

Reading Minus Writing: A Literacy Narrative

For as long as I have been a conscious human being I have known how to read. This sounds like it would be a great way to get ahead in school, after all reading is a basic skill required for all subject matters. As I had a summer birthday, I began kindergarten at four years old, something they apparently don't allow anymore. Perhaps they discourage it so that students can have more time to develop the rest of their skills more evenly in preschool rather than relying on the one or two skills they excel in to make up for the rest. In my case, reading books had become my security blanket, a way to get praise from the adults in my life who were so glad they could leave me to entertain myself with something educational that they never noticed or cared that I never tried to write for them.

I was singled out by my teachers early on for knowing how to read above the expected level of my peers. They congratulated my mother when she came to pick me up on the first day, saying that the multiple-choice literacy test we had taken showed I read at the third-grade level. Every time someone was tasked to read something aloud in class my hand would shoot up faster than anyone else's. I loathed listening to my classmates struggle over basic words and having to wait for the teacher give them the next word when they lost their place. I was impatient with everyone else and would cut in or roll my eyes when they got words wrong. Needless to say, both my classmates and my teachers were annoyed by me then.

Starting in first grade I was separated from the rest of the class during the language arts period. Every day during that hour I would pull one of the books from the in-class library and curl up on a beanbag chair in the back of the room. Being only five now, I felt a strong sense of pride at being special. I had a reputation now for being a know-it-all and the stigma that was deserved from that. Now, instead of learning the alphabet and how to pronounce certain

combination of letters, they were learning how to spell new vocabulary words and doing handwriting exercises. We would all be given assignments to copy the written words at the top of the page over and over again. I could read the words and understand them just fine, but in my head I was just copying the shapes of the letters. I didn't think to memorize how to make the shapes on my own. When I read, the text became visuals in my mind. I didn't notice how the actual words on the page worked. The teachers became increasingly frustrated with how illegible my handwriting was. One finally explained outright that your handwriting was supposed to be something other people can read, and that blew my mind. But as the school year went on, my classmates were improving and receiving praise for their handwriting getting faster and neater. The same teacher that praised me for reading above my grade level now seemed to relish in making me walk up to the front of the classroom in front of everyone else and pick up a new packet of worksheets every week to practice my handwriting. I no longer felt special in a good way after that.

When I really fell apart was when we started doing spelling tests. A teacher would read aloud a word and we were expected to write it down. I would get super frustrated because I would try to picture the actual word in my head, but I could only think of the meaning of the word. A cat was a hairy four legged animal, not C-A-T. The spelling bees were the worst. We'd all have to stand up at the front of the room and when you got out you had to go sit down. I would always be the first one out. My classmates now laughed at me and called me stupid for terrible I was at spelling. I felt exposed and wanted nothing more than to go back to curling up with a book in the back of the classroom, losing myself in the images that formed from the pages. It seemed to me that they intended for reading and writing to be the same thing. How could you be literate, but not be able to write down the words you could read?

My teachers were just as confused as to why I could read just fine but couldn't form the words myself. They kept assigning more and more packets of worksheets for me to take home. Enough that my mother apparently called and begged them to find another solution because she was tired of listening to me sob with frustration as I tried to write down the words, she read out loud to me. They thought I was stupid now. If they caught me reading books they would yell at me to work on my piles of worksheets instead. The school eventually took me out of class and made me work one on one with a teacher in the special room during language arts time. I later learned that they were also monitoring me for signs of neurological disorders, but never found anything "wrong" with me. Eventually the teachers there helped me learn I could memorize how to spell the different parts of words and put them together. I couldn't always visualize the whole word, but I could remember how to spell certain sounds and put them together. At least now I could finally form the words I could speak out loud on the page. My spelling took many more years to be considered adequate, as each spelling test became a memorization challenge more than anything else. There are some parts of learning to write during that period that I don't remember, because most of the time I was leaving that room with tears in my eyes from frustration. The teachers just got used to powering through, only stopping to let me use a tissue when I was getting the paper in front of me wet.

Through all of this, my love of reading never left me. Now more than ever it provided me with a safe escape from all my problems. By the time I got to middle school I was no longer singled out for my skill or lack thereof. I was a perfectly average student. Looking back, I have no ill will towards those teachers who didn't know how get me to understand things the same way my peers did. As an adult now, even I don't know how much brain works most of the time. And despite everything, I am currently getting a Bachelor's Degree in English in hopes of

becoming a professor someday. I know I have a lot to learn about how to write effectively, especially in getting the thoughts that appear in my head translated into words on the screen. But I hope that I can bring my understanding of how struggling with reading and writing can make us feel into the classroom as an instructor myself and make the exploration of English more enjoyable for everyone.