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Stephen King once wrote, *If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things... no shortcut.*

William Faulkner once wrote, *Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master... You'll absorb it. Then write. If it's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window.*

Dear Scholars,

Welcome to your English class. I hope you'll find this space peaceful and inspiring. I'll tell you about myself, my writing life and my goals for this course, and then ask you to do the same.

This is my 20th year at WHS, after spending the previous 4 teaching in New York and Boston, and a New Mexico jail. I grew up outside Philadelphia and later studied at Vassar and Middlebury Colleges, and at the Rainier Writers Workshop. I live with my wife Botum and 3 smaller Bennetts—Ella 14, Olive 12, Warren 9—10 miles down the road from here in Holliston, Mass.

My favorite activities are reading, cooking and outdoor sports. My cooking highlight this summer was homemade granola. My daughters have gotten into making their own acai bowls, so we need a hefty stock of granola in the pantry, and it's easy to mix and bake. My secret ingredients are coconut flakes and chopped cashews.

I've played tennis my whole life, but due to injuries I've transitioned to pickleball. My wife is a full-time pickleball coach, and she's trying to go pro as a player. I sometimes train with her, and we're hoping to play a tournament together in Las Vegas next month. I've always had decent drives and volleys, but, from drilling, I've improved my drops, resets, speed-ups, and counters. My favorite shot to hit is the ATP—if an opponent hits a dink angle that pulls me wide of the kitchen, I can slap it around the post inches off the ground—almost unreturnable.

In addition to teacher, father, and fading athlete, I also identify as a writer—more specifically, a poet. This is a struggle for me, because while I believe I'm a strong writer and have even published several poems in journals I consider respectable, I haven't carved out a regular writing routine—and thus haven't produced much—since my second child was born. So I sometimes feel like a failure. It is fulfilling to sit down and try to write for an hour a day—I get back into this groove once in a while, but then slip out. I think I'm good at starting pieces, but not at ending them; I'm good at making language engaging and clear, and making my lived situations sound entertaining; but I'm not good at breaking free of the first person, of taking up

conflict beyond my personal experience. I'm a good editor, which is good news for you. Part of why I enjoy teaching English is that it forces me—I don't want to be a hypocrite—to complete many of the assignments with students.

I'd like you, too, to identify as a writer, even if you never have before. I believe seeing oneself as a writer also transforms one's *reading* experiences. This is as true of AP-style essays as it is of creative writing. In the quotes I opened with, Stephen King and William Faulkner are talking about novels and stories. You won't be writing those genres for this class. But doesn't the writing skill of *Appealing to an Audience* also inform one's reading skill of *Considering the Audience*? Doesn't the writing skill *Selecting Relevant Evidence* help one evaluate another text's *Sufficiency of Evidence*? Doesn't *Developing your Line of Reasoning* help you measure someone else's *Persuasiveness*?

Why study language and composition? My teaching philosophy is threefold: 1) If we read carefully enough, there are valuable lessons in literature about ourselves as human beings; 2) Great storytellers, essayists, playwrights and poets show us all we need to know about *how to write*; 3) Attention to both of these truths increases the likelihood we'll experience happy and fulfilling lives.

Let me explain that last one some more. In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, former Yale professor and admissions officer William Deresiewicz laments how our educational system has overemphasized quantifiable measures of success (grades and money) to the detriment of learning; he cites the consensus among studies that show no correlation of income increase with increased happiness—excepting the need for adequate baseline income to keep you from struggling. Those same studies show 2 things that do increase human happiness: meaningful work, and meaningful connections to other people.

What does this have to do with English class? a) The intellectual and emotional demands of reading and discussing literature train us to think, doubt, self-examine, communicate between the mind and the heart. If through these means we come to better know ourselves, we're more likely to find our calling in life. b) Literature is as good a resource as any for understanding the complex ways in which other people think and feel. And that prepares us for the second source of sustainable happiness: meaningful connections to other people.

What does this have to do with English class *right now*, in the age of AI? LLMs and chatbots are weakening our ability to problem solve, and they are dulling our intuition. They are *removing* our humanity. It's up to you to restore it. English Language Arts help you preserve and strengthen these faculties, just like holding a plank strengthens your core. Neither are easy, nor should they be, and they both take initiative. Figure out what you sound like when you

know how you feel, or when you don't know how you feel, when you have an opinion, or when you're caught in a trap. This is the place for that.

In addition to what I've summarized, I hope you'll find your own, unique ways to make your work in this class meaningful.

Yours Truly,

A. Bennett