

# Writing Forum

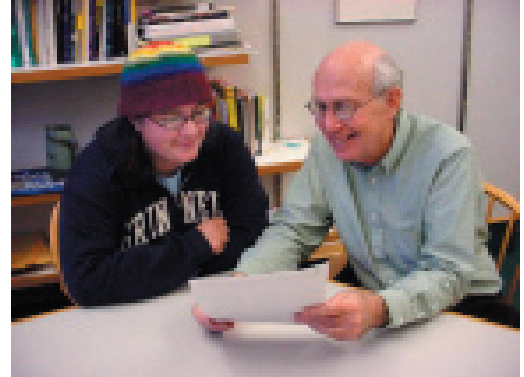
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## Evolution of a Grinnell Writer

*Editor's Note: At Grinnell College, we care about writing: we see it both as an important means of learning as well as an expression of learning. We don't restrict the teaching of writing to the English department but charge each member of the faculty with this task, so that students can become conversant with the various types of academic writing. In the end, we think, students are generally far better writers when they graduate than when they matriculate.*

*Most faculty, however, can only observe piecemeal their students' growth as writers. We see their improvement, perhaps, from one paper to the next, but only rarely do we have the opportunity to observe the growth of a student writer over numerous courses and a number of years. The following article offers a case study of the development of one Grinnell writer during her first three years at the College. We offer it neither because we think the student herself represents the student body nor that her experience typifies other students' experience, but because through her writing portfolio (a collection of most of her academic papers and a few other pieces) and her self-reflections on her own writing, we have an unusual opportunity to observe the process of both teaching and learning over time.*

Katie Mears '03 came to Grinnell with significant writing experience and abilities. As one of sixteen editors of her Iowa City high school paper, she edited five pages of the monthly thirty-page



Katie Mears '03 and Professor Bob Grey discuss a piece of writing.

publication and wrote articles as well. In her journalism class at City High, she honed the art of creating 600-800 word articles, using sidebars, graphics and other visuals to augment her stories. What she didn't learn was how to write the standard academic essay. And a number of basic rules of grammar and syntax had also passed her by.

She observes, "Nobody taught me the concept of a thesis in high school, so the structure of academic papers has never come easily... The thesis/paragraph/paragraph/conclusion thing has always seemed awkward and clunky, so I tried to avoid it." But once she arrived at Grinnell, Katie realized she had some considerable catching up to do. One of the places she turned for help was the Writing Lab.

Judy Hunter, Writing Lab Director,

Janet Carl, Editor  
Linda Price,  
Layout

carl@grinnell.  
edu

Grinnell College  
Writing Lab  
Grinnell, IA 50112  
Tel: 641 269 3117  
Fax: 641 269 4953

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## One Student's Opinions

Asked how professors can help students become better writers, Katie offers the following opinions:

- She thinks professors should allow, encourage, maybe even require, re-writes (although she understands such a practice increases a professor's work load).
- She believes professors should give a number of shorter writing assignments prior to assigning a longer paper so that students can learn what his or her expectations are and practice meeting them.
- She prefers choosing a paper topic from a menu of options rather than the "choose anything you want" approach.
- She thinks the more written feedback, the better—at both the macro and micro levels. "Just circling [some words] in a paper doesn't help because I don't know what the problem is or how to fix it unless [the professor] explains it."

remembers helping Katie during her freshman year. "We worked on grammar, word choice, syntax—many of the usual things that first year students struggle with. Katie always had plenty to say, but didn't always see how to express her ideas clearly or effectively."

Katie remembers feeling frustrated with the writing process during her first year: "I felt like I had all these things to say, some of which were pretty darned smart, I hoped, but no one ever noticed them because the profs were too busy complaining about my comma placement and paragraph order."

Although appreciative of Katie's creativity, her tutorial professor Vince Eckhart wrote in his tutorial evaluation, "I recommend that Katie move closer toward a model of scholarly writing and away from a style that resembles short pieces of newspaper journalism."

During the spring of 1999 Katie traveled to Washington, D.C. to protest World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies. She wrote a paper about the media's coverage of the protest for her *Introduction to Political Science* course with Bob Grey. Although her personal observations were compelling, she chose not to make use of any scholarly resources to support her ideas, an omission that weakened the paper's impact, according to Professor Grey. Journalism and academia were going head to head, and journalism had won

the first round of influence over Katie's writing.

In her second year, she found the writing assignments in Chris Hunter's *Introduction to Sociology* liberating. She says, "Chris just let me write what I was thinking, and nothing was in the way...I always want to place my experiences into some kind of broader framework, and this class gave me the frame and space to [do that]." One of those papers featured a virtual panel discussion among social theorists on the book *Everything in its Path* by Kai Erikson. Responding to another assignment, she wrote a letter to her parents discussing what she had learned about the success of an alternative health care organization.

Like Professor Hunter's, Russell Coward's assignments in *Education in a Pluralistic Society* allowed her to use a more informal tone and format. In one paper she reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of her high school education, in another her view of gender bias in her K-12 course work. She also wrote journal entries as well as responses to class readings and discussions. In assessing these papers, she wrote in her portfolio, "They weren't the most polished things I ever turned out. I do like them, though, because I love informal, chatty writing the most."

She felt less successful, though, in responding to formal writing

assignments in her history class. In a self-reflection on a paper for Tom Hietala she wrote, “I think it comes down to the length problem again. I have a grasp on how to write four or five pages but at eight to ten I lose the focus.” She also acknowledges that she was bored writing the paper, and “it shows.”

In spite of her feeling that she couldn’t write formal papers, Katie was fascinated by history and declared it as her major. Her junior year she took *Immigration History* with Victoria Brown and quickly discovered that this professor would expect much more from her as a writer than she herself did. As she reflects on her writing experience at Grinnell, she says, “I divide my writing into before and after Victoria started looking at it.”

Katie didn’t think the first draft of her paper on Irish immigrants was “brilliant”—she realized it didn’t make a real argument, for example—but she was shocked at the strength of Professor Brown’s negative response to it. They talked about how to improve it and Katie wrote a new version, even outlining her next draft before writing it, but her instructor’s response to this attempt was again very critical: “The POINT here, Katie—and it’s an important one—is that effective writing requires more than effective language/sentences. You are so capable of doing this, but you are not coming to grips with the tactical steps required in laying out the argument before you start writing.”

For the past several years Katie has constructed and maintained her own writing portfolio. When she was in high school, she was required to keep a journalism portfolio, which consisted of writing and editing projects for the student newspaper and her evaluation of those efforts. At Grinnell, she continued the routine of keeping her writing in a three-ring binder, occasionally writing short reflective pieces, a sort of intra-personal dialogue with herself as both reader and writer.

She says the portfolio helps her “guard against the disenchantment” she sometimes feels when she wonders if she has really learned anything about writing while at Grinnell. It also helps her recognize the scope of her writing abilities—that she can do more than write history papers or *S&B* articles, for example.

Katie finds the self-reflection aspect of the portfolio valuable because in writing those pieces she thinks again about the courses she has taken, why she took them and what she got out of them. It’s a different process, she says, than the reflection she does when she completes a course evaluation. It’s not about whether she liked a professor or liked the texts; it’s about her and what she learned.

She thinks other students could benefit from creating writing portfolios and suggests that academic advisers might encourage their students to create them.

At that point, Katie disagreed with Professor Brown’s assessment that she was a capable thinker and writer. “This disaster of a paper and Victoria’s lofty expectations for me meant that I really, really needed to do well on the next one in order for me to believe that I could be a history major.”

The next one was a book review of Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. She started working on it far in advance of the due date. “I outlined and I talked to [Professor Brown] and I read the book a

million times, and I outlined again. Wrote and re-wrote.”

In her end comments on the paper, Professor Brown wrote: “It’s an intellectually mature review. You engage with the book as a serious person with serious concerns.” But all was not perfect. “I played with your phrasing in a couple of places because that’s an area where you need greater precision.... This review shows how important it is that you gain the level of language precision and organization that you’re capable of; your ideas *deserve* that.”

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Second semester of her junior year, Katie confronted her nemesis—the lengthy research paper. It was the only writing assignment for the semester in her *Latin America and the US* seminar. Pablo Silva, the professor, suggested to the class that they choose their topics early and work steadily on the paper over the semester. Katie got stuck; she couldn't think of a topic and avoided Professor Silva, hoping he wouldn't notice her lack of progress. Spring break arrived, and in desperation Katie emailed the archdiocese of Dubuque to ask if they knew of anyone she could contact regarding the role of the Catholic Church in Latin America in the latter half of the twentieth century. She hit pay dirt.

In the lounge of the Sisters of Saint Francis retirement home, Katie spent an afternoon interviewing two elderly sisters, Gwen and Dorothy Henessey, “possibly the coolest people ever.” Their brother Ron had spent thirty-five years as a priest in Guatemala and wrote home weekly. The Henesseys lent Katie copies of his letters from 1980-85.

Katie had found a treasure trove of primary documents, and she finally began to write. The problem was that she couldn't find a thesis. What she had was a descriptive history of one man's work in a war-torn nation, an expository rather than an argumentative paper. She recognized that “the problems

with the paper, especially the conclusion and the structure of the sections, come from the fact that I never found an argument that made sense to me.”

Professor Silva, in his evaluation of the paper, echoed her concerns. “The introduction isn't quite as crisp as one would like...section two seems to drift a bit...the conclusion seems abrupt.” But, these problems notwithstanding, he says, the piece is “well-written and researched.” He gave the paper a B+. Katie Mears, queen of the eight-hundred-word newspaper article, had received high marks on a twenty-two-page research paper!

Katie continued to seek out the assistance of the Writing Lab. She often brought in very rough drafts or even fragments of an idea for a paper and used Ms. Hunter as a sounding board for articulating her ideas. “I have learned that I have to spend more time on the process of writing, especially on outlining,” notes Katie.

As she honed her academic writing skills, Katie pursued her journalistic interests, serving as Editor-in-Chief of the *S&B* since her sophomore year. Her story last year on the changes in the College budgeting process stands out for her as a piece of successful journalism.

“That process was close to how I wish all writing would work: I went out and learned a whole bunch and then turned it over

in my head long enough that it made sense to me, then I presented it in a form that would make it click for other people, too.” She observes that “in newspapers [knowing everything there is to know about a subject] seems a lot more possible than in academia [where] you can't learn everything there is to know about the subject you're writing on. Especially when you have to be in four classes at once.”

A co-leader of an alternative spring break trip to Tijuana, Mexico, for the past two years, Katie recently had the unusual opportunity to co-author a book about the group's efforts to assist Mexicans whose lives have been dramatically affected by NAFTA and US border policies. With co-author Denny David '03, Katie wrote the text that accompanied a series of photographs by Meghan Kirkwood '02. For Katie, the book brought together the strands of her liberal arts education and her personal values: “[It] was exactly what my education at Grinnell, in the broadest sense, had been working toward: valuable social justice work explained clearly and eloquently in a variety of media—both visual and textual—all wrapped up in an new, attractive package.”

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