



Your Teacher Doesn't Hate You – But She Might Not Like Your Writing

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Too often a student is reduced to tears or driven to fury by the red marks and criticisms that a teacher puts on an essay or term paper. It's natural to feel personally attacked, even hated, since in writing that essay you put some of your personal energy out there, your own stuff, and she didn't like it. But there's another way to respond, one that makes lemonade out of the lemon and creates an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth. It takes discipline, but it pays off. *Rewrite the paper! Even if she didn't ask you to.* Here's why:

1. The hardest thing an author has to do is separate the personal and emotional response to criticism from the content of that criticism.

I taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 36 years and served as an Associate Editor of several technical journals for a period of seventeen years. Over that time-span, I saw many examples of spectacular writing and equally many examples of dreadful writing. When appropriate, I would attack the dreadful writing with a red pen, but I always tried to focus on the writing, not on the person. This didn't mean that the author wouldn't get angry or discouraged, but at least I was leaving the door open for something better. "How," you might ask, "can I learn to write if every time I write something, it comes back covered in red marks?" Start with this observation:

2. There's a reason for every red mark.

When a teacher gets out the red pen and makes a comment or criticism, something in what you wrote stimulated that comment. It might have been grammar, or spelling, or sentence structure, or it might be something like "poor logic" or "weak argument." Regardless, the teacher is not a sadist, trying to torture you. She read what you wrote and wasn't satisfied by something. *If you have the personal resilience to think about why she wrote what she did, you are on the right path for making lemonade out of that lemon.*

What if the comment is about grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, or spelling? Ugh. These are the nuts and bolts of writing. I have no magical way to help you learn to spell. Some people can spell accurately, others, even highly literate adults, cannot. Do the best you can, and take advantage of spell-checking software. Most punctuation errors, however, are in the use or misuse of the comma (or overuse of things like exclamation marks). A good way to test for commas is to *read your paper aloud, carefully, with good pronunciation and timing.* Try it. Does your reading naturally pause or inflect in tone at places where the commas belong?

Reading aloud is also a wonderful way to improve grammar and sentence structure errors. Your ear is better attuned than you might suspect to carefully crafted language. Even if your normal

family conversation is highly clipped and colloquial, television and radio news broadcasts and podcasts are usually presented in well-formed complete sentences. If a red mark deals with sentence structure, rewrite it until it sounds firm and elegant to your ear when read aloud. The difference between a poorly structured thought or sentence and a well-structured thought or sentence will become familiar to you, but only if you can convert the former into the latter by rewriting.

3. Vague comments can be hard to figure out.

It's true. Some of those red-marked comments are impossibly vague. What now? When I was serving as a journal editor, I often had to remind authors of rejected papers that the reviewers of those papers had reasons for their comments, even if they were vague or misdirected in some fashion. Figuring out how to interpret those vague comments is indeed a challenge. But you should try. The wielder of the red pen has told you that either your ideas or your sequence of presentation doesn't connect in some fashion, but hasn't explained in detail why. One way to explore this is to take what you have written and boil it down to a very brief outline. Is this reduced version crisp and logical? Sometimes you will find the answer this way, and sometimes not.

4. When you try and still cannot figure out what the comment means, ask the teacher.

Not at first, mind you, only after you have made an earnest effort to figure it out yourself. One or two additional sentences from the teacher may clarify the issue, but you won't understand those sentences unless you have dug into the subject first, on your own, in detail.

5. What about the nasty comments?

Unfortunately, much as I would like to believe that it's all about the writing, some critics do get abusive and say things like "nonsense," or "rubbish," or even worse, "idiotic." Ouch! It's hard to keep your composure in such situations. My suggestion about abusive comments is to mentally reclassify them as "vagueness." Then, perhaps, you can deal with them constructively.

Hang in there. The teacher who made those red marks has given you guidance and an opportunity to learn. The only way to learn to write better is to write, and rewrite, read aloud, and if necessary, rewrite again.

I am always happy to hear from readers. Send me a note at www.stephendsenturia.com/contact.

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