

You May Be Excused

by Douglas Kenter

I blew it in September.

Those twenty days saw me yoked to the Mississippi State curriculum and towing my sophomore English students through subject-verb agreement. One day bled into the next as each night's grading forced me to re-teach the following morning what I thought I had wrapped up the previous afternoon.

At the end of the torrid month my students took their mid-semester test. The results were grim: after four weeks of instruction there was no evidence that the kids had an improved ability to pair nouns with verbs.

I swallowed hard and pressed on to adjectives.

Six months later my classroom was still foundering, now on the rudiments of the five-paragraph essay.

For three weeks my students had hitched thin paragraphs together into spindly, gossamer essays. They had compared Kobe Bryant to LeBron James¹. They had argued for and against pizza. They had written and re-written these essays, but never without me thickly coaxing them along.

¹Bryant was the overwhelming favorite.

It was past time for my seventy students to write on their own. But previous attempts to get the kids to do anything without my express, manifest support had rendered them into panicky goo. And a broad and basic hostility to writing meant even the seemingly strongest instructional days depended on me wheedling to unbecoming lengths .

The impassive Mississippi State Writing Test loomed, only a few months away. Kids who failed to pass it would fall capture to another torpid year at Edmonds High. I had to somehow get my students to bootstrap their heavy academic lassitude into some genuine and independent work.

September's Pyrrhic loss had cast a small shadow in my mind, but I was determined to keep it from dimming my faith in the class. Back in the fall, I told myself, I was both an amateur teacher and a credulous dolt. In February, I was strictly the latter. And yet I also acknowledged that the interests of time and circumstance warranted initiative, even if it had to be unsentimental and unglamorous.

A small measure of subterfuge was in order. I and my students would wilt after another fruitless fortnight.

On Monday morning, the kids awoke to a hideous assignment.

Term Paper Topics:

- *The current state of American science journalism*
- *The history of different theories of nutrition*
- *Satire and parody in 20th century foreign cinema*

- *The future economic potential of the European Union*
- *Dialect variation in rural Appalachia*
- *The effect of federal securities regulation on stock market growth from 1990-2000*
- *The interaction of technology and education in the 21st century*
- *Speech codes and freedom of expression on college campuses from 1960 to the present day*
- *The importance of Native American allegiance to the Allies during World War II*
- *The effectiveness of the transition from AFDC to TANF in 1997*
- *Deforestation and environmental depletion in the Amazon Rainforest*

The term paper should:

- *Include completely original research*
- *Cite all sources appropriately, and adhere to MLA standards*
- *Be at least 15 pages long, not including sources*
- *Feature several graphs, charts, and images*
- *Be typed in 12-point, Times New Roman font, double-spaced*

Plagiarism of any sort will not be tolerated, and will result in failure.

The term paper is worth 20% of your final course grade.

Each class fell silent for a few seconds after reading, re-reading, and internalizing the task before it.

Most kids swayed weakly in their seats, glassy-eyed. A few silently mouthed the words, “term paper,” as if cursing to themselves. Some yelped. Others were catatonic, but not unusually so.

And yet, beyond the gruesome requirements, a crucial proviso:

The term paper assignment will be waived upon receipt, by the end of the class period, of a five-paragraph essay arguing for why you should not have to write the term paper.

Semieducational, semitransparent, and icily contractual. It was perfect.

It was also dangerous. I had be careful to leave my students gently crest-fallen but stop short of then goading them into outright mutiny. I had been burned before by their uniformly ferocious response to my feckless lesson plans.

Once a plurality of kids realized that the topics that wouldn’t be completely miserable to write about would be impossible, each class as a whole wisely elected to write the in-class essay. Confused and alarmed, they set about the task with a quiet intensity.

Their essays showcased an impressive range of creative reasoning and argumentation.

Many considered plagiarism a necessary and natural thing, a viable and justifiable option in the face of a heavy workload and lots of typing. These kids treated my prohibition against it as nothing more than an unfortunate inconvenience.

Term papers are a waste of time. Usually 90% of the time the student will do plagiarism...I should be exempt from writing the term paper because I would plagiarise the work, its stressful, and no internet access...By reading a article about it I would not be able to do a fifteen page summary. That will lead me into plagiarism. -RaMarius

...is has to be type I do not have a computer or a printer and if I go to the libray I would have to pay for it and I do no have any money...The 4th reason why I do not want to write the research paper is because I can not copy and paste. Since I have to do it I should be able to copy and paste because its to long to be typing. Copying and pasting is the easiest way to do a 15 page research paper. -Roderick

...Why I do not want to write the research paper is because I can not copy and past If I pick want If want Be 15 Page long It will Be By 7 and I have problem with typeing If it was more topic I will do it But 15 page is to long these topic is not interest. -LaTrell

I find this kind of difficult...I don't have printers and no paper. There is no Plagiarism so I have to type a lot of pages...I'm asking you as a favor, Mr. K. Could I please be exempt from the assignment because I get very exausted and confused when it comes to assignments like this. -Woodchuck

This a lot to be type 15 pages wow. That is very humulluating. I feel that we shouldn't do this, because there is no way everyone can type all of this...Some

kids like myself have a problem typing. I can type a lot of words in a minute. Most of the time, I'm use to copying + pasting it. Aint no way I can type all this in three weeks These topics are so hard don't think I can find enough info on it. -Lawrence

I'm pretty sure that your brain may be puzzled...A research paper can not help you write better because you are on the internet copying information. -Lawrence

We shouldn't have to write the term paper Because We might make lots of mistakes on it. Like write anything because its 15 pg's long. Try to make one of our kin folks do it and try to make seem like its a mistake. Might use wrong words and punctuation marks. -Lanisha

The matter-of-fact manner of their explanations gave me the disconcerting impression that my students had been asked to write term papers before, and enough times to internalize plagiarism as a ready project resource.

But other students reluctantly admitted knowing that plagiarism was wrong, even as they lamented it being off-limits.

Mr. K why do we have to do this...15 pages is to long plus we to types it out. Where and who is gonna let me types 15 page for this assignment. I know plagiarism is a bad thing but it could at least help on this one...I'm be real with you. I wouldn't finish this assignment because I forget all about it. Its too long and don't have a computer. I know this is not the right attitude to have. -Clarkavious

I would write a five paragraph essay any day over a 15 page research paper...I will not have to go on the internet for anything, and then I will not have to

worry about copying and pasteing things getting points taking off. -Lashiyah

A essay this long will tire you out fast. You will have to type 15 pages. You can't just copy and paste off of the internet, because then you will get in big trouble. Basically, you will have did that paper for no specific reason. -Dylan

Many warned that the typing alone could result in horrendous mind and body damage.

...it would be strenuous, and having recently completed a long assignment, the term might cause a psychologica breakdown. Writing the term paper would put my sanity in danger. -Grover

I will have to work harder then any other student. Everybody and my family will be having fun while I am stuck doing work. I will be tired of having to work on it everyday and my finger will cramp and hurt. -Cayson

Personally, I hate using computers. Computers are irrelevant and they really bore me. Sometimes the light on the screen makes me tired and sleepy. Most of all, the keyboard makes my fingers hurt when I type...The information from the internet may not be reliable. I could get a zero if my information is not right. -Mondreisha

I remember when I had to do a 3 page research paper and it was hard. Research paper are assassins to the brain...Doing this long research paper is like having a heart attack in your brain...Topics like these can make your head hurt and make people fear school...This research paper is a serial killer to the brain. This will be a bad thing on your behalf, Mr. Kenter. -VarJavius

A few argued for exemption, claiming to have already achieved rhetorical

perfection or flawless self-control.

First and Foremost, writing an essay to me is really simple. I know how to write them and I can write about anything. I know If I write this term paper it would be beneficial. But I have already refined my writing to a professional level...I am a transcendent writer...And Essays and term paper are my specialty, but why write them If I am a master at them. -Charleston

I am such an exquisite writer. My writing is so good sometimes it tells stories...I consider myself special because of my writing talent...My good writing skills seem to affect alot of people...I know that Mr. Kenter is fascinated with my writing, who wouldn't be?...It is not every day that you get a child that can write like I can. -Berthesia

Fist I do everything I am told. I do not like getting zeros. Like when class had to do that homework over break mostly everyone waited on the answer...I alway give a hundred percent. I strive for the best. Back when the class worked on the MS Subject Area Test preparation workbooks, while students were complain I was underlining, eliminating, and looking for key words. Lastly I show total respect. -Kool-Aid

I have been good in your room...I do not need to write a 15 page long essay because I am a great student do not give you problems, I am not a problem child. And the good do not need to surfer with the bad. I have a great mind set. -Cherlyss

One confessed that the massive assignment would overwhelm his family's finances.

Ink is very expensive and I nor my dad has the money to buy ink that fre-

quently...fifteen pages will destroy my printer. Ink is probably not a problem for you, but it is for me...my dad is really trying to cut back costs as he has to pay for other things, and a jump drive just is not one. -Mark

A few were nakedly honest about the natures of their relationships to schoolwork.

With this much work, student who make good will probably try to attempt it with help from parent and family member. Little that they know, their parent can not help because they don't know what to do. -Gavin

I would not finish that essay. I would not finish because theres this thing called "a life" and mine is full of work...If I just consentrate on the essay the my other grades in other classes would drop. Which would cause me to fail. That my friend could possibly be the down fall of my future...Now that you see it from my point of view, you should know because of the listed reason why I cant write that essay. -Fulani

Mr. Kenter I think you is way too cool for to give us a 15 pg essay. I know you trying to help us to see what life gone be like ahead of us. Peoples in this class are lazy enough to write a persuasive 5 paragraph. I think you should let the peoples who tried to go free, and let the others suffer. I know I am not a great writer, but I try. If I can do it they can...I was wondering will you just let the peoples who tried to get away, because of our knowledge and great work ethic...I am a person that trying to make it in life and I know you feel the same way. So just help the peoples that want to learn and look over the other people. They gone constenly do the same thing over and over again. -Bunky

I appreciated Breavon's canny deployment of theretofore-remaindered vo-

cabulary words:

I think I should not do the 15 pages essay. My rationale is that, it too many pages, I might forget and My handwriting is incoherent. So do you think you want to waste your time peruse through some incoherent writing. -Breavon

It seemed the kids would always remember me as that guy who thought plagiarism was bad.

Five weeks later and two weeks after the nominal term paper due date Percy handed me a smart white folder with a transparent plastic cover. Inside I found a tidily formatted 17-page paper, replete with colored graphs and several pages of what appeared to be MLA-compliant sources. He had chosen topic number two., and it was entirely plagiarized from the first three Google search results for ‘nutrition.’

Kudos to Percy for charging into a lost cause head-on, with pie charts, I thought in June as I passed him.

*You just read an excerpt from my upcoming nonfiction book, **Expulsion of Disbelief; or, How I Learned to Stop Teaching and Lean with Those Who Cant.** Thanks for reading.*