

Grace

Driving home from Fairfield Middle School in the late afternoon, Grace Jones thinks about 12-year-old Tyler Banks who writes like he's chasing something that's getting away. Sentences run into each other, much like the streams that follow the road.

"Try to slow down," Grace says in class.

"I think too fast," Tyler explains.

Grace understands. She is an English teacher for whom writing is difficult. Words come from the knuckles and digits, not directly through the mouth like talking. Thoughts veer off course, land in the toes, the hips, drift above the ear line.

Grace remembers. Her essays once bled where teachers poked them with red pens, trying to force her to slow down. Lost in the abyss of the page, she fingered the folds of her skirt and stared down at her brown shoes.

Teachers injured her papers but praised her written insights, paralyzing her with their seemingly contradictory evaluation. She possessed urgent, poetic thoughts and an almost physical impulse to write, but the idea of being an author overwhelmed her.

After graduation, she continued writing only for herself, and letters to good friends, within a private, safe freedom she insisted upon, allowed herself, found.

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In Grace's seventh-grade classroom, Tyler Banks reads his essay aloud in a small group then asks for specific, "directed feedback," such as help with transitions or copy editing, protecting himself from an onslaught of opinion. He revises his essay based on an outlined plan. His new draft is almost an entirely new essay, a so-called "Drastic Draft." Writing should involve change, Grace believes, much like personal growth. First drafts can be saved for pirating and posterity.

Painfully, Grace listens to her students ask, "Did you like my paper?" Some mask their concern by pretending not to care. Sad, she doesn't want their attitudes to be so contingent upon her approval. Her students plead for so much more than the technical assistance she can provide (comma splices, dangling modifiers). They seek assurance that what they write is intelligent, *special*.

They must feel strong, like authors, Grace thinks.

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Anxious, Tyler sits in Grace's cinderblock office with his essay on the Green Bay Packers, his favorite team. It's punctuated in only three places, once with an exclamation point, but Tyler doesn't notice. Grace refrains from correcting. Papers litter her desk in a messy, friendly way.

"Look," she says, pointing out the window to a parking lot, a big oak tree, a gravel path, students walking. "Notice how part of this picture is moving: the limbs of the tree in the wind, the students, that car?" Tyler looks. He sees things moving. "Notice also," Grace adds, "some things are still; they have stopped. What isn't moving?"

Tyler looks nervously out the window. "The school," he says, "and some cars."

Grace nods. "Writing has both these elements. Some things stand still as a tree trunk. Some things move. People sit on a bench, watching."

Grace puts a pink finger on Tyler's paper. "Here. I want to stop and sit down here." Tyler lets out a short breath. "Now, show me where *you* want to sit."

The long-awaited teacher response.

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Tyler's high school English teacher, Mr. Preston, wearing a worn corduroy jacket, carrying a bundle of books and loose papers under his arm, tells Tyler his paper on *King Lear* wasn't relevant to the reading. He says the word "solipsistic" as if it were a bad case of acne. "I want to hear less of your opinion and to see more references to the text," Preston explains as they walk down the hall. "This isn't a diary. At least one quotation on each page, and don't write 'I think.' It's your paper. I assume you are telling me what you think." Tyler, age 17, looks up solipsism in his torn, paperback dictionary and reads: "The theory that the self is the only existent thing."

In college, Tyler learns that by building connections between himself and what he studies he creates meaning. In philosophy, he learns a tree doesn't fall in the forest unless he hears it. He remembers his *King Lear* essay and realizes, in retrospect, that he admired Lear's strength, that he values people who endure. At age 21, feeling his budding authority, he challenges a bespectacled poetry professor who asserts that *Ode on a Grecian Urn* has one, correct interpretation. "But the

poem means something different to me,” Tyler insists. In ensuing years he recognizes the truth in both his and his professor’s stance. There is a transcendental, classic quality to great art, but he affects it, brushes against it in passing. His master’s thesis contrasts the absolute truths of science with the more interpretive, spiritual truths of literature (convergent versus divergent thinking). The subjective element of the latter complicates evaluating his students’ essays. He struggles to be a fair grader, to respect his students’ assertions, to not wound them with his red pen in the small office he shares with three other, part-time instructors.

Knowing his students want him to love what they write, he reflects that most audiences are critical: teachers, employers, peers, editors, readers. Students tell him that even when they *freewrite* in their private journals they feel watched. But when he attempts to be non-evaluative, to remove himself as the central authority figure, they become confused. When he charges them to determine their own audience, they complain: “Who else do you want us to write for? You’re grading us.”

Half of them still can’t end sentences with periods.

Throughout his 30 subsequent years of teaching, Mr. Banks labors to foster self-authority by requiring students to construct and defend bridges between their inclinations and the material they study. The public education system mandates that he prepare them to be debriefed.

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Grace pulls into her driveway, after work. Home at last. Mist from the river rises above the stubble of her neighbor’s corn field. She feeds her cat, then settles into her chair by the front window and writes, first privately, slowly expanding her imagined audience, overcoming her fear of being an author.

Most evenings she doesn’t know what she wants to say, feels only the familiar, almost physical impulse to keep writing.