes and writing and even colon use changing, you will get a sense of efficacy that is one of the main antidotes to burnout . . . and it will in turn make you an even more effective teacher (McLeod 117). And, yes, it’s fun.

*Enjoying the variety.* Teaching writing is seldom dull. Well, sure, if you spend more than five minutes lecturing about punctuation, your students will nod off and so will you. And if you assign paper topics, you will get bored with those subjects. But in general, the work of the composition teacher defies generalizations. Whenever the pundits make sweeping claims about “young people today,” we know the limits of the claim, and exceptions spring to mind. Whatever succeeded last semester or last period may well flop today. The work we do on any particular day is as varied as the individuals in our classes and unique as the writing those individuals produce.

Of course, you need to keep your eyes and ears open to capture all the interesting moments that keep us awake and amused—the snatch of conversation between the classmates starting to flirt, the priceless malapropism, the shift in a paper that signals a major revision of perspective, the student story that will come to define your thinking about anorexia or the Piltdown man. As long as you maintain your own curiosity, composition will retain its fascination.

*Bonding with peers.* Camaraderie may be the most alluring and addicting aspect of the comp teacher’s job. An unusual and powerful bond develops when you wander, punchy and bleary, into your neighbor’s office after you’ve both survived a day of three classes or twenty-seven conferences. Or when you suggest just the right activity when your office mate rushes in, frantic for ideas, ten minutes before class. Or when you spend two hours and $10 of beer money grousing about the student who won’t shut up or the class that won’t talk.
I was intensely grateful for this community of the trenches during my twenty-plus years as an adjunct, and I miss it now that I’m a faculty member, a “real person” with a private, semi-permanent office on the first floor. I don’t romanticize the comp slave’s life enough to return, at age fifty-two, to the fourth floor and a four/four load. But I do know what I’ve lost, and the casual professional respect of my current peers does not make up for it. Some of the relationships developed in the comp ghetto survive; most evaporated as we went our separate ways. But for a semester or a decade, they were intense, meaningful, and real, and I would not willingly lose the memories of climbing the stairs into the composition attic, feeling the way many people do when entering their favorite bar or club.

If you’re lucky in your first year or two, you may develop a close relationship with someone who doesn’t live in the trenches—a “real” professor, perhaps one of the writing program administrators. Such relationships can be tricky, because you may have to shift roles almost instantly, from talking like equals at lunch, to becoming a staff member again when your boss runs the staff meeting, to regressing to “student” in a class you’re taking from your professor friend. But if you’re careful about observing the boundaries of each different pair of roles, a personal relationship with someone further up the hierarchy can be rewarding for both of you—and can be a major asset in your career advancement. (See “Mentors” in Chapter 3.)

Creating a writing community. We create our own microworld in our classes, and it can be profoundly gratifying if that world is more friendly, cooperative, and creative than the “real” one. Many people invest considerable time in building such a community (see Chapter 4), and I’ve seen some new graduate instructors ready to burst with pride when relating how their collection of twenty-two first-year students became a supportive, productive, caring group, able to mix work and fun, respectful of each other, their teacher, and writing in general. Students who learn the joys of writing and of talking about writing in such communities will seek out similar experiences in the future . . . and form other writing groups.

Reveling in favorite things. Many teachers feel guilty if they let their life creep into their classroom. But whatever your passions—Romantic poetry, mystery novels, The Simpsons, black-and-white photography—you can productively bring them into the comp classroom. Don’t create an intellectual wall between your classroom and the rest of your life. (See Chapter 11.) You won’t necessarily share the love poems you’re writing to your latest crush or your thesis on Anthony Trollope. But don’t rule it out. Look
for connections, relevancies. Students love enthusiastic teachers, so if you can increase your classroom enthusiasm by including Trollope, maybe you can wake students up, and maybe you can find a way to use his prose to talk about style. I wrote a whole book—From Dylan to Donne—about my habit of bringing music into my classes; maybe the pedagogical uses of your passions deserves a book too.

Ironically, the trickiest enthusiasms to bring into your composition classroom may be ones most closely related to the class topic—journalism and “creative writing” for instance. Both of these siblings of composition have much to teach us. If fiction, for instance, is your passion, you may well find that you can use both the analytical and the creative tools of fiction writing to great advantage in a composition course. The problem is remembering that few of your students will ever write a short story. So, fun and enlightening as they may be, the techniques of fiction writing deserve a place in a comp class only if they advance the goals of composition. It is easy to get lost in the enticements of the activity and forget that it needs to be fun and meaningful.

Thinking. In discussions about career choices, inevitably the question comes up, What’s the smartest way to think about a career? Many of us move in a particular direction because of someone else’s sense of our aptitudes or interests—Barto does well in math, so people tell him to be an engineer; Sonja pursues a business degree because people told her it would make her rich. I’m wary of anyone making important decisions based on others’ biases and judgments—even my own, say, in this book. But what’s a better way?

I pondered that question one evening after class. It wasn’t that I had to answer it; no one had asked it directly, and a perfectly legitimate answer would have been, “You’ve got to figure that out for yourself.” But the question interested me, and I wanted an answer for myself. After all, when applying to college I had put “chemistry” in the “intended major” box; my math aptitude was higher than my verbal. And here I was, forty years old, making half my age despite my Ph.D. and years of experience. In those days, career questions were never far from my mind. Finally, I had a moment of epiphany. The right career is one that gives you material that you enjoy pondering, not because you have to, but because it’s interesting, meaningful, maybe even fun.

Although that was a particularly productive pondering session, it didn’t differ radically from what I do almost every night during the school year—rethink what went on during the day’s classes. Sometimes I imagine
what I could have done differently, but mostly I sketch out what I should
do during the following classes to build on, modify, or transform the
previous class or reading. The thinking that my job requires engages me
on many levels. I miss it during my summers off, and often I find myself
planning fall courses long before I need to.

My realization about careers may not be “right” or even particularly
useful, but the scene demonstrates the mental delights of teaching comp.
Look at the kinds of thinking embodied in this anecdote:

• Connecting the immediate and the long-range. I’m not sure this
rates as “fun” for everyone, but if you do it fairly consistently, it
protects you against the feeling that you’re lost in the trees and
can’t see the forest.

• Seeing the parallels between my life and my students’ lives. I steer
students away from teachers who give the impression of handing
down wisdom from their throne of knowledge, infinitely elevated
above the classroom rabble. I can imagine that that kind of power
trip might be attractive, for a while, but it would almost certainly
become boring. If you know all the answers, why not write them
down, hand them out, and go home? Teaching fascinates when
we’re tackling a problem that engages our own imagination as
well as our students’.

• Creativity. (See above.) Many writing teachers—who should know
better!—conceive of creative work in stereotypical ways, linked
solely with “creative” arts. But the thinking involved in planning
tomorrow’s comp class is as creative as it comes. It requires not
just talent and training but a willingness to experiment and to
move beyond or around traditional, received ideas and attitudes.
Every day, we respond in novel ways to novel situations, whether
the problem is finding a way to explain “coherence” or figuring
out what’s “fair” to require of a student hurt in a car crash. At
first, such thinking on your feet, without any reliable guide or
precedent, scares most new teachers, and you may yearn for the
straightforward simplicity of scanning a barcode and counting out
change. If you’re like me, you may never completely get beyond
rethinking your spontaneous decisions and finding better solu-
tions for the illusory “next time.” But I hope you’ll also find exhil-
arátion in such quick thinking, you’ll keep a mental notebook
of your own and others’ clever solutions to difficult student problems, and you’ll begin to feel that a day of teaching is akin to a day of surfing or skiing, staying on top as you hurtle along, accepting the falls as all part of the sport.

• Organization. Many people who go into composition teaching identify themselves as the artsy, disorganized type, the type that can’t keep appointments straight and who lose three grade books each year. But if you’re going to survive as a teacher, or in just about any other independent job, you’ll have to find ways to get organized and keep track of things. And I’m betting that you’ll actually enjoy it.

  Most aspects of teaching composition could be described as barely controlled chaos: the classroom itself, often a five- or six-ring circus (though the ringmaster doesn’t have a whip); your gradebook, where you may try to keep track of everything from who talked on what day to what subjects everyone’s working on; and of course the papers, perhaps multiple drafts of the same paper, some coming in, some headed back to students, some just waiting to be marked in the book. You may borrow organizational ideas from this or other books or from peers or mentors, but within a year you’ll have a system different from anyone else’s, and you’ll be modifying it for the rest of your career. This prospect may strike you as anything but fun, but remember: it’s the chaos, and the prospect of dealing with chaos, that is so daunting. Taming that chaos, making it orderly, is fun. And the process may show you strengths you never knew you had, strengths that can carry over to other areas of your life.

  I urge those who are wondering about it to become writing teachers. Few things in our society are less alienating, less immobilized by competition and greed, more likely to bring us in contact with those from all parts of society, more likely to make it possible to participate in both individual and social growth, more involved in exchanging important thoughts and feelings with others, more relaxed and intense at once, and more joyful and less sad even in frustration and failure. (David Bleich, 62)

WHAT STANDS IN YOUR WAY?

The rest of this book attempts to identify and slay (or at least sneak by) the demons that make it difficult for some people to enjoy teaching
comp. Most new writing teachers share very similar worries, yet often they feel alone with their worries and silly for having them. So I want to list a few right off the bat. I’ll provide some quick antidotes now; look for others as you read on.

1. Fear and lack of confidence

   Everyone starts here. I’ll never forget the secretary laughing at me as I hyperventilated in the courtyard before my first class. And the reassurances—“You’ll do fine!”—made me feel as bad as the laugh. So this book will take your fears seriously, present some worst-case scenarios to keep you from being surprised, and try to separate legitimate fears from worries that will likely prove groundless. One piece of advice for now (and this will be my prescription for many problems mentioned in this book): find a sympathetic veteran and share your fears. Get them out of the closet, name them, laugh at them. The worst thing you can do is live alone with your fear.

   Susan McLeod offers a valuable metaphor:

   The choir directors of my youth used to say we should be keyed up rather than nervous, so as to perform at peak. Channel that energy, they would say—make your butterflies fly in formation. (1)

   New teachers must transform the nervous energy we all feel into the classroom energy that many students love and most students count on. Get those butterflies into formation and you may turn that incipient nausea into enthusiasm.

2. Time

   Yes, if I had a way of stretching time, I wouldn’t be sweating in front of a screen writing books about composition. Much of my *Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide* focuses on saving time, and I will give as much advice as I can in this book. But no one ever conquers the issue of time.

   I can almost guarantee that you will be astonished by the amount you can get done in a semester. I still look back on some semesters and ask, “How did I make it through?” The first step in feeling less oppressed about time should be identifying what’s crucial for the upcoming semester and where you can cut some corners. Desperate, many new teachers assume that “work” is crucial and “life” can be sacrificed, but for grad students, even that flip answer doesn’t suffice. Your graduate advisor will remind you that you are, first, a student; your writing director may argue
that your own students come first. Thinking ahead about how you’re going to reconcile those incompatible claims on your time may save you some agony later.

3. Volume

We’re overwhelmed. The problem isn’t just time and organization; it’s the sheer volume of stuff—stuff that your writing director wants you to learn (like the difference between reader-based prose and writer-based prose, or how to teach the insights of social construction); stuff that everyone assumes you know but you don’t (like the difference between a gerund and a participle); stuff you feel you ought to know to be a good teacher (like every student’s name).

Face it: composition’s an overwhelming business. This book will help you sort the crucial from the trivial and give you some handle on the crucial, but the feeling of trying to surf a landslide won’t ever completely leave you. Two interrelated “secrets” about this feeling:

• Learning to write better is a huge, lifelong task; students could productively take a writing course every semester throughout college without much repetition and without feeling “done.” So give up right now any thought you have of covering “everything” or solving all of a writer’s habitual problems. No one can, and trying may make you skim everything.

• Take it a day at a time. The best anyone can do is to make sure that every minute (well, almost every minute) of the day is productive and students are learning something, whether classmates’ names or how to organize a long paper.

4. Imposter Syndrome

We all feel like impostors at some point, and anyone who claims, “I can teach you to write,” is a fraud, since the best we can do is help people learn, help them improve. But when we feel fraudulent, it’s not that generalized, philosophical kind of fraud we’re talking about. It’s the “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing” kind.

I’m not sure I’d trust someone who has never wrestled with the imposter feeling, and no one can seriously claim to know everything about teaching writing. I felt most fraudulent myself when I taught my first business writing class, since I had no background in business or business writing.
and in fact considered capitalism a destructive, immoral force. But the students liked me because I was a voice of warm-n-fuzzy humanism in the MBA world of productivity benchmarks. We figured out together how to apply my knowledge of writing to the writing challenges they faced in the business world.

It’s probably obvious to you how much you don’t know about your job, but think about how much you do know, starting with the insights and generalizations that come from attention to your own writing, and including any books and articles you’ve read, classes you’ve taken, conferences you’ve attended. It’s worth reminding yourself every day of the simple but fundamental point that Edward Corbett makes: “students can learn whatever the teacher knows that they do not know” (2). And the most important thing students can learn may be the most basic: “a thirst and a respect for knowledge and a sterling set of intellectual and moral values” (4). A sixty-minute writing class might require four or five clever, practical activities. If you can come up with those for each class, you’re producing the same kind of course that a veteran creates. Unless you call attention to your unworthiness—a big mistake!—your students will probably never imagine that this might be your first course.

Teachers establish their authority and legitimacy in a variety of ways, and the vast majority of students automatically respect anyone with the teacher label; authority is yours to keep or lose. We’ll talk about many ways to maintain that authority, but the key one is simply to act like a professional. There may be questions you can’t answer, and you can’t necessarily prepare for them. But you can always be to class on time, prepared, with everything functioning. You can learn names in the first couple of weeks, return papers quickly, do what you said you were going to do, when you promised it. Your syllabus alone can assure students you’re someone to take seriously, as it establishes high, specific standards and assumes sincere, adult work from students.

Professional sloppiness and self-deprecation eat away at students’ respect more quickly than an occasional “I don’t know.” So don’t start the semester saying “I’m a greenhorn bottom-of-the-heap graduate instructor” or “I’m only an adjunct.” If you project an air of authority, students probably won’t question it, and you’ll gradually grow into the self that you’re projecting. As my colleague Bruce Ballenger says, you need to get students to focus on their performance, not yours.

Elizabeth Rankin suggests that the fraud feeling for beginning teachers arises because these teachers “don’t yet feel the authority they’ve been
given, so they try to act it out in ways that feel false even to them. In the process, what they lose is the chance to relate easily with students, the chance to use their youth and shared culture to advantage in their teaching” (5). Take advantage of your youth (or your wisdom), your cultural knowledge, the things you know that impress students.

When you’re feeling guilty one day after faking it once again, consider the glorious consequences of “fudging it.” According to Ruth Freeman Swain, “Fudge . . . was probably discovered when a batch of caramels was ‘fudged,’ or ruined” (1). May all fakes have such consequences.

5. Grammar

The fear of being revealed as a grammar fraud terrifies many beginning writing teachers. We’re supposed to be experts on grammar, right? So what do you do when a student asks a grammar question about which you don’t have a clue?

First, it probably won’t happen. I don’t think I’ve ever had a student ask me, “What part of speech is that?” or “How would you diagram that sentence?” They’re as afraid of exposing their ignorance as you are, and they have no motivation to get into the subject in the first place. If a student ever does ask me such a question, I tend to answer with something like “Why does it matter?” Many students have the same warped impression that the general public has about writing—that the most important stuff is what’s easiest to test. So a picky grammar question can occasion a quick discussion about the kinds of decontextualized language identification and testing students have been subjected to.

And when you just don’t know, it’s much better to say “I’ll get back to you on that” than to give a wrong answer. Responding honestly can teach students an important lesson about writers’ priorities: “I haven’t done that stuff since junior high; I’ll have to look it up. Like most writers, I make that kind of decision by ear or instinct or I check a handbook during proofreading.” Even when I have a good answer myself, I may respond to a student’s question with “Anybody?” Often a few students at least think they know grammar, and they may disagree long enough to give you a chance to come up with either an answer or a way to punt. Make it a research project. “Can you look that word up for us and bring us a definition next class?”

Finally, we should be ready to quote the famous conclusion reached by the authors of *Research in Written Composition* over forty years ago and confirmed by scores of researchers since: “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and
practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, Schoer 37-38). So don’t feel guilty if you’re not doing daily grammar drills. You’re in the best of company.

Figure 1

The Road Signs of Writing

Try making punctuation decisions by thinking of punctuation marks as road signs that give readers quick and accurate information of what is to come. Your options are few and straightforward, and they can be arranged in a rough hierarchy, from periods (which the British call “full stops”), down to parentheses, which some readers barely notice.

| . | Full stop. Prepare to shift gears, though you may be able to roll right through. |
| , | Take a breath, now, and prepare for a curve. |
| : | Restatement coming: example, definition, or quotation. |
| ; | Reaching the end of one independent clause; prepare for another. |
| — | Prepare for a sharp curve—watch the cliff on the right!—or a change in road surface. |
| ( | You can ignore this (if you want to). |

Examples of the final four:

- We need five things for the picnic: eggs, salt, spoons, cake, and ants.
- He’s a no-good man: he dropped her with a thud. *Note that you could also use a semicolon here, but the colon gives the reader more precise information.*
- John Kennedy was right: “Ask not what your country can do for you.”
- You can end an independent clause with many marks of punctuation; a semicolon, however, is the only one that assures a reader another independent clause is coming before the period.
- He named his son Walter—his enemy’s name!—and his daughter Mourning Glory.
- She moved here from Philadelphia (a beastly place, in my opinion), and she hasn’t been back East since.

Because the teaching of grammar frustrates teachers and angers politicians, many smart minds have tackled the issue, and you can find plenty
of help if you want to do grammar “right.” Constance Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context* is a fine all-around source, while Rei Noguchi’s *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing* has a more limited focus but includes a wonderfully creative way to teach sentence boundaries. Muriel Harris and Katherine E. Rowan’s “Explaining Grammatical Concepts” describes how to set up grammar questions efficiently and orchestrate practice to teach particular concepts.

New teachers are often terrified of grammar because they’re well aware of their own grammatical weaknesses, but with some courage, those weaknesses can become strengths, as you explore with the class the difference between hyphens and dashes or the reason we use possessives before gerunds. If you can remember your own frustration when you felt that you wrote well but did badly on grammar tests, and if you can get beyond the punitive feeling—“I had to suffer diagramming sentences, so my students should too”—your empathy will serve you and your students well. And you’ll soon see improvements in your own writing and in your ability to explain subtle points to your students.

6. Age

The first class I ever taught was at a community college in rural Virginia. I was twenty-four. The average student was twenty-eight. It turned out to be one of the friendliest courses I’ve ever taught, and the students gave me some of the best evaluations of my career. Some were young enough to think I was cool, others old enough to pity this scared young grad student. I’m not suggesting this is a typical experience. I just think age—that is, youth—is as likely to work for you as against you. Near the end of his remarkable career, Edward Corbett encouraged composition teachers to “really or vicariously [project] ourselves back into the status of students”(8). If you’ve recently made the switch from student yourself, that crucial projection should be easy.

You may have a student who doesn’t respect you because of your age, old or young. But you also may have a student who can’t respect you because of your argyle socks or the cut of your backpack. Youth confers on you advantages that you won’t fully appreciate until they’re gone. The advantages of experience are more obvious—as your expertise and your résumé grow, you’ll be more relaxed and confident in class. But as you get wiser, you’re getting older too, and each year your students treat you more like a parent, less like a friend.
7. Fearing the Job Can’t Be Done

You’re probably well aware of the shortcomings of your own writing, but you may not yet believe what old fogies like me will tell you—that all writers are learners and we never reach a point where we can say, “Now I know all about it and can teach it.” It’s true you can’t teach someone to write, in the same sense that you can’t make a horse drink. But if students have even a modicum of motivation, you can help them learn.

Virtually any writing resource can help you help your students; almost every writing text now includes pages of ideas on how to come up with topics, focus, organize, format. You may feel least capable of helping students with their style, but many excellent books are available: Richard Lanham has written a number of books based on his “Paramedic Method,” a quick step-by-step approach to making writing more direct and active, and Joseph Williams’s *Style* will satisfy any student’s curiosity about the subtleties of English.

And you’ll probably discover that the “help” students need most is not some kind of linguistic expertise but a willingness to listen, to read carefully and ask good questions, to engage with the ideas. Ironically, people skills may be more important for most writing teachers than writing knowledge. And improving students’ attitudes about writing almost certainly benefits them more in the long run than helping them learn the vocabulary of grammar.

8. Lack of Concrete Benefits

This book enumerates scores of benefits of teaching composition, but none are as palpable, as obvious, as universally recognized, as unambiguous as a decent paycheck or a “Professor” before your name. When you’re degraded in all the categories that society values most, it’s difficult to see the benefits of the job, and even when someone points them out to you, it’s hard not to think “what bullshit rationalization!” As David Foster put it twenty years ago, “Teaching writing is [or at least can be] a uniquely thankless job” (2). Or as I put it once, myself:

ADJUNCT

With a Bartleby of Arts
and a doctorate in Denial,
I’ve survived four chairs,
three deans and
six or eight directors.
Student butts beyond count
have squirmed in my one chair.
My floor is white with dead letters.
My recycling box is always full.
Take the stairs to the top—
no penthouse here—
hang lefts until you see the end.
Where the hallway dies, that’s me—
King of the Dead End,
Master of Intermission,
Sultan of Sour Grapes.
The ceiling is low,
the walls very high,
there’s a window into a shaft.
The perfboard’s covered
with crayoned monsters,
tales of freak beheadings,
the shelves are filled with
books thrown out by those who rose.
Read the screed
outside my door,
genuflect before you knock—
in a year if you’re lucky
you’ll be on the tenure ladder
at the College of Great Benefits
while I’m teaching your replacement
how to climb.

A large percentage of people who end up teaching composition profess not to buy into American materialist culture. I don’t know whether that means that neo-hippies flock to composition or whether everyone who survives in composition does so by becoming cynical about the benefits they’re not getting. In any case, you’ll be happier at this job if you can persuade yourself that money and status really don’t matter. The search for intrinsic benefits will pay off, but the search for professional pay for professional composition teaching probably won’t. I’m not saying, “sell yourself short” or “stop agitating for better working conditions.” I just don’t want you holding your breath until you get what you deserve.
9. The Groucho Marx Syndrome

Groucho famously said that he didn’t want to belong to any club that would accept him as a member, and new composition teachers, already feeling like frauds and suckers, getting paid badly for work they’re not sure they or anyone can do well, may question the value of the whole enterprise. The secret to combatting this syndrome will become clear to you slowly—while the composition club may not have the cachet of the Shakespeare Society or the theory cabal, comp teachers know that the goal of improving students’ writing is practical, reachable, and almost universally supported. Few other disciplines can make similar claims.

10. Your Expectations

The belief that the job is a stopover, a transition on the way to greater things can destroy any hope you have of enjoying it or sticking with it. It’s true that few people spend their careers teaching comp, but drifting across disciplinary boundaries occurs in most academic areas, especially as teachers become administrators or researchers. When I was starting out, very few people went to school to teach writing—composition teachers were literary scholars sidetracked by the fascination of their comp classes or the realization that that’s where the jobs were. Some people do teach comp for just a semester or two and go on to other things. But don’t assume that this will be your route. Put yourself into it, give it a decent shot. And then you can decide where you want to end up.

If you’re like me and many other composition teachers, the greatest barrier to your having fun may be your own critical makeup. We remember the one negative evaluation, not the twenty-three positive ones. We berate ourselves for the one typo in the eight-page syllabus. If you tend to be that way, the best favor you can do for yourself is to notice the good moments—the thank you’s, the relieved faces when students discover you’re human, the sudden small improvements in a student’s writing. Celebrate finishing a class right on time having accomplished exactly what you’d planned. Savor those moments, feel them. If you can’t come to view such moments as the reward, you won’t last long in composition.

YOU KNOW YOU’RE IN THE WRONG JOB WHEN . . .

Teaching composition isn’t for everybody. Even those of us who devote an entire career to composition wonder on occasion if we really should have
pursued that interest in glass blowing. So how do you tell if your frustra-
tion with your teaching now will last for years? If you’re really not cut out
to read seventy-three ten-page essays over a weekend?

I gave one answer, the most serious one, at the end of the first section
of this chapter: if the job engages your imagination, if you’re thinking
about it at night, on weekends, during the summer, then you’ve found a
profession. But if many of the following seem familiar to you, it might be
time to reconsider plan B.

*Avoiding the Stack of Papers in the Study Has Led You to Clean the House So
Maniacally That You Break a Knuckle on Your Scrubbing Hand Trying to Get
the Grout Behind the Toilet.*

All teachers get tired of grading papers, no matter what clever alterna-
tives to traditional grading they use. I get antsy about reaching the bottom
of the stack, but I seldom have to fake interest in the next paper. If you
really don’t give a shit, five hundred more papers over the next few years
will not change your mind.

*All Your Students Irritate You, and You Find Yourself Wanting to Respond to
Their Incessant Self-Centered Griping with “Whatever.”*

Perhaps some quantitative comp person could devise a way to measure
a teacher’s level of unhappiness by determining what percentage of the
class currently drives the teacher crazy:

95% look for other work

50% you’ve got a few more years in you if you can concentrate on
the good students

0% you must be onto some good drugs.

*All of Your Students in One Course or One Semester or of One Sex Blend
Together into One Undifferentiated JanelleJanineJayneyJudyJill.*

The vast majority of students who move through our classes are pleas-
ant and reasonably well motivated. They don’t cause problems. They
don’t demand much from us, and they may even thank us on the course
evaluations. That can be great, but what keeps most of us teaching, I
think, are the individuals, the two or three each semester that connect
with us in important ways, the ones we know we’ve affected. Worry if you
can’t remember a single outstanding student from a recent class.
Your Inner Sadist Has Begun to Love Teaching. “Squirm!” Has Become Your Favorite Silent Command.

I sometimes feel that students treat me like a dartboard, and that makes me want to yank the darts from my own head and send them back. I need to catch myself when I find myself gleefully marking down another “late” in my book, knowing that the infraction will push the offender to another level of punishment.

Words Bore You.

It’s not a crime to be uninterested in language. I’m not interested in opera, and I’ll still show my face on a big-city street, at least during the day. But if you don’t like playing Scrabble or Boggle, if figuring out how to put it just right always frustrates and never rewards, if you tire quickly of your friend’s clever punning, if you just don’t care about the different uses of “which” and “that,” then you might be smart to get out of such a word-oriented business.

You Survive by Hoping for Tomorrow, but Tomorrow Never Comes.

This delicate issue requires some soul-searching. It may even be a religious issue, since it comes down to a question of living for the present or living for some imagined future.

I taught composition as an adjunct for nineteen years. The pay improved slowly, we finally got benefits, I expanded my repertoire of classes . . . but my job was never going to change in a significant way. And I wasn’t holding my breath. I thought the work intrinsically interesting enough, and valuable enough, to be worth doing as I was doing it . . . and I was lucky enough to have a spouse who made “real” money (for academia). I had lots of other jobs on the side, and figured I was just as likely to write the Great American Novel with teaching as my day job as I was to do it making ten times as much selling insurance.

What I’m saying is: that decision—to try to be happy with my head pressed against a glass ceiling—required a particular temperament and a particular set of circumstances, and I’m not by any means advocating it for everyone.

You need to become aware of what you’re feeling as you work—a time when you’re usually too busy to monitor your happiness level. For me, the clearest indication that I don’t like the work is that I become hyperconscious of time. The clock refuses to move and the bell refuses to ring, as
happened as we waited for lunch hour in high school. Five o’clock starts looking so good, I can’t believe it will ever really come.

Teaching composition—and especially holding conferences—makes me punchy, hyped, exhausted, euphoric, depressed . . . sometimes all at the same time, but it doesn’t leave me craving five o’clock.

There’s nothing wrong with seeing this job as a phase. But if it’s a phase from hell, you need to transition quickly.