

Thoughts for a Freshman

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (December 2018)



Portrait of Norman Bowler, John Minton, 1952

If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them.—Orwell

Learning is not schooling, no matter how prestigious the school. You become learned with effort, hard work, and sweat equity. You might even become wise with time and experience. Experience beyond the ivory tower is ultimately the best teacher.

You learn best by doing—and doing your best.

Your hands are as important as your head. Show me an art history teacher who does not draw, paint, or sculpt and I will show you a curator. If you do not see the dynamic relationship between hand, eye, and mind, you can never feel the genius of a Michelangelo, Mozart, Stan Lee, or Scott Shapiro, heart surgeon extraordinaire. Manual skill, even in small tasks like cursive writing, sketching, gardening, whittling, or penny whistles keep you from becoming a complete dolt.

Manual skill is often the harbinger of genius too. Music, art, surgery, and hand-to-hand combat are probative here.

Alas, too many teachers, like journalists, often go from the

classroom to the podium or press room without the leavening of skills, outside jobs, or life experience. Teaching for most is usually an abstraction. Life is anything but. Unfortunately, poseurs don't know what they don't know – and they usually don't care.

Give your instructors a sanity check, verify their *bona fides*. See if they have any seasoning like a market job, jail time, a recent war, or any interests beyond the schoolhouse.

The halls of ivy are festooned with fakirs, ladies and gents who spend their lives in their heads—or on a campus. Pedagogy, unseasoned by real world experience, is always a sketchy proposition. The “ivory tower” metaphor suggests that many academics are prisoners; indeed, captives in their tiny claustrophobic worlds.

Antifa, BDS, the Muslim Students Association, and Me Too movements are all symptoms. The intolerant campus is now a national norm in America. Toxins like anti-Semitism, especially, are on the move again.

Success with politicized umpires is thus a game of sorts, finding what instructors want and giving it to them. Don't expect to be challenged at an American University. Few lectures will be presented without patronizing political spin. If a class isn't objective or challenging, the ball's in your court.

Challenge yourself with independent research.

Education, after government, is now the biggest racket (nee business) in America. The ayatollahs of academia have a vested interest in talking down to the lowest common denominator, keeping as many dolts as possible in school, whether they thrive there or not.

American parent or taxpayer pocketbooks are just way too fat not to pick. In America, teachers are usually recruited from the [bottom](#) of the academic barrel. We are now the victims of affluence, low standards, and expensive mediocracy.



Schools that offer “full rides” to hundreds of semi-literate, pierced, and tattooed jockstraps make up their deficits with

thousands of retail, prosaic credential seekers. Don't be one of those. Don't believe any propaganda about college credentials and compensation either. Nobody pays you a living wage, except maybe a school board, just because you have a few letters after your patronymic.

Real job offers come with marketable skills or talent—or an uncle who owns the company.

Take all “economic” advice proffered at the schoolhouse with a grain of salt. Many at the lectern, especially those with tenure, are still mourning Karl Marx. Few academic socialists have any time, or sympathies, with the vagaries of the real world, markets, business, or capitalism.

In short, the American academy is a kind of hot house for the politically correct, the toker, the left-leaning, the welfare statist, and the globalist slacker. Pardon any redundancy. The *Internationale* may not be sung in the faculty lounge anymore, but the quixotic search for universal Nirvana hasn't gone away either.

Bong resin, administrative *castrati*, and nanny state mobs still rule on campus.

The Paid Help

Most teachers, like lawyers, do not value originality so much as they revere precedent or “recognized” authorities. Thus, you will probably be required to honor the footnote meme. Alas, endnotes are boilerplate unless you’re doing some original scientific or economic research. Notes add nothing save dress to most arguments. And nobody reads addendum anyway.



Any troll with a laptop can usually find some agreeable precedent or source. Still, nobody likes to be recognized in a footnote as much as those chaps and lassies at the lectern. *Ad vericundium* arguments always work with Teach, especially if your citation is one that caters to what your pedagogue already believes.

Stroke fragile egos if you must. Don’t, however, sleep with your mentors—especially **assistant** professors, no matter how they flatter or grade you. Sleeping your way onto the dean’s list is an idiot’s errand. Many progressive academics are geographic bachelors with Ponce de Leon delusions. They believe that young conquests are a professional perk. Alas, a new crop of impressionable, seducible bimbos volunteer for sacrifice every fall.

“We two” was a thing on campus long before “Me Too” came along. Screwing co-eds or grad students is the traditional

fountain of youth for many insecure gents of the academy. Don't become one of their discards.

Skill Set Troika

Three skills separate the educated from the merely credentialed; critical reading, coherent writing, and persuasive public speaking. Your "major," your subject matter, is comparatively irrelevant. Nobody cares that you might be an expert on second wave feminism or chronic chlamydia.

Rhetorical skills, a truly liberal education, are marketable. Experts are a dime a dozen. Specialized expertise is the gravy, not the brisket.

Of the big three, **writing might be the most important skill**, especially in the age of the internet. Writing is your permanent record, your indelible rap sheet. You are sure to hear your classmates bitch about papers and essays, as if writing is torture. Don't get stuck in that tar pit.

Don't wait until the last minute to write either. Quick is the enemy of quality. Any meal at Taco Bell makes that point emphatically.

For drill; keep a journal, write in a diary, capture an absurd moment, sketch a classmate, craft a haiku or poem, or write a short story. It's all good. Writing, like music, is a personal performance art. You get better with practice. If and when you

craft a polished phrase, you will look forward to your next gem.

Craft is the mother of all invention. The apprentice precedes the master. Good mechanics make mastery possible.

The Arbitrary Mechanics of Writing

Many authors write about writing. The good ones are worth reading. Twain and Orwell are examples. The mechanics of writing are as variable as authors. What follows here is a tossed salad of subjective axioms.

To begin, writer's block is a crock. "Block" is an excuse, often a euphemism for lazy, stoned, hung over, or depressed. If you have some fact, thoughts or opinions on any subject, you can always put those ideas to paper – unless you're impaired. Hemingway did not have writer's block. He probably crashed at the junction of male menopause and adult beverages.

Hemingway was a drunk. With enough substance abuse, depression is a lead pipe cinch. People who give up, or eat their gun, are usually selfish. Gifted grifters often grow to hate themselves.

Reflecting on life is a virtue; self-loathing is just the sound of bells tolling.

As you begin any opus, free associate all your thoughts on the subject at hand. Just capture as many relevant ideas in no particular order. When that well runs dry, organize your thoughts with some scheme, in some order of ascending importance, chronologically or logically, whatever makes the most sense for you or the subject matter. Chronology, obviously, often works well for a paper about history.

How you organize is not as important as the relevance of your facts or illustrations. Avoid tangential excursions. A good irrelevant thought is not a good idea. Take notes as you read and research, capturing poachable pearls that support or illustrate your argument, footnote fodder if you will.

Craft a relevant metaphor early and return to that signal at the end of your piece. Wrapping your pitch like knickers from Victoria's Secret makes a better package. Presentation matters.

Use the active voice. The passive voice makes you sound like you don't really have a clue.

Write in the second or third person unless you already have a Nobel Prize. The second person allows you to be inclusive, drawing the reader into your narrative. The third person allows you to keep your distance, seem objective. The first person, whilst you are still a student, makes you presumptuous or arrogant, or both. Don't let your tone, ego, or voice get in the way of your narrative.

Nobody cares what you really think anyway—until you're a Q-Tip.



Spike adjectives and hyperbole whenever they raise their ugly heads—unless you're writing for a politician. Calling John Donne a "great" poet is redundant. We know that. Remember, the Dean of Saint Paul's was the father of eleven and a master of those bells too.

Don't bury your leads either. Save the good one-liners for paragraph openers or closers. A one-sentence paragraph conveys emphasis. Choose words with care too. Or as Mark Twain might have put it, "The difference between the right word and a word that is almost right is like the difference between lightening and lightening bugs."

Choices in words, literature, and life are the graffiti on your wall.

Think about your reader. Short paragraphs and simple sentences facilitate reading. As you audit your draft, look for long paragraphs that might be butchered to make two or three. Scan for complex sentences that might need to be split.

Brevity is the soul of you know what.

Hemingway once said good writers know what to throw out. Twain may have said it first. Better still, you could channel Jack Yossarian. Censor yourself. Make your style as sparse and conversational as possible. Think of your reader as you would a BFF.

Nobody teaches you anything. True learning is a solo experience. Monks did their best work in a cloister for good reason. Their manuscripts and prose were literal and figurative works of art. Alas, unless you are thinking of becoming a nun, have peers read and make suggestions on anything you write.

We are loath to recognize our own error.

Indeed, friends made in school will be chums for a lifetime. Use them well. Find one or two that will ruthlessly vet your papers before you turn them in. Do the same for them.

Whilst you are on your own for learning, writing is a team sport. All journeys are shorter with two on the road.

Writers need cold editors—and warm friends. With luck, they will be the same person.

G. Murphy Donovan is a product of Catholic schools, grade school through college where cursive hand writing was a fetish. In those days, an orderly hand was thought to cultivate an orderly mind. Regrettably, he fell off the wagon on the left coast and attended graduate school with California heathens. Worse still, he then made a career with the deep state.

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