# How to Read a Blank Page of Writing: Acknowledging and Celebrating the Writing Potential in Every Student

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Consider with me the blank writing pages in your life, waiting to receive the written word. Crisp, white paper or the blinking cursor against an empty document, every writer must confront the blank page.

As a writer, I know how much energy it takes for me to overcome a blank page, and I know how vulnerable it feels to have birthed a weak draft that isn't strong enough to survive others' scrutiny. As a teacher of writers, I know the exponential increase of energy required for me to help a student overcome their blank pages, and I know the restraint required to not impinge on their vulnerable writer identities with my scrutiny.

Much of my early teaching career was spent trying to overcome students' blank pages. Kelly Gallagher's (2006) Teaching Adolescent Writers shaped the way I approached reluctant writers as a young teacher: I offered students choice in writing topics to make writing more authentic (p. 91); and I followed Gallagher's admonition "that we ignore the mandated discourses until we have had a chance to help students warm up to writing" (p. 93). Following the National Writing Project tradition, I implemented informal scribble time writing with great success (Wiederhold & Dean, 2020). And yet, there is no way to eradicate the blank page of student writing.

My work seeks to bolster the empathetic foundation on which writing interventions sit because if teachers use existing strategies with students but start with a better understanding of what can be "read" or understood from students' blank pages, I believe existing strategies will be more effective. And reading a blank page begins with realizing that not every blank page says the same thing.

There are myriad reasons writers produce blank pages: anxiety, fear, procrastination, perfectionism, apathy (Prather, 2022). Practitioner scholarship responds with brainstorming strategies, drafting strategies, collaboration strategies, mentor text study, and process approach (Dean, 2021). I spent years honing my craft in implementing effective writing strategies and practices, so as a young teacher, I took every blank page as a personal and professional challenge and an inability to overcome a blank page as a personal and professional defeat.

Now, as a veteran teacher, I am re-evaluating my relationship with a student's blank page. I am re-evaluating my emotional and professional response. I am advocating that there is value in reading a blank page—meaning, the literal definition of reading, "look at and understand the meaning of written or printed words or symbols" (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2024, n.p.)—rather than immediately responding with intervention. For the sake of my students, I am reconsidering the blank page as a symbol worth analyzing.

## There Are Invisible Splattered Guts of Meaning on the Blank Pages In Our Classrooms

Reflecting on her education as a student at Berkeley, Joan Didion (1976) made a comparative allusion between her process as a writer and Berkley's particle accelerator. In a gross oversimplification, we could say that a particle accelerator uses centrifugal

Wiederhold, J. D. (2024). How to read a blank page of writing: Acknowledging and celebrating the writing potential in every student. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *8*(1), 2–10.

force to get a particle moving so quickly that when it splats against the wall, all of its guts come spilling out revealing what was previously invisible to detection (Smith, 1948). It's a fitting description for what a writer does, particularly Didion (1976), who was able to fixate on a single subject or image until—in her words—"it shimmered" (p. 270).

When I discovered the *currere* method (Pinar, 1994), I immediately thought of Didion and her particle accelerator revealing the invisible. Although unintentional, Didion's piece written in 1976 reflecting back on her lived educational experience at Berkeley in the 1950's in order to explore who she was in the present, reads like it has been run through the *currere* methodology, proving that this kind of thinking can happen—in part—organically. I have, for years, been organically processing a few classroom memories from my time as a homeless teenager, but it wasn't until after spinning these lived experiences inside the recursive-memory-particle-accelerator that is the *currere* method that I have arrived at some splatted guts that have revealed a synthesized reconceptualization of the blank pages I have produced as a student and processed as a teacher and that have me reconsidering how I will react and respond to my own blank pages and those of my students.

## Elementary School: A First Grade Blank Page

I was born in Guadalajara, México, to a Mexican mother and a father with German roots. We were poor. My mom was terminally ill. We bounced from house to house throughout Central California for the majority of my early education. Because of our limited resources, we often didn't have as much control as my mother would have liked over where we lived, and by extension, where we would go to school. To get around this, my mother would find a family whose home was situated within the boundary line of her chosen school district and convince them to let us use their address for our admission forms. I was given a flashcard with the new address to memorize in case anyone interrogated me. All of this to say, that before the first day of first grade, I was already petrified of saying the wrong thing to an adult who would then have the power to evict my mother from her dream for us. I was afraid of standing out.

And boy, did I stand out to Mrs. Grenager, my first-grade teacher. I can still see her pacing slowly up and down the aisles like a sentinel on patrol, her eyes always, seemingly, locked on me. Within the first week of class, she made sure I learned some important lessons: I was the slowest reader; I did not pronounce my words correctly and would need speech therapy; I could not write (probably, she said, because I wasted all my creativity on daydreaming); and I literally could not write (poor penmanship).

I was paralyzed. Every day I would come home crying to tell my mother that I couldn't read, and I couldn't write, which confused her. Because of my mother's disease, most of our time was spent reading and writing together. Her books and my books became our books, The Little Prince, The Princess Bride. She would read aloud; then, I would read aloud. Sometimes we read silently next to each other, but we always read.

And we wrote. She was worried she would die before she could tell me all that she had to tell me, so she wrote to me in a journal. She would give it to me when she needed to sleep, and I would read it, and I would respond with questions and feelings. What do you want your last words to be? Will you be sad if Dad remarries? What's the most important thing to know? I hope you can still feel my love when you are in heaven. Her writing mixed with my writing into journals of our writing. I didn't think of these as academic skills. Reading and writing were just a part of our lives. It was closer to

what sociocultural learning scholars would call "a bidirectional process" (Martinez et al., 2017, p. 495) that fosters a healthy and empowered identity (Williamson, 2019).

But Mrs. Grenager never saw this part of my life. She saw that, when I wrote my name, the letter J was too slanty-flat and the letter e was too squashy-flat. She made me copy my name over and over on those gray-brown, train-track construction papers that seemed designed to rip if you tried to use your eraser. I became so paralyzed that, any time I received a piece of paper to write on, I would stare at it. If pushed to write, I would respond, "I'm thinking," and put my pencil at the ready until Mrs. Grenager moved on. The blank page was the only safe way to write, especially when there was no safe shelter for my reader identity, and I viewed the two identities not separately, but as a singular reflection of my ability to succeed in school.

As I re-inhabit this dusty space of an educational system, it almost feels unrecognizable. Cursive is gone, and when I tell my current students about my "slow bird" reading group in Mrs. Grenager's class, they can't believe it. The fastest readers, the "bluebird" group, had a sign at their table with a picture of a bluebird, its mouth overflowing with worms. The sign on the "slow birds" table was a bird shrugging its wings as it looked at an empty hole with a question mark over it. Maybe this was meant to motivate us, but maybe it was closer to what one of my current students called it: "Straight up child abuse." Some of these early images of my education seem to have been eradicated, but I'd submit that even though those external practices might not exist in the classroom, perhaps the underlying principles and biases that drove those practices are still holding on. While research touts the positive effect size of ability grouping (Steenbergen-Hu, 2016), my own experience aligns with research on the lasting harm of being told at an early age I existed in a deficit (Belfi et al., 2012).

Educators—myself included—think in terms of school years, but for students, experience is not fractured. They are a homogenous collection of all their experiences and—at least from personal experience—a few months of immediate acceleration within a grade level perhaps isn't worth the collective effect of a language portfolio that will impact formative self-conceptualization in a negative way.

I was switched out of Mrs. Grenager's class for the last two months of school.

On my first day in Mrs. Teagarden's room, I received an empty booklet of paper in the shape of a pumpkin. The eyes were cut out, revealing the lined writing paper beneath, brown and blank. I wanted to do right by that pumpkin—it looked so cool—but my sullen expression made my self-doubt evident. Mrs. Teagarden said, "I hear you have a wonderful imagination. I can't wait to read whatever you write." She had me at "whatever." I didn't feel pressure to create perfection; I felt a freedom that whatever I wrote would be honored and not criticized. Mrs. Teagarden did for me what I want to forever do for all my students: encourage, cultivate, and safeguard their right to fill the blank pages of their writing life.

### High School: A Homeless Blank Page

My mother died. My father stopped coming home, so I bought a one-way Greyhound bus ticket to Provo, Utah. I had just turned 16. I walked to the courthouse and told a clerk I wanted to make sure I didn't miss any important steps in the paperwork process of transferring power of attorney away from my father. She was kind and explained that my lawyer should know how to do all that. I smiled and asked if there was a way I could do it without a lawyer. She smiled back, more concerned, explaining that I would still need legal paperwork and that I really did need to find a lawyer. With otherworldly

confidence, I told her that if she could show me an example of what it needed to look like, I could write it. And nothing in me doubted that I could.

After giving me a copy of an old filing she redacted with a black Sharpie, I methodically read and re-read every line, every word, adapting them to fit my circumstances. I used an electronic Brother word processor that showed three lines of text at a time. Because of the fastidious formatting requirements of the example filing, I had to start over several times. But it worked. At 16, I successfully drafted and filed my own legal documents transferring power of attorney away from my father.

I chose Utah because I thought I might find a stable home with a brother who was living there. Things didn't work out, and I spent a year living on the street without a home, without family, without support. Ever the good student, I had enrolled in AP Literature before knowing I would be without a place to sleep. It was my favorite class.

Mr. Baldwin walked in 2 minutes late every day. He always wore orthopedic shoes and corduroy pants with oversized Hawaiian shirts that framed his impressively hairy chest. I can only assume he had dentures because he was constantly sucking up excess saliva and speaking with a bit of a lisp around his unnaturally fitting teeth. He was an odd-looking man, and I loved him for it. Utah had been a hard-cultural adjustment for me, and Mr. Baldwin seemed more California eccentric, so he was my closest attachment to home.

"You guys, did you do the reading last night?" Heather's question isn't directed at me but to two young men who look like they could play quarterback.

"I did. I couldn't believe it."

"Like, oh my frick! Can you believe how many frickin swears there were?"

I only know Heather's name because everyone knows Heather's name, since she always has a problem with everything Baldwin stands for. At this point in the year, I have not said one word in class, but I love to watch all this drama. Since Baldwin is late every day, he misses these Heather-rants that allow me to watch all the dramatic irony play out when he shows up.

"I'm gonna say something today. We have to take a stand."

"If you say something, I'll support you."

"And why do I need to be reading about a woman's bra? I mean it's clearly all about sex!"

"I've thought about asking my parents to come talk to him."

"Guys, if he makes us read anything with swears or sex today, I am going to walk out!"

"Good morning class. I had to wait in line to make the copies for today. Hopefully you had a chance to talk about the reading a bit."

Heather's hand shot straight up. "Why did you assign us this book to read?"

Mr. Baldwin looked confused, his tongue sliding across his teeth. "This novel is part of the course reading list."

"But why can't we read a different book."

"You can read any book you'd like. This is just the book we are reading for discussion in this class. I assume you all did the reading?" Mr. Baldwin flipped to the page he wanted to discuss.

"I just want to know why you chose a book that is inappropriate when there are so many other books to choose from."

"This book isn't inappropriate. It's literature."

"It's sex and swearing! Do you really think it's appropriate to be talking to kids about sex?"

"You are all going to fail the AP test if you can't handle reading about life."

The room was silent.

"Do you know we can see your chest hair?"

"Okay, clear your desks!" His face was lobster red, the veins pulsing in his neck. I could hear his blood pressure rising by how frequently he was sucking his excess saliva. "How about love? Can we talk about love?!"

Mr. Baldwin slapped a stack of handouts against the front desk of each row. "You'll have to write an essay today because I'm not going to talk about literature with people who can't handle life! This is a poem about Love by perhaps the greatest poet of all time. You have 40 minutes!" The handouts included the poem, "The Broken Heart," by John Donne and a prompt to, "Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude toward the nature of love."

Heather was either a fast reader, or I was slow in processing what had happened because I was still reading the first two lines—"He is stark mad, whoever says, That he hath been in love an hour …"— when she stood up.

"And there it is! Sex and swearing!" She circled the words "swear" and "breast" holding them up for the class and walked out.

It was a lot to process. I had spent the last night sleeping in five-minute chunks. Every time I got warm enough to fall asleep, it only lasted a few minutes before my body would shake so hard it woke me up. I was thinking about that and Heather's clear misreading of Donne's usage of "swear" and how poorly Mr. Baldwin was treated when I hear, "Five-minute warning."

I'm not sure what happened, but the page in front of me is blank, and the pressure in my head feels a little better. I must have fallen asleep.

I decided trying to write the essay was a mistake. Instead, I underlined some random words, drew some arrows, circled a few words that looked meaningful, then wrote a little note:

I got so wrapped up in Donne's beautiful imagery, I lost track of time. Sorry about that. And sorry about the way the students treated you. I think you are a great teacher. I know this poem isn't about sex. It's about love!

I underlined the word love and ran over it a few times with my pencil to really emphasize the point. I left class that day feeling really good about life, like Mr. Baldwin and I had fought the class and I had his back the whole time. It didn't feel like family but something close to it: an alignment of values.

The next class period, Mr. Baldwin was waiting for me at the door with my annotated poem.

"You were the only one who didn't write the essay," he said as he walked me to the book room across the hall. "You can use this class period to get caught up."

After another night of endless shivering, I didn't stand a chance in the quiet cocoon of that closet. I woke up in a panic to the sound of his orthopedics squeaking in the hallway. I didn't want to disappoint my favorite teacher. When I saw he was talking to another teacher with his back to me, I slipped around the corner and left campus.

I skipped his class the next week. A mix of shame, worry, and wishful thinking that maybe, after a week, I could just sit down in class again like nothing had happened. It didn't work.

"You left! And then you skip my class for a week?"

"Sorry." The word caught in my throat. He showed me to the closet again. "You have two prompts now. I don't know how you are going to finish them, but you better get started!"

I couldn't see straight. His words, the tone. It felt like a betrayal of my last safe space. I spent five minutes deciding if I should write the essay or leave again. I knew if I sat down, I'd fall asleep, so I stood with a book behind the paper and tried to write. It didn't work. I thought I had been smart enough to take this class but must not have been because I couldn't seem to get my brain to work right. I crumpled up the paper and shoved it into my pocket along with my hope for passing Mr. Baldwin's class.

How was it possible that I was spending my free time drafting legal documents while simultaneously failing high school English? Furthermore, how had I independently acquired samples of legal paperwork, studied how they worked, identified what each filing required, adapted my language to fit the legal jargon in this new genre, all while believing myself to be an incapable writer?

Mr. Baldwin knew nothing of my extracurricular courtroom writing activities, and things with him only got worse. When I did turn something in, he could never seem to look past my spelling mistakes, poor handwriting, and my persistent misuse of punctuation. Everything had been reframed for him by my avoidance behavior of skipping his class.

What can we do—practically—as overburdened teachers to get to know our students' writing lives? To validate their experience?

> For schools to be successful, they do not necessarily need new curriculum or radical restructuring, but a change in culture and attitude—a change that recognizes that with teaching comes a commitment to build knowledge of our students as much as to build knowledge in our students. (Martinez et al., 2017, p. 490)

Mr. Baldwin is a big part of the reason I became a teacher: to make sure no kid would ever have to feel the way he made me feel. I wanted to not be the kind of teacher who would punish kids with writing an essay because they chose to stand up to his choice of books. I wanted to get to know kids before making any assumptions about them. I wanted to teach students rather than curriculum. I have tried my best.

### Teaching: Wiederhold Reverts to Blank Page Baldwin Rage

But I have failed many times. Despite my best attempts to not revert to Mr. Baldwin, to not tap my inner Mrs. Grenager, my years as a teacher have revealed that nothing frustrates me more than a blank page sitting in front of a seemingly apathetic student.

I taught Dieme as a ninth-grader. We bonded over Caribbean food: he was from the Dominican Republic, and I lived in Puerto Rico for a few years. I knew he spent his weekends taking the train into the city to meet up with his cousins. I even watched the home-made music videos they would create together. I was succeeding in connecting with Dieme, the person. Because I cared about him, I wanted desperately to empower him with writing strategies I knew would help him address any writing situation he'd face in life (Dean, 2005).

"Dieme, why aren't you writing?"

"I'm thinking," he said, tapping his temple thoughtfully.

Thinking is part of writing. I know that. If he needed time to think, that was valuable writing energy that maybe a less experienced teacher wouldn't recognize I thought.

Dieme was often the first to class every day, so I made sure to check in with him the next class period, "So last time, you spent a lot of time thinking. What is your strategy for starting the drafting process?"

"I dunno."

"Dieme, the strategies. What about making a list? What about an informal scribble first to get the juices flowing? Or doing some fat drafting to build from some raw material you have already created?"

"Oh, yea. One of those would probably work. Thanks."

After 10 minutes of waiting patiently for him to start, "Dieme, what strategy do you want to try first?"

"I'm just thinking, making a plan."

"That's great. That's valid. I'm worried that you only have two days left to finish this. I want you to be able to enjoy the weekend with your cousins. How about starting with a scribble? Just informally spill your thoughts on the paper without worrying about spelling, grammar, any of that stuff. Just ideas. Sound good?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

I walked away from Dieme and watched him lean back for the majority of the period, periodically tapping his pencil on his paper if he saw me look his way. How stupid can I be, I thought. He probably has something going on in his life. I was homeless. What is going on with Dieme that would keep him from engaging? I will take a deep breath and check in with him next time.

"Dieme, hold up." I pulled him into the hall to talk before class started. "I've been worried about you lately. I see you aren't engaging in class. Anything you want to talk about, or I can help you with?"

"Nah, I'm good. Just been thinking."

"Okay. I want to give you your space. I also want you to pass English. If you don't turn this in, I can't give you a grade. You gotta give me something. Can you write something today? It's the last day we have to work in class."

"I got you. I will."

Dieme never got past the thinking stage of the writing process. He failed my class, and I feel like I failed him. Our daily talks turned away from Caribbean food to my worries for his future. I spent the rest of the year showing him graduation progress charts, trying to warn him that he wasn't on track to graduate. Reminding him that I can give him credit for anything he is willing to turn in. I felt so much frustration at my inability to break through whatever was distracting Dieme from what I was sure was the most important thing he could be doing.

His sophomore year, he came and said hi to me every now and then. I asked him how he was, and we shared some personal pleasantries, but my talk always veered back to encouraging him that he could still work with me to earn credit for his freshman year.

At the beginning of his junior year, another teacher asked me if I had met Dieme's son yet. Son?! I was shocked. Dieme being a father was so far outside the possibility of what I had imagined he might be facing.

"I didn't know Dieme had a son. Was that like over the summer?"

"No, his kid is like a year and a half."

"Yeah, he has full custody too. The mom didn't want to be a mom, so he's working a ton to try to support his kid. I'm so proud of him for still trying to finish high school."

Dieme had learned he was going to be a father while he was a ninth grader in my class. He had promised to care for his son, enlisting help from his family, looking for a job, shopping for cribs and bottles and formula. He was even reading parenting books—all while he was in my class. I had no idea. And I don't know that I needed to know. Sometimes I forget that even if Mr. Baldwin had tried finding out more about what was going on with my home life, I wouldn't have told him.

## How I Now Read and React to Blank Pages of Writing

I am learning that there is a line between a student's effort and my own and that too often I have been guilty of overpowering—with the very best intentions—a student's right to not write. In psychology, narcissistic parents see their children as an extension of themselves and, therefore, try to control and take ownership of their behavior (Lo, 2022). I don't think a direct comparison between my efforts as a teacher and a narcissistic parent is fair; however, making the comparison is a helpful reminder that students exist outside of myself, and it is healthy to maintain that boundary.

I know how hard it is to maintain those boundaries when I also feel a professional responsibility to prepare students for end of year testing, for passing my class, for graduation. I worry that, in wanting to help students prepare for traditional academic success, I have created two distinct discourses in my classroom (Gee, 1989): one that tries to place students at the center, jointly constructing meaning through genuine dialogue and inquiry, and the discourse of test-prep that reverts to the "banking" model (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 72) with the justification that all students need to know certain things to be successful on the test. What I never considered before was that I might run the risk of invalidating or at least undermining one while choosing the other, that while I—as teacher—might be able to compartmentalize those two discourses with my own internal dialogue, my students will experience it differently. Dieme was caught between those conflicting priorities I gave to my classroom. He handed in so many blank pages, and I didn't read a single one.

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