First Time Up
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Think twice before reading this chapter. I’ll probably bring up some frightening scenarios that you haven’t imagined yet. And I can tell you right now that I don’t have fast, sure solutions to any of these nightmares—they wouldn’t be nightmares if they were easy to solve or avoid. You might want to skip this chapter and return only when you actually face one of the problems identified in the sub-heads. But if you’re feeling courageous, plunge ahead for some combination of these reasons:

1. If you ponder these scenes, you’ll be in a better position to avoid them or to deal with them if they do happen. That’s one of the assumptions of this whole book, and it applies here—though with luck you may never have to grapple with these nightmares, unlike most of the issues discussed in other chapters.

2. If you’re like me, when you’re first stepping foot into unknown territory, you have a vague sense of dread that can produce almost overwhelming anxiety. It’s healthier to exchange that amorphous dread for specific worries. I’m hoping that you will read this chapter and say, “Gee, if that’s the worst that can happen, I can deal with it!”

3. It cheers up most people to realize that everyone’s in the same boat, dealing with the same fears, and that even grizzled old geezers like me lose sleep over those fears—not just first-timers.

4. Thinking about these issues one after another might help you formulate a general stance or philosophy—to be tough and unbending, for instance, or to be accepting whenever possible, or to refer all nightmares to the program director.

One point relevant to almost all these nightmares: most students’ views of the world change radically when they’re in college, and the anger or
frustration that students vent at you may well be an expression of the way they're feeling about their whole lives, confused and uneasy. Students often look back on their first college year with embarrassment; many have come to see me in junior or senior year to apologize and thank me for putting up with them. College students’ perspectives evolve in fairly predictable ways, and it may help you to read about those ways and see that you may have little to do with students’ feelings. Wilhoit provides an excellent summary of the studies done by researchers like William Perry and Mary Belenky et al, fascinating work on the ways that students learn and view the world (166-169).

So, here we go. If I don’t include your own personal nightmare, that gives you one more thing to talk to veterans or mentors about. And if you’re a glutton for this kind of punishment, check out Power and Hubbard’s *Oops: What We Learn When Our Teaching Fails.*

**NO ONE DOES THE READING**

It would be rare if no one did the reading, but you’re almost certain to have a day when you ask the first question about the day’s homework and look out to see all eyes on the floor. The big questions then are, “What do you do at the moment?” and “How can you prevent it from happening again?”

*At the moment.* We normally try not to react emotionally, but sometimes it may not be a bad thing. At least some of your students will probably respond to your emotion—when you break out of your role as unflappable, distant teacher, they may break out of their roles as “You can’t make me learn!” students.

For me, getting emotional at such a moment would mean having a little “time out” in which I empathize with their overwork and their resistance to the reading, but explain that any future lapses will produce consequences. I’ve known teachers who said, “If you don’t want to do the work, there’s no point in my being here,” and just walked out. I don’t think you can do that more than once a semester, but it certainly gets students’ attention. Or ask those who didn’t do the work to leave. Getting the day off may seem like a reward, but no one wants to file out past more conscientious classmates.

If you’re really pissed off, don’t rule out forms of punishment—give a quiz or a short essay about the reading, or arrange the class into a circle and ask everyone to talk about a favorite detail and explain how it contributes to the point of the piece assigned. A student who has to admit, “I didn’t do the reading”—or who tries to bullshit until everyone realizes that’s the case—will probably work to avoid such humiliation again. Or
you can reward those who did the reading by having everyone write an extra credit essay about it, or by holding a discussion in which the diligent students can shine.

Me? I roll my eyes and sigh and go on, filling in the details or whatever was necessary.

For the future. All but the best students need to be held personally accountable for anything you assign them. So let students know there will be a quiz about the reading every day, or a short essay or an “everyone contributes” round-the-circle discussion, and they will be graded in some fashion. You can’t influence a student who’d rather get a D for the course than do the reading. Try to make the “checking up” educational, not punitive: avoid fact-and-date quizzes; ask questions that require thought as well as memory and upon which you can build a class discussion or an essay.

And ask yourself some tough questions, too. Are your readings too long, too difficult, too alien to your students? Did you ask them to do too much in one day? Are they overwhelmed by exams or by something extracurricular like a big concert or an upcoming holiday? Have your past questions been so difficult that some students have concluded there’s no hope even if they have done the reading? Do you answer your own questions too quickly? Always consider the possibility that student reactions tell you something you need to hear.

STUDENTS CHALLENGE YOUR AUTHORITY

This happens much less often than you might imagine. Most college students have spent almost their entire lives in school. They know appropriate teacher-student roles, and very few work up the energy or the animosity to violate them. Real troublemakers generally don’t make it out of high school and very seldom go to college.

But it does occur occasionally. It probably has almost nothing to do with you and everything to do with the student. Although few students are outright hostile, most teachers have at least one student per class who accuses the teacher of being unfair, having favorites, or not liking students because of their ideas or writing styles. Some are, in the words of one of Elizabeth Rankin’s study subjects, “aggressively apathetic” (1). Some students whine because they can no longer get an easy A in English, and they vent their frustrations on us. Others assert that they can do whatever they want in class because they “paid for it.”

You can head off challenges by being approachable, caring, and interested in students, developing a personal relationship with each one. It’s
much easier to be rude to a role than to a real, emotional person. As Lad Tobin says, “writing students succeed when teachers establish productive relationships with—and between—their students” (6). Meeting them one-to-one in conference is the best way to establish a respectful relationship. (See Chapter 8). Quickly learning names helps, as does playing music or doing something else every day that the disgruntled will enjoy. And while you don’t need to make a show of recounting your qualifications to teach, I always give my students a summary of at least part of my background because a student in any class deserves to know what right someone has standing in front of them and claiming expertise.

Your personality should dictate which of the many possible strategies you use to deal with student challenges. Choose the one that feels most natural.

Get the class involved. “Ok, time out for a second. The word that Richard just used bothers me. Does anyone have anything to say about whether that word should be used in a class like this?” This strategy almost always works. My wife still remembers what the rest of the class had to say when one of her students complained that Frederick Douglass was biased in his portrayal of slave-holders.

Give yourself time to think. If possible, postpone acting on the issue until the next class period. Although the student may sound hostile, and you may feel that the student is trying to make you look foolish, perhaps the student’s challenge is really a badly worded request for information. When is the paper due? How do you deal with the subjectivity of grading? Even if you doubt the student’s intent, acting as though you’re having a civil discussion about information may defuse the situation: “I shall certainly look into removing my head from my ass, Richard.”

Use humor. Some people can joke, cajole, and tease their way out of any situation and into anyone’s heart. Your acting as though the troublemaker was just kidding gives the student a chance to have second thoughts and to retreat from the confrontation.

Be firm. I debated the best way to label this approach—“be tough?” “pull rank?” “show who’s boss”? I chose “be firm” because it implies or assumes that you have the right and the power to assert yourself; you don’t need to try to look big and tough or assert that you’re the teacher. A simple statement that leaves no room for debate—“Shanan, you need to stop talking now” or “Billy, put the newspaper away please”—will usually achieve the intended result.

Confront the student one-to-one. Many students lose their bravado when they don’t have an audience egging them on. And a tete-a-tete erases any
doubt about your seriousness. Usually a meeting after class or during a normal conference will suffice. A couple of times during my career I’ve asked a student to step outside for a quick consultation during class time.

*Email.* Like most people who hate confrontations and telephones, I love email. When you’re dealing with an unruly student, email has the advantage of giving you a permanent copy, useful if you decide to initiate formal disciplinary procedures against the student. Many disciplinary codes require written notification of the student as a first step. Using email also gives the student a chance to calm down after class and perhaps think about the seriousness of his or her actions and then respond to you without the bluster that he or she may carry into an after-class meeting. On the down side, email may not reach the student quickly, the student may claim never to have gotten it (though you can avoid that problem by choosing the “sender requires return receipt” option), you might write too hastily and with too much anger, and it may feel to both you and the student like a copout: you didn’t have the guts for High Noon.

*Stare silently.* Students who are being disruptive often wither under almost any kind of attention except the sly high school laughs that they trained for. Silence can be very effective. Or asking the talkers to share their ideas with the class. But I try not to be sarcastic; no point in losing the student for the semester.

*Ask someone to observe the dynamic in the class.* Maybe the student you view as surly or belligerent will seem shy or defensive to an observer—our assumptions about student attitudes and motivations are often wrong. Is it possible you’ve gotten in the habit of asking rhetorical questions that might drive a student to rebellion? Perhaps in your attempt to solidify your authority in the class, you have unwittingly placed yourself on the English Teacher Pedestal and become the latest symbol of something that students may despise. Maybe what you need is not more authority but less. Try asking the offending student to your office and talking about the music he or she likes.

*Get your supervisor involved.* You’ll have to tune in to the department gossip to learn whether your supervisors hate to be bothered. Most writing program administrators like to know when trouble is brewing—before an out-of-control situation walks in the door. And your supervisor may suggest strategies you hadn’t thought of. If you envision the situation escalating, you should certainly talk to a supervisor, because any action like removing the student from the class will almost certainly require the supervisor’s cooperation. Just having the supervisor visit your class may be enough to get the problem student to shape up.
Don’t ignore it. Sure, a rude word or nasty tone every now and then doesn’t require United Nations intervention, but ignoring an obnoxious person repeatedly may affect the morale of the whole class. You may be able to ignore the troublemaker, but your students won’t.

Read. Since fear of the unruly student is almost universal, much has been written about dealing with such challenges. You might start with Jennifer Meta Robinson’s chapter, “A Question of Authority: Dealing with Disruptive Students.” And see if your institution has a classroom civility policy that can scare some manners into students.

In your elusive quiet moments of reflection, analyze why certain students bug you so. A colleague of Elizabeth Rankin’s noticed that “The students who give me the most trouble are often the students who are like me in some way” (2). Does the student remind you of one of your parents, or bring out the parent in you? I’m not suggesting you need to hit the psychiatrist’s couch to figure out why you’re irritated by someone in the back of the room making farting noises, but if you realize, “She bugs me so much because she reminds me of my bossy older sister,” you may be able to undermine the power the student seems to have over you. And never dismiss the possibility that one of the Big Factors—race, gender, class—influences your reactions.

If you feel that you can’t start to deal with a student’s behavior until you can make more sense of it, read Susan H. McLeod’s Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom, which offers a variety of different ways to understand our students’ behavior and our reactions to it. For instance, she says, “of interest to writing teachers” is the “theory of learned helplessness, where students who feel they have no control over their success or failure simply give up at the first sign of difficulty” (13). She relates a study that concluded that most students believe “the most important purpose of writing is self-knowledge and self-expression” (14) and worries about students with those beliefs resenting teachers who emphasize something less personal like persuasion. And she reviews studies that conclude that extrinsic reward, when added to an ongoing intrinsically motivated activity, reduced the subject’s interest in the activity for its own sake. . . . Researchers suggested that situations enhancing intrinsic motivation include self-determined behavior or choice, positive feedback, and optimally challenging activities; those that decrease intrinsic motivation include external rewards or pressures to act in particular ways, feedback that implies external rather than internal reasons for success, and ego-involving task conditions that might challenge self-esteem. (50–51)
McLeod’s chapter, “Motivation and Writing,” offers a wealth of possible interpretations of students’ behavior and suggestions for improving motivation (43-66).

Although it’s difficult to take this perspective when dealing with an unruly student, try to keep in mind that rebellion and resistance to authority may be positive, healthy signs, especially for young people who have done nothing but obey all their lives. As Peter Elbow says, “An important goal for teachers is to help students find fruitful or healthy ways to resist” (1998, 103). If we’re lucky or clever, we can unearth the student’s real beef and help the student express anger or resistance in writing.

DIVERSITY SCARES YOU

It’s all well and good to support diversity theoretically, but living with a diverse student body keeps you on your toes. If you imply that all romances are heterosexual, will that offend a gay student? Should you mark the nonstandard verb inflections on the African American student’s paper? Should you go easy on the student from the Middle East who defends his plagiarism by saying that everybody does it that way in his country? Ask. Students appreciate that you’re aware of and trying to deal with their particular issue. The African American student probably wants lots of “correctness” feedback, but discussing the issue can give you a chance to support the student’s home language before you start critiquing the student’s writing.

In the plagiarism example, you may want to ask your colleagues. Whether the student’s claims are valid—whether his culture really does encourage what we call “plagiarism”—might affect how you handle the student’s consequences, but it should not lead you to bend your standards. Because universities require composition classes in part to familiarize students with the peculiarities of writing in different discourses, particularly “standard” and “academic” English, your student needs to learn the traditions of English, whatever he may have been taught at home.

Just being sensitive to the issues will put you a step ahead. And if you blow it, you can always make your mistakes into teachable moments. A couple of years ago, a member of my tenure committee who teaches communication disorders as well as English observed one of my classes in which there was a deaf student, Craig. In her observation write-up, the observer detailed how the students and I could make things easier for Craig. When I discussed the letter in class, my students could see I was
chagrined, and I think that meant they took the lesson seriously. And that we’ll all remember it.

**TOO MUCH—OR TOO LITTLE—TIME**

I remember during my first semester of teaching I often worried that I didn’t have enough material to fill up the day or the week, and I would trade with other novices for filler ideas to get me through the fifty minutes.

I don’t know if anyone feels that way any more—it’s kind of hard to imagine, since the handful of composition books available when I started has now become an overwhelming library, and many of them can be opened randomly for an instant activity. But I don’t think it was the lack of books that left me with dead time—I lacked a sense of how class time could and should be used. I had the vague idea that I could focus on anything concerning writing, but having so many possibilities was almost as paralyzing as having no possibilities at all.

Two thoughts for anyone in that position today. First, it’s always a good time to write. Students need to know that you consider the act of writing important enough to devote class time to it. If you write with your students, you’ll have endless opportunities to make points about writing processes and goals as you write. Students like using class time and class activities to provide momentum for the writing process that will follow the class session. I particularly like having students brainstorm leads in class, because the opening paragraph hangs people up more than any other part of the paper, and a good lead can point the writer to the organization the paper needs.

Which brings me to the second point—always work toward an assignment. Both teachers and students get bored and antsy if writing class activities seem like drills, without any perceptible link to the real world or the requirements of the class. Always try to connect the day’s writing to a paper that students are or will be working on—brainstorming for paper ideas, freewriting about the best of those ideas, focusing or ordering material they already have, revising sentences, critiquing drafts with peers. There’s no end to the valuable, paper-directed work you can do in class, and as long as students see how the activities help them get their “homework” done, they’ll be happy to do them. I always jot down one or two such activities at the end of my day’s lesson plan, thinking of them as extras that I probably won’t get to. But when the group doesn’t show up for its presentation or the reading discussion falls dead fifteen minutes early, I’m always glad to know I have something useful ready to go.
The opposite problem—too much to do, not enough time—plagues experienced teachers or novices who have collected ideas from everywhere. It’s not a problem on the same scale with most in this chapter, but it can be a frustrating surprise the first few times you realize it’s almost Thanksgiving and you still haven’t done about half of what you planned for the semester. Three thoughts:

1. Keep yourself more or less on track by setting paper due dates before the semester begins, sticking to them, and making sure that the class can complete them on time. For me, “making sure” means counting the activities I want to do before the next paper and apportioning them over the days remaining.

2. With four or five weeks left in the semester, make a list of everything you have to do and everything you would like to do in the remaining time, and plan each day. I find I often have in the back of my mind a category, “slip in when possible,” that keeps growing all semester, and “when possible” never appears. So at some point I need to face that category squarely and figure out what I can realistically do.

3. Plan out every day of the semester before it begins and/or leave yourself two or three blank days for makeup and fitting in those leftovers. I like to make my schedule flexible enough to be able to respond to the particular needs of the class, so I’m hesitant to commit myself to a set agenda. But the more you plan each day before the semester, the less trauma each day will bring during the semester.

THE CLASS IS DEAD

It happens to everyone. Everyone. Sometimes it’s just a bad day—late on Friday, mid-semester blahs, a vacation or a big concert is coming up or has just occurred. You probably won’t be able to do better than guess at the reason, and unless it can turn into a writing prompt (“Why is it worth a night’s sleep to go to a Radiohead concert?”), it doesn’t matter. Much more disconcerting is the perpetually silent class, the class that stares fixedly at notes whenever you ask a question. Seconds click into eternities as you wait.

Chances are you won’t have such a class, at least not right away. The Good Fairy that keeps an eye on teachers usually allots one talkative
person to each group, which leaves you with a different problem—how to keep yourself from giving an automatic A to someone who makes your life so much easier. But what can you do the first time it does happen? How do you avoid panicking?

1. Write first. You may have read the day’s essay three times in the past twenty-four hours, but your students probably read it only once, very quickly, thirty-six hours ago, and have read material for four other classes in the intervening time. Even well-intentioned, bright students need considerable time to think: “Yeah, okay, English class. That little green book. We were supposed to read something . . . yeah, that E.B. White essay. Something about a lake? Where’s my damn pencil? Okay, now what was the question?”

Writing for ten minutes before a class discussion allows students to go through that kind of thinking on their own, not while you’re holding your breath. And once they’ve finally collected all the necessary materials, found the right page, and repeated the question a couple of times in their own heads, they’ll actually be ready to think about it. In the remaining minutes, as they try to write a coherent sentence or two, they may actually come up with something to say.

2. Wait. When you’re on the spot, every second of silence tortures; the few seconds that you actually wait seem to take up the whole class period. It’s a fascinating phenomenon—when you’re an observer. I’ve watched teachers wait resolutely, gradually use up their patience as the silence gets to them, give in, and provide an answer, all while my watch ticked off five seconds.

If we wait long enough, someone will eventually talk—a student will feel the weight of the silence almost as much as we do and come to our rescue. Since I was that kind of student, it’s difficult for me to imagine what other students feel at that moment, but I know that some will eventually give in—out of boredom, empathy, or the slow gelling of a vague idea. If you’ve been in the habit of answering your own questions, it may take a number of long silences before the class realizes the old pattern has died and they need to deal with a new one. Classes stay mute when they’ve learned that the teacher will answer the question in a few seconds, so there’s no point in trying to answer it themselves. With practice and an iron will, you can outlast them.
3. Go around the room. Give the class a specific assignment and a few minutes to prepare: “Find a detail in the essay that you think is important and be ready to explain why.” Get them in a circle, then start somewhere and go around the circle. You can keep to a strict order without much discussion or encourage everyone to respond and add their two cents when someone brings up a subject close to their own. Any approach that includes everyone but singles out no one has great advantages—no one feels picked on, so students tend to be resigned rather than outraged when it’s their turn. Among the many other ways to get everyone to contribute: go through the role alphabetically; ask everyone to speak only once until everyone has said something; divide the subject into different sections (perhaps “thesis,” “assumptions,” and “evidence” if you’re discussing a persuasive essay) and then have everyone who focused on each section talk.

4. Use small groups. Groups have become the remedy for almost any class problem, and with good reason. Often students who won’t say a word to the whole class will find plenty of energy in small groups. And even students who aren’t sympathetic to the teacher’s plight have trouble ignoring the interpersonal pressures to talk when two or three people rely on them and the group needs to get a job done. Using groups can also encourage more students to do the reading: some students feel more embarrassed to admit to peers than to teachers that they didn’t do the work and don’t know what they’re talking about. Small groups can be an end in themselves, working for the same amount of time that the whole class would have talked, or the groups can tackle a particular task and then choose a spokesperson who reports to the whole class. Sometimes if the class just won’t seem to talk as a whole, I’ll hold most class discussions in small groups.

Much has been written about group work, and once you’ve used groups a few times, you might want to read what the experts say and experiment with different kinds of small group tasks. Kenneth Bruffee says that a three-person group is the optimal size for a “working group” that will meet more than once and perhaps produce a paper or presentation together, while five is the best size for a decision-making group (89-90). More controversial is his recommendation that teachers should stay out of small groups once
they’re set up: “Emphatically, the teacher does not ‘sit in’ on consensus groups, hover over them, or otherwise monitor them” (87). Meeks and Austin, on the other hand, encourage teachers to “monitor each group” (48). I tend to stay at my desk, not intervening in group work, but listening to the conversational scraps that come my way and visiting groups that ask for help or seem to be straying from the task. There should be a task, generally one that requires discussion and a variety of opinions, not one that can be solved or answered quickly. Usually groups should have a scribe or recorder who reports back to the whole class after the group session. See Milner and Milner for a summary of group designs (359-360). But you don’t need elaborate role-playing for groups to succeed.

5. Call on individuals. I must admit, I suck at this. I hate embarrassing people, and I know when I call on a normally quiet person that I’m embarrassing that person, even if he or she has an answer. But I’ve witnessed many classes in which the teacher routinely calls out a name whenever waiting a few seconds doesn’t produce a volunteer, and I’ve never witnessed a classwide revolt or a student walkout. In fact, the radical act produces no sensation at all, since students have been singled out by teachers since kindergarten. The teacher just needs to act as though calling on individuals is as natural as asking for raised hands.

6. Use alternative modes of expression. I’ve had students who can’t say a word in class beg to be able to exchange daily class journals with like-minded classmates. One of the best responses to literature I’ve ever seen was the painting that my house-mate did about Joyce’s *Ulysses*; he never said a word in class, but as an art major, he did his thinking in oil. A student who shied away from political subjects in class produced long, well-reasoned diatribes when encouraged to write whole-class emails. Could students respond with songs, limericks, video clips?

**Their papers are horrible**

If reading spiteful course evaluations is the worst moment in a teacher’s year, getting a stack of really bad papers may come in second. You agonize through the weekend reading them, wondering, “Is my teaching that bad? Have they really learned nothing?” It’s possible that your students really are numb as posts and will never improve. But it’s self-defeating to think
that way; better to focus on the things we can do that might improve the papers or at least improve our attitude toward them.

*Remember Tom Carnicelli’s twelfth week rule:* no matter how good the teacher, no matter how smart the students, most student writing doesn’t start to show substantial change until the twelfth week of a fifteen-week semester. Student improvement that seems glacial probably is, but don’t worry about it.

*Examine the prompt.* Students write weak papers in response to weak questions. Is your prompt specific and clear? Did you leave room for students to focus on their own subjects or write from their own perspectives? Are your questions likely to interest students? Are there relatively easy and obvious ways of constructing a response? I’m not calling for ritual self-flagellation and burning of the question. But if you can find significant shortcomings in your question, you might improve the next batch of papers drastically by improving your question, and wouldn’t that feel good?

*Change your focus.* As I see it, three very broad focuses compete for our attention in the comp classroom—product, process, and attitude. Traditionally, as I discussed in Chapter 5, English teachers focused on product, urging students to clean up mistakes so that the paper looked tidy, even if it said nothing. A process focus looks at what we do more than what we produce. But both focuses may fail if we ignore students’ attitudes, so many comp teachers specifically design activities to improve attitude. It’s easy to go too far in any of the three directions—to focus on correctness and clarity but ignore how to produce it, to look only at process and forget that the measure of any process is its product, to worry only about attitude and forget about good writing.

To improve the caliber of your students’ papers, consider shifting your emphasis. But don’t think “I’ve got to spend more time on the picky stuff” just because the papers are sloppy. Maybe the sloppiness says more about students’ “who cares?” attitudes or their procrastination than about how you’ve taught or how much you’ve emphasized grammar and editing.

*Read a colleague’s papers.* Ask for some bad ones. It may comfort you to learn that even the teachers we look up to, the veterans with years of experience, still get wretched papers. Do whatever it takes to convince yourself that it might not be your fault.

*Separate the weak from the terrible.* Sometimes if I read two really bad papers first, they color my impression of the whole stack. If they’re all bad, either your expectations are unrealistic, your luck is bad, or your assignment is faulty. More likely, you’ll find that most papers are just sloppy and
rushed, the result of procrastination or an ineffective writing process, not of inability or illiteracy.

But what do you do about the student who can’t seem to form a complete sentence and who assures you that the paper is the best he or she can make it? First, although the job of improving the writing may seem overwhelming, don’t panic. Your school probably has some system for dealing with such students—“remedial” or “basic” writing courses, a writing center or tutors. If you don’t have, or are not sure you want to use such resources, it might help you to see how experts in basic writing approach such a paper. Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, the classic work in that field, insists that even the worst student writing has its own logic and that we need to understand that logic in order to help the student. A short, helpful, more recent piece consistent with Shaughnessy’s philosophy is Glynda Hull and Mike Rose’s “Toward a Social-Cognitive Understanding of Reading and Writing.” We need to see that even experts are often overwhelmed when they first see poor student writing and that we can take steps to help weak writers, even if we don’t have training in basic writing.

**A STUDENT ACCUSES YOU . . .**

of sexual harassment, of racism, of being unfair or unprofessional. The nasty student accusations that I’ve witnessed have resulted most often from a clash of personalities or from a student’s going through a bad life period and taking it out on the teacher. A distant third cause has been real teacher error. So, as awful as it feels to have someone accuse you of a serious offense, you probably haven’t done anything wrong and you won’t, in the long run, have anything to worry about. But you do need to handle the situation with care.

*Take notes and date them.* Keep track of everything you and the student say and do. There’s nothing more frustrating than getting into an “I said . . .” / “No you didn’t” argument.

*Get help.* Talk to a veteran or supervisor. Find out what channels the student has to pursue to file a grievance against you. Consider asking a third party to join a meeting with you and the student. At the least you should get some advice. At best, you might find that the student has a history of making groundless accusations. Supervisors respect teachers who deal with student nastiness with grace and equanimity.

*Realize that it’s part of the job.* It happens to everyone. A couple of years ago my supervisor was accused of being racist for not overturning
university rules to favor a particular Asian student. My nastiest student accuser was pregnant and had to wear a fetal heart-rate monitor everywhere. I guess yelling at me helped relieve her stress. Even in the one legitimate sexual harassment case I’ve adjudicated, the student complained only months after the harassment, when it was clear she wasn’t going to get the grade she wanted. I’m not dismissing all student complaints or holding teachers blameless, just trying to ease the paranoia. You’ve no doubt heard of made-up stories ruining the lives of teachers and daycare workers. But that particular hysteria seems to have run its course, and if you feel innocent of the charges, you’ll probably be fine.

PLAGIARISM

probably deserves a chapter of its own, and I have devoted a lengthy appendix to it, but I don’t want to give it that big a place in your imagination. It’s rampant, everyone says. But in my own classes I’ve caught only two people—one copied an Ann Landers column verbatim, the other badly erased the page numbers from a high school paper and wrote in new ones. I’m sure other plagiarists have avoided my detection. But I don’t lose sleep over it.

Plagiarism upsets many of us because it feels like such a betrayal of the relationship we’ve built with our students, of the mutual trust that we pride ourselves on. It is often its own punishment: the bought paper that doesn’t fit the assignment earns the student a lower grade than the uneven draft that it replaces. The page lifted from the textbook doesn’t support the badly conceived thesis.

Sometimes plagiarism is not what it seems. We tend to get so outraged by plagiarism—with justification, I think—that we may overlook circumstances that would, in other situations, elicit our sympathy or understanding. The plagiarism policy adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators makes a crucial distinction between plagiarism—usually conscious and willful—and “misuse of sources”: “carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source” (2). Raking a student over the plagiarism coals for carelessness wastes your time and energy and will probably damage both of you. Maybe the plagiarist is undergoing a personal crisis, strung out and sleepless, and in a time of diminished capacity for judgment decides that plagiarism is less shameful than asking for an incomplete or dropping the course. Maybe the student has misunderstood something that you’re promoting—as did the two students on the same soccer team who knew that their teachers prized “collaboration” and turned in identical papers about their big soccer game. Maybe the student grew up in a culture—there are quite a few—which has no concept
of “plagiarism,” and in which borrowing without attribution is an important part of the erudite writer’s art. And while ignorance may be no excuse, it certainly explains the large percentage of students who say that anything on the Internet is common knowledge and therefore public domain (McCormick 68). Wilhoit’s students say they were told in high school they didn’t need to quote passages lifted from encyclopedias (163).

Don’t chastise yourself for being a softie if you don’t punish a student who borrowed badly. Most cases of “plagiarism” rightly end up as slightly scary learning situations for naive students.

There are ways to prevent plagiarism and ways to catch plagiarists, and I’ll list a few of each. Standard operating procedure about plagiarism varies from school to school, department to department. So when you suspect plagiarism, ask around, find out about procedures and normal punishments. Get plagiarism statements and definitions from the writing program, the department, or the university.

**Prevention**

It may seem like a pain to spend your time on these strategies, but if you’ve ever pursued a full-fledged plagiarism case up the administrative chain, you know that prevention is much more efficient than punishment. Suggestions to head off plagiarism:

1. Monitor student papers. If possible, require multiple drafts and teach with conferences and/or frequent email exchanges, so you know what subjects students begin pondering and you can track how papers develop. Because we can spot things in papers that the authors themselves aren’t aware of, students often get an exaggerated sense of our memories and develop an exaggerated respect for our ability to sniff out any hint of ethical infraction. So our familiarity with their papers may provoke a healthy paranoia in our students. If you can catch plagiarism problems early in the writing process, you can use the transgressions as learning moments rather than treat them as crimes that require punishment.

2. Collect preliminary work on important papers: annotated bibliographies, summaries, freewrites, overviews, discovery drafts, maybe even outlines. Insist that students show you a draft of any paper turned in for a final grade or as part of a final portfolio. You don’t want to get a totally new paper in the portfolio and have to guess whether it is the student’s own work.
I don’t favor the traditional approach—“turn in the Roman numeral outline two weeks before the paper”—although even that can be generative for the student if it’s taken as a starting block, not a lane you can’t change. Collecting preliminary pieces helps you get to know the paper, the evolving idea, without directly checking up on students, and the pieces themselves have value as process steps for the writer.

3. Discuss plagiarism. Use some of the activities in Appendix E, the academic integrity appendix: define plagiarism, orchestrate role-playing skits about it, lead students through plagiarism practice. Let students know that plagiarism is

- important. Recalling high-profile cases and reciting plagiarism penalties may be effective.

- personal. That is, we as teachers take plagiarism in our classes as a personal betrayal. It hurts our feelings, it makes us mad, and it provokes us to punish.

- easy to slip into. In seconds, students can plug into their paper a great quote found on the Internet, and the source may include no reference information even if the student looks for it. So why waste time flipping through books? Most students can figure out for themselves that buying a paper on the Internet or pulling one from the frat’s file is wrong. So we need to devote our time to helping them understand and become alert to the subtler forms of sometimes-unintentional plagiarism.

4. Develop a personal relationship with each student. Of the many ways to do that, the most effective is the conference. Just one ten-minute session of swapping musical favorites or talking about hometowns changes my relationship with my students forever. Students have a much harder time cheating on someone they’ve traded stories with than on a distant “professor.”

5. Show them some of your aces: tell them about the things in the next list.

**Catching Cheats**

1. Get a second opinion—ask a colleague to read the sections of the paper that you suspect.
2. Use your department’s communication network—send out a query: “Has anyone else received a paper about bulimia as a free speech issue?” Be careful, however, not to provide information that would lead to the identification of a particular student as a possible plagiarist. We can’t ignore the student’s rights.

3. Find the sources. Often the plagiarism is direct and easy to spot in the original.

4. Google it. You may find the original source for a key phrase in one quick Google search.

5. Use Internet sites.
   The following plagiarism detection sites charge a fee, and they don’t always catch papermill papers.
   - plagiarism.org
   - plagiarism.com
   - integriguard.com
   - turnitin.com
   
   Paper mills themselves offer large databases of papers. You must search through a catalog of topics to find papers and compare for possible plagiarism on these sites.
   - www.123helpme.com
   - www.123student.com
   - www.schoolsucks.com
   - www.bignerds.com

   See Robert A. Harris’s The Plagiarism Handbook.

**Punishments**

1. Get help. Administrators don’t mind being asked for advice; what they hate is cleaning up after teachers trying to do everything themselves.

2. Don’t feel like a failure if you’re conflicted and end up letting the plagiarist “off easy.” Plagiarism makes me angry, and I’m happy when a school summons the courage to expel habitual or flagrant offenders; a student given one break may be prone to repeat the offense. But when I’m in my office listening to the plagiarist’s story—which usually involves bad judgment piled on bad judgment, not intent
to defraud—my tough-guy resolve often dissolves. It’s never an easy issue; try to make the punishment a committee decision.

3. Follow the book. Your university may have very specific requirements about what gets reported to whom—advisors, deans, university counsel etc. You don’t want to spend hours on a case and then have it blow up in your face because of a technical issue.

In plagiarism cases, as in most other quasi-legal aspects of the teacher’s job, you need to keep notes on everything. If a student contests your handling of a case, a paper trail is crucial.

YOU’RE THE STUDENT’S ONLY FRIEND

At 2:00 a.m., a desperate first-year student feels suicidal, starts swallowing pills, and with her last sane thought calls . . . her composition teacher, you! Yes, it happens. A student’s comp teacher is often the only friendly adult face that a student sees during the week, the only “professor” that knows the lonely student’s name, the person who teaches the only small class the student takes.

It’s a compliment to be the most trusted adult that some eighteen-year-old knows. But do you want the 2:00 a.m. phone call or the string of emails as a student negotiates a first college romance? That’s not a rhetorical question—if it’s a choice of the student’s calling me or finishing the bottle of pills, I’d rather get the call. And I have been lovelife advisor for more than one student.

The issue is boundaries. You need to decide where yours are and make them clear to students. That’s a relatively easy task, once you’re aware of it, except for those of us who are flattered by any attention and never learned to say no. I’ve never heard of a student latching onto a teacher out of the blue. The process is almost always slow, and you can head it off if you redirect the conversation to the merits of the paper rather than the heartbreak at its core, or you respond to the first pleading email by sending the number of the counseling center, or you make it clear that you don’t have forty-five minutes after class to talk.

There’s no right way to manage individual relationships with students. I like getting to know my students as individuals; it’s one of the joys of teaching. Many of my current friends started out as my students, and I’ve almost never run into problems with students wanting to be too close. But the time and energy I expend on students appalls many of my colleagues who keep students at arm’s length, the boundaries clear. Every teacher
A STUDENT DISAPPEARS

You see a student every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for twelve weeks, then she disappears without a word. You email her to ask what’s up but get no reply. Then at the grade deadline you give her an F because you have no choice, though in general you like her as a student and think she could have earned a B if she had finished the work. You worry. Should you have called? It’s not your business and not your responsibility, but still . . . maybe all she needs is a little push from an adult. What if she’s suicidal?

I hate it when students just drop out of sight. As my courses get to the home stretch, I repeat the refrain, “keep in touch, let me know what’s happening especially if you can’t meet the deadlines.” But at least once a year a student vanishes and I’m left wondering.

I’ve learned not to assume I have a clue about what has happened to the student. I hear stories all the time that include the “leaving school without notice” phase, and the reasons range from a mental breakdown to a decision to become a ski bum. Most commonly, students need to deal with family problems: mother’s in the hospital and needs older sister to take care of the young ones; someone has to stay with Grandpa 24/7, and there’s no money for a nurse.

A one-email query is, I think, the perfect way to handle the situation. We certainly don’t “owe” students such a note; it’s up to them to get to class. But often students seem immensely grateful that someone had an eye on them and cared enough to write a thirty-second email. (The sense of being a faceless number that no one cares for contributes to much undergraduate despair.) After one email, if I have particular reason to be concerned about a student—because of what I know about the student’s background or what she has written—I might take one more step, probably trying to figure out through semi-official channels if she’s been attending other classes. At that point, I just want to make sure she hasn’t fallen into a well.

But if you lose sleep over vanishing students, you’ll be tired all year. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to invest your time and energy in people who clearly need it and will get something out of it. Think of how small a percentage of your consciousness classes occupied at some points in
your undergraduate career. At times of stress, when we need to jettison something to keep our sanity, academics are sometimes a logical thing to throw overboard.

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Unfortunately, this chapter could be twice as long without even mentioning the particular scenario that gives you nightmares. But I hope thinking through some of these issues will help you improvise when your own nightmare looms.