

# THE MAKING OF A WRITING INSTRUCTOR: A *CURRERE* REGRESSION IN FOUR FRAGMENTS

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## SCENE: A TYPICAL SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

In the last few minutes of the last class meeting of my freshman high school honors English class, I sat looking at the grade sheet that the teacher had handed me detailing my final course grade. My heart sank as I looked at the bottom line: 94.4 (A-). In my academically competitive high school, a 95 was an A and was the score that was needed to be automatically placed into the track for senior year AP English, a goal I had been shooting for since I learned that the entire year would be spent on Shakespeare, a personal favorite (I know. I am a nerd. At 14, Shakespeare was a favorite. Nothing to see here. Move along.).

When the class ended, I shuffled in my seat, taking time putting away my things as the rest of the students left the room. My teacher (whose name I don't recall but who I remember as looking like a mashup of Dolores Umbridge and Betsy DeVos) stood ordering papers and books on her already-tidy desk and did not look up when I approached, though I sensed that she knew I was there.

"Yes," she said, still not looking up from the surface of the desk.

"Um," I began, trying to figure out how to start, "Well, my grade is one tenth of a point away from getting me into the AP track, and since not making it now will shut me out entirely, I was hoping there might be something I could do to get that extra tenth of a point."

"No," she said, finally looking up and making eye contact.

"No?" I asked, a little surprised at getting a one word answer.

"The fact is," she went on, "that you are not AP English material."

## SCENE: A TYPICAL STATE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

In the last few minutes of the last class meeting of the first week of my freshman English composition class, the instructor (whose name I don't recall but who I remember as looking like a mashup of Kristen Bell and Ellen DeGeneres) had just handed back my Harbrace Folder, in which was the graded copy of my first college essay and upon which was a post-it note reading, "See me after class." My heart sank, and I opened the folder with trepidation. At the top of the first page, written in large, swooping letters were the words, "Excellent Work, A+."

Confused, I sat looking at the folder as the rest of the class filed out into the hall. I quickly gathered my things and went to where the instructor was shoving her books and papers into a ratty backpack. Sensing my presence, she looked up into my eyes and smiled.

"I guess you are wondering what I want," she said. "I just wanted to know what such a good writer was doing in my class. Did your school not have an AP English program?"

I explained my situation to her, and she nodded and said, "I was afraid of that. Well, if I am the first to tell you, and I fear I may be, you are a really good writer. I mean, you could make a living at this someday if that interested you."

### SCENE: A TYPICAL STATE UNIVERSITY FACULTY CLUB

In the first few minutes of the a “meet and greet” cocktail hour event for new English Department graduate students, I found myself standing shoulder to shoulder with two other students who, like I, had received honors fellowships that would pay for our Master of English in Literature and Composition programs, along with a generous stipend for living expenses. The rest of our cohort was scheduled join in another hour, but the first event of the night was meant to be an honor just for the three of us. Nervously, we fetched drinks from the bar and began chatting among ourselves, sharing stories of how we had ended up there together. I had just finished telling them that this school was actually my undergrad alma mater and that I had come back specifically to work with the medieval literature professor when faculty members started to drift in, approach the bar, and eventually head casually in our direction.

As the evening progressed and the honors-fellowship hour was coming to a close, a professor (whose name I don’t recall, but who I remember looking like a mashup of Jared Kushner and the teacher from Ferris Bueller) approached me with a smile on his face and his hand extended to shake mine.

“Welcome to the Department,” he said. “My name is [insert entirely forgettable name here], and I’m the Director of Undergraduate Studies.”

“Hi, Professor [Whatsits], I’m Kelly Waldrop, and we have actually met before.”

Slapping his thigh in an actual, corny, gosh-shucks manner, he replied, “I knew you looked familiar. How do I know you?”

“I got my B.A. here, and during my senior year, Dr. Howes was teaching an honors seminar on Chaucer. Space was limited in the seminar, and you had ruled that seats in the class would be determined by G.P.A. Since I had spent the first two and a half years of my college career as an Engineering student, I knew that my 3.6 G.P.A. wasn’t likely to make the cut, so I came to your office to appeal to you for a spot, given that my G.P.A. after changing my major to English was a 4.0.”

He looked at me with a sort of blankness that confirmed he had no recollection of this at all, and with a tell-me-more eagerness in his voice, he asked, “What happened? Did I let you in the class?”

I looked him straight in the eye and said with a slight half-smile, “Nope.”

At first, his face fell slightly, but then he brightened as if remembering where we were and said, “Well, it doesn’t seem to have hurt you any.”

### SCENE: ANOTHER TYPICAL STATE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

In the first few minutes of the first class meeting of Teaching English Composition, the first course in my master’s program, as soon as the class came to order, the teacher asked, “How many of you took freshman composition in your bachelors programs?” Of the twenty students in the classroom, I was the only one who raised a hand. Giving me a surprised look, the teacher (whose name I don’t recall but who I remember as looking like a mashup of every female professor I have ever had) said, “Well, you just ruined my next line. In all of my years teaching this course, I have never had anyone raise their hand to that question, and I explain what a deficit it is to be tasked with teaching a course that you have never taken. Would you be willing to put together a short presentation for the class on your student experience in freshman composition and what you feel you learned from the class?”