

4 The World of Published Writing

Student writer as published writer. This idea seems natural to me, but it is not a universally accepted one. Some of my colleagues consider my confidence in the student writer as published writer to be foolish; those who are kinder substitute the word idealistic. Whatever their words, their message is clear: a lot of student writing isn't very good, and as a teacher I'm wasting my time encouraging students to pursue publication. Any teacher who does encourage her students to publish their work, and who creates a classroom that fosters that activity, is likely to incur similar resistance. Perhaps the best arguments for this practice are anecdotal. I offer two of my stories, certain that the teacher who does become an advocate of student publishing will very quickly collect her own.

I ran into Dina not too long ago. She was pushing a grocery cart, three little boys clutching its sides. I smiled at her, the sympathetic smile I send to harried mothers with children, and headed toward the cereal aisle. But a voice, tentative and a bit quizzical, followed me.

"Ms. Rubenstein?"

I turned around, focusing on her face. She *did* look familiar, but. . . .

"I'm Dina," she said. "Dina Andrews. Well, Dina Cassidy now," she smiled at the boys," but I was Dina Andrews back in 1982. Creative Writing? Remember?"

I *do* remember. More than a dozen years have passed, yet I do remember that young blonde girl in Room 231, always polite and smiling, not the best writer in the class maybe, but sure, I remember Dina.

We exchanged warm smiles and pleasantries, and then I began to push my cart forward. She stopped me with her words. "I'm working on a book," she said, "a children's book. Would you . . . would you read it?"

Sometimes when students leave my class, I banter with them, telling them I expect a dedication in their first novel or collection of poetry. Those are the students whose papers are splashed with the yellow highlights I use to mark lines I particularly like, who come to me after class bearing notebooks full of stories, who scan the bulletin board every day looking for new contests to enter.

Dina was not such a student. Dina was a quiet, reserved seventeen-year-old, who, if I recall correctly, was interested mainly in horses and

the dress she was wearing to the Senior Prom. I don't recall her writing, and, as she reminded me slyly as we leaned against our grocery carts, I gave her a B- for the course. But somehow in that class the seed was planted. Somewhere in the jumble of handouts—market lists, cover letters, and manuscript preparation guidelines (“I still have those,” she tells me. “Are they outdated?”)—Dina found something that would never become passé. She found a reason to believe in the power of her own words. Years ago I told Dina that when you have something to say that comes from your heart, there is a whole world waiting for your words. Now, as a mother, Dina's heart is full of children and she has something to say to them. It may have taken more than a dozen years for her ability and her confidence to come to fruition, but, in the course of a lifetime, that isn't very long.

Sometimes it doesn't take that long. I think of Brian, a hulking sophomore who hung out in my classroom before school with his pals, tossing wisecracks and elbows at one another as only sophomores can. It was always Brian's elbow that got caught on the bulletin board, tearing a flyer or sending an envelope of entry forms to the floor. It was always Brian who picked absent-mindedly at the staples while he listened to the bluster of his buddies. None of the damage was intentional. I knew Brian's mind was far removed from my bulletin board. It was just something that got in his way while he was being what he was, a fifteen-year-old kid charged with the energy of adolescence. But it made me crazy. And he wasn't even my student.

One day I had had enough. My polite requests to *please be careful of the bulletin board* had gone unheeded one morning too many. I stomped to the back of the room, looked Brian in the eye, and pointed to a page taken from *The 21st Century* posted on the board.

“Read this,” I said.

His friends snickered, but Brian did as he was told.

“‘Enter Virgin Records' Contest: Fight For Your Mind. \$800.00 in cash to be awarded. . . .’”

I stopped him. “That's enough. Thank you. The point is, there are announcements here that students are interested in. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave them intact long enough for them to read them!”

The boys laughed again, but they moved a few steps away from the bulletin board. Brian ducked his head, seemingly abashed, and I went back to my desk, hoping the matter was settled, at least for a few days.

I was wrong. Brian was back at the bulletin board the next morning, even before his friends arrived. But this time he was studying it intently, and, had I not known better, I would have thought he had never seen that board before in his life.

Then suddenly he was in front of me. “Eight hundred bucks?” he said. “They give you eight hundred bucks?!”

“It’s not quite that easy,” I cautioned. “It’s a national contest. There’ll be a lot of entries. There are rules to follow. And you have to have something you really want to say.”

I am adamant that students not be led to believe that entering a writing contest is like buying a lottery ticket. But a dreamy look had already come into Brian’s eyes, and, though I am realistic enough to know it was at that point the look of someone counting crisp one hundred dollar bills, I encouraged him to write down all the necessary information and give it a try. *Write a letter, essay, or poem about your feeling and opinions on “Freedom of Expression.”* More than once that morning while his friends jostled and joked before the first bell rang, I caught him staring at the paper in his hand. When he headed out of the room, he gave me a small wave.

To be honest, I didn’t expect to hear any more about Brian’s literary pursuits. Experience has taught me that though students are often tempted by the publishing opportunities available to them, they often fail to follow through on them unless steadily encouraged by a teacher, another adult, or a fellow writer. They dream of the winning but are often discouraged by the work. Brian struck me as such a student.

I was wrong. Within a few days, Brian was back in front of my desk, an essay in hand. It wasn’t a great essay and it certainly wasn’t an award-winning essay, but Brian knew that. He held it out to me and said, “What can I do to make it better?”

“You want to win?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I want to say what’s in my head too, and I don’t know how.”

I wondered if the words that were in his head had ever mattered to him before.

Sometimes I wonder if I am too idealistic (I won’t admit to being foolish!) in my attempt to turn my students into published writers. On those days I think of Dina and Brian. They reassure me. Neither Dina nor Brian showed great youthful promise as writers. Neither exhibited a gift that any teacher would feel particularly privileged to nurture. Yet both of them saw themselves as writers. Dina grew into that identity. Brian stumbled upon it. Presented with an opportunity and with the knowledge and skills—and encouragement—needed to make their words public, both found they were writers, real writers, pursuing the path to publication.

Students who have something to say, who take pride in their work, and who commit themselves to the painstaking writing and revision that professionals undertake (and that English teachers demand) ought to give that writing a chance to “make it” in the world outside the classroom. That is not idealistic; that is practical. For good writing to languish in a gradebook or in a folder marked “Student Writing” or even to hang on the bulletin board (subject to the mischief of the Brians of the world!) is sad and senseless. Good writing deserves the widest possible audience, one that goes beyond the classroom walls and even beyond the school building walls.

The preceding chapters have suggested ways to begin to build a wide audience, an audience of readers for whom the writing has real meaning. As students grow comfortable with the idea of an expanded audience through their letters and reviews and shared papers, they develop the confidence and the writing skills to move naturally into a much wider sphere—the world of published writing. It is an exciting world, where one’s words can reach thousands of readers. It is a world filled with possibilities for the proverbial fame and fortune. It can also be a cold world, where rejection comes in the form of a printed slip clipped to the manuscript with no kind words penned by a teacher to soften the rebuff. For that reason, I caution teachers about *requiring* students to attempt to publish their work in a competitive market. Not all students are emotionally ready to face flat-out rejection, and to put them in such a situation is to jeopardize their growth as writers.

Teachers who encourage their students to publish work in a competitive market need to be very aware of both the rewards and the risks of such a pursuit. In fact, I would suggest that teachers who undertake this activity be *personally* cognizant of the rewards and risks; that is, that they be writers themselves. They should know what it feels like to struggle with words, and they should understand the thrill a writer feels when finally she’s got it right. They should be familiar with markets, own the yearly *Writer’s Market*, and subscribe to magazines like *Poets & Writers* and *Writer’s Digest*. And, most important, they should know what it feels like to have their work rejected. It’s one thing to tell a student not to be discouraged when her story is turned down by *Story* or *Skylark*. It’s another to truly know that sinking feeling when you see a big brown envelope in your mailbox. In the world of athletics, it is generally agreed that to be a good coach you have to know what it’s like to play the game. It’s no different for a writing teacher. To be an effective and empathic “coach” in the game of publishing, it’s best if you’ve taken a few knocks on the field yourself.

Armed with that personal knowledge of the experience of trying to publish, there are things a teacher should consider to help make her students' experience in the publishing world a positive one. First, as Part One of this chapter indicates, teachers, as well as students, need to be aware of both The Risks and The Rewards involved in attempting to publish. Then, when the decision has been made to go forward, to send words into the world, students need to know how to do it right, to produce a professional manuscript. Part Two addresses those concerns.

Part One

The Risks

Rejection

Rejection is demoralizing; there's no refuting that. When as writers we send our work out into the world, we send pieces of ourselves, and when those pieces come back marked *Thanks but no thanks*, we can't help but lose a little confidence in our work and feel hurt. For young writers, unused to such unqualified rejection, the blow can be quite damaging and make them wary of ever submitting their work anywhere again. For that reason, it's important to make students understand that rejection is just part of the game. To return to the sports analogy, in every game there are winners and losers, but just because you didn't win—your name isn't on the front page, you didn't take home the trophy—doesn't mean you're not a player. As long as you're out there on that field kicking a soccer ball, you're a soccer player, and as long as you're putting words on a page and sending those words out into the world, you're a writer. Winning or losing—being published or being rejected—doesn't change that.

My students know I'm a writer. They know it because I talk about my works-in-progress, because I tell them about writing workshops I attend, because I grow excited when one of us discovers a new market. But often they naively assume that because I am a writer, my work is always published. The day I bring in an envelope—a very large envelope, I'm afraid—filled with my own rejection slips is an eye-opening day for them. Students find it hard at first to fathom that a teacher—*their* teacher—could be such a failure!

That's the teacher's task: to make her students realize that in the publishing world rejection is not synonymous with failure. I spread out my rejection slips and let my students shuffle through them, reading the messages. From *The Sun, A Magazine of Ideas*: "Thanks for sending us your work, but it's not what we're looking for. This isn't meant as a reflection

on your writing . . .” From *Agni*, a journal out of Boston University: “Thank you for letting us consider your work—The Editors.” From *Seventeen*, a handwritten rejection letter: “Sorry to have taken so long to respond. Sorry too that your story ‘Mother Love’ isn’t right for *Seventeen*.” From the *Iowa Review*: “We’ve filled our next several issues and won’t be reading again until September. Thanks for thinking of us and we hope you’ll consider sending us more work next year.”

What I want to impress upon my students is not only the number of rejections I have received (and yet I still consider myself a writer), but also the impersonal nature of the notes. Students need to understand that when their work is taken from the slush pile—that enormous heap of unsolicited manuscripts the staff of every magazine and journal faces—and read, the editor has absolutely no personal connection with the writer. The work is judged purely as a piece of writing, and if and when it is rejected, it means simply that at that time the piece is not suitable for that publication. The work has been rejected; the writer has not.

At the same time, student writers need to realize that there are a number of reasons why a manuscript may be rejected, and not all have to do with the quality of the piece. For example, a particular piece of writing may be rejected because it is not appropriate for a certain magazine. That’s one reason why it’s essential that young writers choose their markets carefully. In other instances a very good piece may be rejected because it is similar to something the magazine has recently published. In that case, the piece will likely find a home elsewhere. And sometimes good pieces are simply overlooked. We all know the stories of now-famous pieces of literature whose authors collected numerous rejection slips before some perceptive editor spotted the piece’s worth. I discuss honestly all these situations with my students in hopes that they can then face the all-too-common rejection slip with equanimity.

And I discuss another truth with them: that certainly in many cases a manuscript isn’t accepted for publication simply because it isn’t good enough. That’s a hard truth but an important one. Until students accept this reality, attempting to publish really is little more than buying a lottery ticket, hoping for a “win” on luck alone. I encourage my students to publish because I believe it will make them more enthusiastic writers and *better* writers. Each time their work is rejected, I tell them to take a long, hard look at that work, to examine it for flaws and failings, and to ask themselves, “What can I do to make this piece so good that an editor will want to publish it?”

Sometimes they are aided in this undertaking. I encourage my students, particularly those who are just beginning to market their work, to

send to publications that may comment on the work they reject. Many of the literary journals and small-circulation magazines note this practice in their listings in *The Writer's Market*. Other magazines take an even more concrete approach. *ByLine*, a monthly magazine with a special interest in new writers, sends a rejection slip that lists a number of reasons why a piece might be rejected and the editors check off the appropriate reasons. Not surprisingly, my students seem far more impressed when *ByLine* says of a piece "Too much editing needed (grammar/spelling errors, manuscript preparation errors or problems in the writing)" than when I make similar suggestions! *Merlyn's Pen*, *The National Magazine of Student Writing*, receives over 15,000 manuscripts by students per year, accepts approximately 200 as written, asks another 100 authors to make revisions before publication, and returns the remaining 14,700-plus with a critique from a *Merlyn's Pen* editor. The important point is that though rejection is disappointing, it should not be defeating. All writers—professional writers, teacher writers, and student writers—grow *as* writers if they understand that rejection of a piece is not rejection of a person and that rejection of a piece is simply a call for revision.

Revelation

Writing is revelation. When we write we often discover things about ourselves and others that we've never quite realized before. So too when we write do we reveal things about ourselves and the people in our lives who make up our stories. Even when we turn the truth into fiction, fragments of the truth, often very recognizable, remain. For these reasons, writing is risk-taking. It's putting yourself—and sometimes others—on the line through your lines. That's not an easy thing to do, and sometimes the ramifications are serious.

For students, the greatest risk is usually self-revelation. We all have students who, a bit embarrassed, squirm when we read their papers aloud in class or encourage them to hang their work on the classroom wall. Usually that squirm comes partly from pleasure at being singled out and complimented on their work. But often, too, there's an element of discomfort, for when a writer's words are made public, so too is his or her heart. I think of Wylie considering the publication of her intensely personal essay and the look in her eyes when she says, "*Seventeen* . . . I don't know, do I really want *everyone* to know about me?" In the classroom she felt safe to reveal her feelings and the insecurities that plague her. Enough trust had been built within that small community of writers to make such honesty possible. At that point, however, she was not ready to offer herself to a national publication.

When students seek to publish their work, they need to seriously consider what it would mean to them—and to others—for their words to be very public. Publication in even the smallest, most obscure literary journal is still publication, and I challenge any writer not to want to tell the world, “I’ve been published!” when his work appears. Though I explain to students about the use of pen names and tell them it’s certainly an option in their work, I also tell them that it’s unlikely that they can keep secret the work they publish, nor in fact would they really want to. Writers write because they want to be heard, because they want to give voice to the feelings inside of them. I think of the young woman who, using a pseudonym, publishes a wonderful poem in our school literary magazine about an unnamed boy she is attracted to. Before the poem is printed, I ask her if she’s sure she wants to do this. She thinks about it a bit and then nods. When the poem is published I hear students buzzing about it and its author. Many of them have guessed the author and her subject correctly. I wonder if she regrets her decision, but when I ask her about it, she smiles. Apparently for her that poem was a love letter to be shared with the world.

Sometimes though, the situation is not so pleasantly adolescent. Student writers are generally very candid writers, particularly if they are part of a classroom-turned-writing-community that fosters trust and honesty. In such a classroom students feel safe to write about the difficulties in their lives: dysfunctional families, friends with drug and alcohol problems, their own insecurities. The papers they produce are often extremely powerful because of their candor. Recently Carrie wrote of the dissolution of her family in a piece that I found heart-wrenching and that her classmates, many struggling with similar situations, listened to in rapt silence: “A few months after Amy went to school, my dad explained that he really felt as if he didn’t belong and he left. There was no more cooking meat and sautéing vegetables. There was no more WGBH echoing through the house. There was no more dinner and there was no more family.”

I wish Carrie could publish the piece, partly because it’s just so good it deserves to be published, but also because I suspect it would have a significant impact on teenage readers who would find in Carrie’s words not only an echo of their own lives but empathy as well. But in good conscience I can’t encourage Carrie to send this piece off to *Writes of Passage* or *360° Magazine*, not unless her family, the people so poignantly portrayed in the piece, are completely comfortable with that. Nor do I want to suggest that Carrie turn this autobiographical piece into fiction, which

is one way of protecting those involved. Carrie put her heart into her essay, and in doing so, I think she confronted some feelings and issues that had been buried inside of her. She's not ready to turn that hard-earned truth into fiction.

On Parents' Night her mother speaks to me about the piece. Her voice trembles a bit, perhaps with pride in her daughter's work, perhaps with pain. "It was all *right there*, wasn't it? It was good . . . and, you know, I never knew before why Carrie stopped eating at the kitchen table."

Teachers who encourage students to publish their work need to discuss issues of privacy with their students. Students need to understand that there are legal issues as well as moral issues involved in revealing truths about the lives of others. Though I've told my students about famous writers, Flannery O'Connor and Tennessee Williams among them, who did in fact use the lives of their families and friends as fodder for their work, I suggest that at fourteen or fifteen one might not want to alienate those closest to them! I want my students to be risk-takers. I know great writing doesn't happen by playing it safe. But students who are used to writing for the teacher alone frequently don't realize just how powerful their words may be. So when a student wants to try to publish an essay or poem that speaks candidly about a difficult family situation, for example, I always ask the student to bring the piece home, to let the family read it before it goes out in the mail. Sometimes students balk at first, uncomfortable about sharing their words with those closest to the experience, but they soon realize that if the piece does get published, there will be no hiding it anyway. Other times I suggest that students change the most telling details to protect the privacy of those involved. That might mean simply altering names, dates, certain events, or it may mean turning a nonfiction piece into a work of fiction. And sometimes, when the piece is self-revelatory, I just encourage the writer to wait a bit before sending it out, good advice in general in that most pieces of writing improve by "aging." Young writers can be very impulsive, loving a piece they wrote one day, hating it the next. Worse than not having your work published is having work you're no longer proud of in print! Sometimes a "cooling off" period is necessary for a student writer to clearly evaluate a work and its potential impact on others.

None of this is meant to discourage either teachers or their students in the publication of student work. It is simply a caution, a reminder that good writing, writing from the heart, has extraordinary power, and, like any sort of power, it must be used responsibly.

Rivalry

Writing may not be a competitive activity; publication is. That is the cold, hard truth. You need only read a market listing for any publication—commercial, literary, or small circulation—to realize just how fierce the competition for space on the printed page is. *Seventeen* receives 350 unsolicited fiction manuscripts per month and generally buys only one per issue. *Boys' Life* receives 150 unsolicited short stories and publishes 12–18 per year. Even the so-called “little and literary” magazines are inundated with submissions—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—and can publish only a fraction of them. Within these adult markets, young writers must also compete with older, experienced writers, many of whom already have publishing credits.

Even if students confine themselves to student-written magazines, there is no guarantee that they will be published. There are a limited number of such publications and, as the fifteen thousand yearly submissions to *Merlyn's Pen* indicate, there are many, many young writers eager to see their work in print. That number is growing, as editors of these publications realize. The *21st Century*, a monthly newspaper of student work, now also offers a separate publication, the *21st Century Poetry Journal*, to keep up with the flood of poetry submissions, over four thousand per year. Students who send their work out to *any* magazine need to understand that they are vying with many other writers for a place on a page.

But if the world of publishing is necessarily competitive, the writing classroom need not be. In the classroom students should feel safe to experiment with their writing, to try out new styles, play with new voices, and take all the risks that apprentice writers need to take in order to develop their craft. I tell my students that in the world of published writing there are basically two grades: an A, you get published; an F, you don't. In the writing classroom, however, there should be an endless number of grades, or, in an ideal world, perhaps no grades at all. In the next chapter I will talk in detail about the issue of evaluating writing, but for now let me say that it is of utmost importance that student writers feel that, in the classroom, they are competing only against themselves and their own previous efforts.

As a teacher, I believe my job is to encourage all students to grow as writers from whatever point they begin. Early on in my writing classes I find that students preface every piece they read aloud in class with a line like, “This is terrible but” I joke with them, tell them that we will begin every class with that line, all of us repeating it together like a mantra. In fact that disclaimer is an excellent means of relieving the pres-

sure of publication, even when the publication is only in front of peers, and it seems to serve as an “equalizer” among the students, making them all feel they’re on the same ground as writers. Every one of them can get better. No one’s work is perfect, and they are all there to help each other improve. Certainly when students read their work in response groups, they recognize that some pieces are “better” than others, but response to writing is highly subjective, and what one reader enjoys, another may not. And sometimes there are wonderful surprises. The student who never quite measures up in terms of analytical writing, or whose voice is non-existent during class discussions often produces the most powerful poetry or prose. I love the look of amazement in the other students’ eyes when the quietest kid in the corner shares a story they never expected could come from him. It is the teacher’s job to create a classroom where every student’s potential is recognized, where every student is a “writer-in-progress.” When the writing community is nurturing, the praise lavish, the criticism specific and constructive, students feel comfortable as writers and begin to take those risks that allow their work to develop. That’s when they start heading toward publishing success.

But sometimes one student finds that success more quickly than her peers. This was the case with Anne, a young woman who sat in my sophomore class a few years ago. Anne was a talented writer, but beyond that she was a hard-working, disciplined writer, someone who took on a writing project with enthusiasm and followed it through to the end, motivated by her own high expectations for herself. That spring Anne independently decided to enter a contest sponsored by Scholastic, Inc. Certainly she was lured by the face on the advertising materials—a soulful image of Tom Cruise—but it was also the headline that attracted her. “Send your story to the *Far and Away* Creative Writing Contest. Win a chance to meet Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, and Ron Howard.” The story was to be about a voyage to America and could be based on family history or be a purely fictional account. Anne had a story to tell—the reminiscences of an elderly woman who fled Poland and the Nazis during World War II—and she set to telling it. A few other students in my class also began working on stories. Not all followed through, but by the deadline date, four stories were in the mail.

The happy outcome was that Anne won. As the state winner from Massachusetts, she earned an interview, via satellite, with Cruise, Kidman, and Howard, as well as the admiration and celebrity that comes with such an honor. I was thrilled for Anne, thrilled to watch her grow in her glory. Almost overnight she turned into a person who radiated confidence in

herself as a writer. So delighted was I that I bought an enormous sheet cake emblazoned with the words “Congratulations, Anne!” for her to share with the class. It was on the day that I picked up the cake and gazed at the bright yellow frosting that shouted her name that I realized how suddenly and completely competition had come into our classroom. To their credit, none of the other students who had entered the contest begrudged Anne her moment of fame; in fact, they seemed to be quite happy just knowing someone who had spoken to Tom Cruise! But the fact was that suddenly the stakes had grown higher than who had received an A and who a B or C. Suddenly there were larger prizes to claim, and I realized that if I were to keep my classroom a community, I had to find a way to recognize Anne’s accomplishments without slighting her peers.

Over the years I’ve worked to find ways to let the spotlight shine on those young writers privileged to earn its light without letting their peers feel lost in the shadows. When one student’s work is published, I always congratulate the class, particularly those students who worked closely with the writer on revision and editing. When a student discovers a “friendly” market, a publication that appreciates his or her work, I encourage other students whose work might also be recognized there to submit their pieces. Kate sends a short story to Majestic Books and promptly receives an acceptance letter and a contract. They want her piece to appear in an upcoming anthology of student works. I am delighted for Kate and also delighted to find this new, receptive market, and I begin to think of other students whose work might be appropriate for it. I am always on the lookout for markets for my students’ work, and I gear my search to the level of competition I feel each individual writer is at.

For some students, particularly those who have never imagined themselves as writers, publication in the school’s literary magazine is just as wonderful and rewarding as publication in a national magazine. I think of Bryan, a pseudo-tough senior, who couldn’t quite keep the grin off his face when a story about his father was printed in *rhubarb pie*, my school’s magazine.

“Wait ‘til my folks see this,” he said, a gleam in his eye. “They’ll be off my back about my grades!”

Obviously some student writers have their own idea of rewards! And in all my classes, I end the year with a class reading, a time for us to celebrate the work of all the writers, published or unpublished. When I carry to class the cake for that event, I’m always pleased to see it say, “Congratulations, Class!”

The Rewards

Glory

Were I to ask my students what they feel are the rewards of being published, I imagine most of them would tell me that the greatest reward is glory, the “fame” that comes with being published.

When a student’s work is published, be it in a school literary magazine or in a major publication, immediately that student gains a measure of celebrity. For Anne that fame came in the form of a write-up in the city paper as well as an interview on local cable news and that, she told me, led to many conversations with people she had never spoken to before who wanted to know what *he* (Tom Cruise) and *she* (Nicole Kidman) were *really* like! When Jen’s essay on a near-tragic experience with alcohol was published in the “First Person” column of *Worcester Magazine*, she found her teachers and her peers looked at her with new respect. And Dan’s letter to the editor brought a flurry of responses in the days that followed that made him the talk of the local paper as well as of the community.

For many teenagers this Warhol fifteen-minutes-of-fame can be a heady experience, but also one that contributes to a more permanent sense of self-esteem. As all teachers know, it is not unusual for their best student writers to be the more quiet, introverted students, those who generally don’t find glory on the athletic field or on the school stage. They are the students whose talents can go unnoticed in a typical high school or middle school environment. For that reason, I particularly enjoy watching students bask in the acclaim—however short-lived—that publication brings them. Although I offer a gentle reminder that you’re only a writer as long as you keep on writing, for most students that warning is unnecessary. Once students have tasted success in the form of publication, they rarely stop writing.

Gain

Next to glory, my students would probably name “gain” as the best reward of publication. Gain can come in many forms: monetary awards, scholarships, all-expenses-paid trips, books, computers, even interviews with people like Tom Cruise. Certainly many of my students are initially motivated by the “prize,” and when they scan the bulletin board in the back of my room for potential publishing opportunities, I know their attention will be drawn first to those that offer the most extravagant concrete rewards.

I don't condone this interest, but I understand it is human and can even be quite practical. Adult writers consider the compensation they will receive from various publications when they set out to market their work. Writing is work and does deserve compensation. For that reason I don't discourage my students from considering the payment they will receive as one factor when they are deciding where to send their writing. But I remind them, there are other important points to take into consideration.

One is that they are very much beginners, particularly if they are competing in an adult market. For that reason, sending their stories to a highly competitive and very well paying publication is perhaps imprudent. Their time and effort (and postage!) might be better spent on sending their work to a smaller, less prestigious publication, one that may only pay in copies of the magazine. Some students, however, simply want to try the big magazines, and, as long as I feel confident that they will not be permanently discouraged by likely rejection, I don't dissuade them. In fact, I share a bit of their optimism and figure that rejection is rejection and you might as well be rejected a time or two by the best! In my own experience, too, I have found that sometimes the bigger magazines, which are perhaps better staffed than their smaller counterparts, do take the time to offer a comment or two that aids in later revision. Such a personal response is invaluable, not only in terms of reworking a piece, but also in letting the writer feel that she is truly a writer and part of the whole writing enterprise.

My other caution to student writers who are lured by big prizes is this: sometimes prestige itself is a prize, maybe more valuable than any material award. In the writing world, *where* you have been published is a very important issue, and even student writers are not too young to begin to amass writing "credits." As all writers know, that first sale is the hardest. Once you have "cracked" the market and found your way into print, then you are a writer by commercial standards and can use that first publishing credit, revealed in your cover letter, as a way to open other doors. Clearly, certain publications, even those written exclusively by young people, carry more weight than others, and while I would never disparage publication in any legitimate market, I want my students to understand that some magazines/journals/contests are more respected and better recognized than others. Publication in such arenas then is very valuable, regardless of what other rewards are, or are not, offered.

In terms of financial rewards, any market guide will provide up-to-date information on payment for accepted pieces. Some smaller journals

pay only in copies called contributor's copies or offer only minimum compensation, as an honorarium. Some periodicals pay by the word, generally three cents on up. Others offer a broad payment range, from twenty-five to more than one thousand dollars. Payment rates depend on the commercial success of the publication itself and on the type and length of the piece accepted for publication. As a general rule, nonfiction pays more than fiction and everything pays more than poetry!

For publications written exclusively by students, financial remuneration is usually minimal, under \$25, and writers are basically rewarded by seeing their words in print. They may receive complimentary copies of the issue in which their work appears as well. Detailed information as to what certain publications pay appears in the Market List in the Appendix.

Students motivated by grander awards might want to consider one of the many writing contests that seek student work. Details about these many contests are included in the Contest List section in the Appendix. A sampling of such contests reveals a wide variety of prizes for an equally wide variety of types of writing.

EF Educational Tours sponsors an EF Ambassador Scholarship Program for students in grades 9–12. Scholarships for an educational tour in Europe are awarded to students who, in poetry, prose or artwork, best describe a plan for global or local change.

Young Playwrights Inc. offers the Young Playwrights Festival National Playwriting Competition for students ages eighteen or under. Playwrights are asked to submit one or more plays of any length, style, or subject and compete for the opportunity to participate in the professional production of their plays in New York City. As an added incentive, each entrant receives a written evaluation of his or her play.

America's Best High School Scholastic Writing Competition is presented annually by the Writers Foundation, Inc. This competition judges work in six categories—Scriptwriting, Short Fiction, Poetry, Original Sitcom, Novel, and Songwriting—and awards computers, savings bonds, and autographed copies of work by celebrity writers in each category.

Landmark Editions, Inc. sponsors the National Written and Illustrated By . . . Awards Contest for Students, offering the publication of winning books in three age categories. Student writers receive publication contracts and are paid royalties annually. They also win a trip to Kansas City to participate in the production of their books.

Opportunities for students abound, and the rewards are often impressive. Of course the competition is also fierce since most of these contests are offered on a national level, but, as I always remind my

students, someone has to win and it might just as well be someone sitting in my class. But, as I tell students who are often quite dizzy with excitement when they hear of a new contest, one that offers a trip to Europe perhaps, thinking about winning a contest is one thing; doing the writing is another. I remember all of my sophomore girls oohing and aaahing over the possibility of meeting Tom Cruise, but by deadline day only four stories made it to the mailbox. If it's human nature to procrastinate, then that tendency is born in adolescence, and student writers can use that to their advantage when they enter competitions. Getting your entry in on time, in a polished, professional form that adheres to the contest's rules, is half the battle. Once you have done that, I tell my students, you have earned the right to daydream about winning.

Growth

The rewards of fame and fortune are certainly attractive, and I understand why students find them such powerful motivators. But in my mind the greatest reward of publication for students is growth. When students seek to publish their writing, they suddenly begin to grow as writers, producing work of a much higher quality than even they thought themselves capable of creating.

The growth in these would-be published writers seems sometimes miraculous, but there are very solid reasons for such improvement. First, when a writer sends a piece of writing out into the world, he has to imagine on some level that it may actually be published. Even in a national competition where the chance of publication is slim, that chance still exists, and it is that possibility, that knowledge that one's words may appear in print for all the world to see, that spurs young writers to do their best work. Students may share mediocre work with their response groups or turn in "C" quality work to their teachers, but when their audience grows, so too does their desire to produce work they are proud of.

Competition itself can be a great motivator. Students know that to get their work in a major magazine or to win a prize in a writing contest, they have to produce exceptional work. Even when I distribute copies of solely student-written publications like the school literary magazine or national publications like *Writes of Passage*, students recognize that the work within these pages is of top quality. Only occasionally do I hear a student say, "Oh, I can write better stuff than that!" When I do, I seize the moment to offer that student a challenge. "Prove it," I tell him or her. "Let's see you get your work in print." Sometimes they meet my challenge head on and successfully submit their work. It's a confrontation I'm happy to lose.

Cognizant of the competition they face, students are far more willing to revise when they are working toward publication. “Oh, it’s good enough,” they often tell me when they hand in a paper they believe is destined for my eyes alone. When I ask if they made the changes suggested by their response groups or peer editors, they shrug, and that shrug is an eloquent statement of their belief that they’ve given enough attention to that particular paper. After all, a grade by any other name is still a grade, isn’t it? B or B+, what’s the difference?

Getting students to revise is an extraordinarily difficult task. Even though revision has been made easier by the word processor, it nevertheless is a tedious and exacting chore, one that young writers shy away from. The best revision my students do comes when they are working on a piece that they want to send out for publication. The most compelling reason for this is that the piece matters to them; if it didn’t, they wouldn’t be putting the time and effort into preparing it for publication. Because they truly care about what they are saying, they want to say it right. Second, knowing how hard it is to get work into print, they are willing to put extra effort into the final piece and welcome, even seek out, suggestions from their peers and from me. They seem to understand that every improvement, however minor it may seem, increases their chance of publication. And last, but hardly least, is the fact that when they are working on a piece, for *The Claremont Review* perhaps or maybe *New Moon* or *How on Earth!*, suddenly they feel like real writers, not students writing for the teacher but writers writing for the world. They understand that writers revise and that revising is part of the job of being a writer. Now it has a purpose: it makes your writing good, it makes it publishable, and it makes you a writer.

And there is another kind of growth that comes from putting your self on a page. That’s personal growth, the kind of growing we all do when we confront head-on the problems in our lives. As teachers we know that our students’ lives are far more complicated and difficult than children’s lives ought to be. They struggle daily with adult issues—poverty, violence, divorce, death—and their ability to function effectively in school is impeded by the weight of these problems. Writing that allows students to address these problems is powerful, not only for the reader but for the writer as well. When a student can put the pain in his life into words, he gains some control over it.

The student who taught me that lesson best was a young man of nineteen, a quadriplegic since the age of seven. He came to me in a wheelchair with a ventilator and a nurse and a mouthstick with which to type his words. During the months he was in my class, he began to tap out the

story of his accident, the family problems it provoked, the years spent in hospitals and rehabilitation centers, the losses he lives with daily. Writing those pieces was slow going for Chris, both physically and emotionally, but he had a story he wanted, no, *needed*, to tell. He wanted to enlighten those who don't understand what it means to be a seriously disabled person, and he wanted to encourage those who know all too well. And I think he knew too that he needed to finally put the years of pain and grief and ultimately courage into words on a screen, on a printed page, perhaps maybe even one day in a book. That was part of his recovery, to see for himself where he had been and just how far he had come.

Certainly not all the writing our students do about the problems in their lives is worthy of publication. Some of it is simply therapeutic for the writer, and he or she has neither the interest nor perhaps the emotional energy to take it farther, to turn it into publishable material. But the personal problems young people describe in their writing are ones often experienced by many of their peers, and when they are able to share their words in a published piece, the impact can be extraordinary. When my students pick up a magazine or journal filled with student work, they generally go directly to the personal essays. That is where they find their connection. That is where they feel the pulse of the publication. That is the place where the writer's heart beats best. Just as my students grow emotionally from putting their own problems into words, so too do they find comfort and wisdom from the words of their peers as they recognize that their problems are universal ones. They learn that solutions come slowly with patience and effort, just like words on a page.

Goals

We live in a "quick-fix" society. Today's Americans are not known for their patience. We want our rewards and reinforcements to come quickly; we want to see results. Such drive is not an entirely negative quality. But in our young people this eagerness, this itchiness, this out-and-out impatience is often counterproductive, and many adolescents find it hard to set, and follow through on, long-term goals.

As any published writer will attest, writing for publication is most definitely a long-term goal. From the moment a writer has the first glimmer of an idea to the day he sees a finished piece in print, an enormous amount of time may elapse. The writing itself can take weeks, months, or years, during which time the writer rethinks, revises, and rewrites and sometimes just lets the piece sit in a drawer for a while so that he can see it again through fresh eyes. Once the piece has been sent out for publication, it's not unusual for a magazine to take months to respond to it,

and even if the work is then accepted, many more months may pass before it actually appears on the printed page.

My students are often taken aback when I explain this long process to them, and indeed many of them challenge it. I post a notice for the Nicholas A. Virgilio Memorial Haiku Competition for High School Students on the bulletin board on Tuesday. On Wednesday, some of my students come in with three typed haiku ready to send off. "They're short," one student tells me nonchalantly. "I wrote 'em in ten minutes."

The truth is, he probably did, and it becomes my job to explain why a haiku written in 3.3 minutes is most likely not a prize-winning haiku nor the poet's best work. It is hard to explain to an eager young writer that writing takes time and that sometimes the best writing happens not when you're holding a pen or when your hands are poised on a keyboard, but when you give your mind and heart time to wrestle with your subject, when you let your creative imagination work its magic on its own. I delight in those students who tell me sincerely, "I'm working!" when I see them gazing into space during a classroom writing session. I know they're telling the truth. They are the kind of writers who need to let their ideas brew in their heads before they ever begin to put words on a page. I wish more of their peers would follow their patient example.

I tell the boy with the haiku that writers need feedback, that before he sends his poetry out to face a real editor, he needs to get feedback from "pseudo-editors," his classmates, a trusted reader, me. My students are used to working in response groups and they understand the value of this, but again it is often their impatience, their desire to get their work in the mail, that keeps them from seeking the advice they need from other readers. To ameliorate this situation, I try to always provide students who request it time within the class period for them to present their work to their response groups or to the entire class if they wish. I consider such time well spent. This not only promotes better writing and more revision by the writer, but it also encourages other students to tackle their own publishing projects, and it improves their own writing skills as they work as editors.

Once a piece is in the mail, I can offer only empathy to students who fret over the time it takes to hear from an editor.

"I know," I tell them. "I've had stories returned to me after such a long time that I'd forgotten I'd sent them out!"

This understanding does little to soothe some of them, but swiftness is not the way of the publishing world, and that is a reality writers need to get used to. Seniors whom I have in a Creative Writing class are often amazed when I tell them that they will most likely not receive a

response from an editor on their final publication project until long after they are settled in their college dorms or post-high school apartments, but I make them promise to contact me if their work is accepted for publication. They are savvy. There is always one student who asks, “And if it is, will you change the grade *you* gave me?”

To be sure, classroom conditions are not perfect for nurturing long-term writing goals. Each term a grade has to be recorded, and so, throughout the term, writing must be produced on some sort of schedule, revised under some sort of time constraints, and eventually graded. Even those students whose reveries I applaud have to stop staring into space and put their words on paper. On the positive side this exigency parallels the reality a writer faces if he intends to make writing a career. Each writer has to work hard, stay focused, and adhere to deadlines, imposed either by an editor or by one’s own self, if any writing is ever to be finished. Moreover, the professional writer ultimately faces someone, generally an editor or an editorial board, who judges his writing just as I must judge my students’ work. The standards a writing teacher establishes and the discipline she enforces in her classroom are not that far removed from what a professional writer encounters in the “real” world, and this is something I make very clear to my students.

Unfortunately, however, the time a student spends in one teacher’s classroom, especially on the high school level, is very short. My Creative Writing class, for example, meets for only one semester, the second semester of the students’ senior year, hardly a time known for constructive work. By the time my students have experimented with prewriting techniques, established productive response groups, and learned to feel comfortable when faced with the blank page, much of the semester has gone by. Though they all are working toward a final piece to submit somewhere for publication, there is very little time for truly long-term projects—a well-developed short story, for example, or a children’s picture book. Certainly there isn’t time to let a manuscript linger in a drawer growing better (or worse) with age.

The constraints of a school schedule then often work against some of what I try to teach young writers. For that reason, I encourage them to think beyond—and work beyond—those parameters. I want them to continue as writers when they leave my classroom, and what better way to promote that than to have them engaged in a writing project even as the semester or the year ends. I’m happy to have students send me copies of the pieces they are working on over the summer or bring them to my classroom when the new school year begins, and I enjoy responding to their work. Sometimes I try to pair a writer up with another enthusias-

tic student whose work is at a similar level so that they can serve as readers/peer editors for each other outside of the classroom. I tell them to be on the lookout for other astute readers, sometimes an older sibling, a neighbor, even a parent, who can offer both continued support and constructive criticism on the writer's work. And I remind them that all writers struggle with the loneliness of writing, the need to find a way to share both the joy of writing and the frustration of it.

This past Christmas I took a very long walk with Marcy, a young woman, now a college senior, who sat in my classroom during her senior year in high school. She was easily one of the most wonderful students I have ever had, a talented writer with a thirst for writing and a zest for life that delighted me. That winter she began a somewhat autobiographical story that dealt with the pain of prejudice and the special intensity of that pain when you encounter it head-on at seventeen. The story was poignant and passionate and contained a very sophisticated metaphor in its focus on blood ties.

Marcy wrestled with that story throughout the semester. I encouraged her heartily because I thought she had something very important to say, and I knew she had the ability to say it well. The story never got finished, partly because of the pressures and distractions of the end of senior year, but partly, as I realize now, because Marcy wasn't really ready to finish it. She wasn't ready to see all sides, to face her own feelings about the prejudice she had faced. But in these last four years, that story has never been far from Marcy's mind, and each time we talk, we speak of it. Sometimes it's sitting in her desk drawer; sometimes she takes it out and rewrites a few lines. This year, as we walked along a snowy street, Marcy told me the direction her story is now taking. No longer quite so autobiographical, it is now a story that reveals the pain of the perpetrator as well as that of the victim. It is now a story of incredible depth and real maturity. I am sure I will see that story in print some day. More than four years have passed since that story's inception; another four may pass before that story lands on an editor's desk. Marcy is not impatient. She has grown with her story, both as a writer and as a woman. She understands the beauty of a long-term goal.

Part Two

Once a teacher has assessed the risks and rewards of taking her students down the path to publication, then she has to consider the nuts and bolts of marketing a piece of writing. The next section of this chapter discusses concerns about selecting a market and preparing a manuscript.

Choosing a Market

For a young writer, choosing a market can seem as easy as opening a market guide and picking a title. Such a choice should not, however, be made lightly. When a piece is accepted for publication, it is not only a reflection of the quality of the work, but also the choice of an appropriate market. There are many things a writer needs to consider when he chooses a potential market for his work, and there are particular things he needs to be cautious about. There are, then, certain questions that the writer needs to ask himself before he puts an address on an envelope.

Is this a legitimate publication/contest?

In encouraging student writers to submit their work to publications, this question is one of my most immediate and serious concerns.

Most market guides preface their listings with a statement regarding the integrity of the listings. The editors of such guides do their best to investigate the publications and contests they list, but, considering the rapid appearance, disappearance, and change of publications, they cannot possibly guarantee the accuracy of every listing. In fact, many market guides come to depend on information from reader-writers in order to update their listings.

Generally, however, one can assume that if a publication or contest is listed in a guide like *Writer's Market* (which is published annually by *Writer's Digest Books* and is supplemented with other more specific guides like the *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market*), it is likely to be a legitimate market. By legitimate, I mean that the publications and contests it lists are offered in good faith and that a writer's work will be read in a timely fashion and then either returned to the writer, held temporarily for possible later publication with the permission of the writer, or immediately accepted for publication to be rewarded with payment as described in the listing. Certainly this process is not often as swift as a writer might like, and, as was noted earlier, young writers need to be accepting of the inevitable delays that are part of the publishing process.

What young writers should not, however, ever be accepting of are publications, and particularly contests, that seem to prey on adolescents' naiveté and desire to be published. Such markets might, for example, guarantee publication in return for a fee—either an extremely high entry fee or the purchase of a book in which all such eager young authors are published. I tell my students there is no honor in paying for publication, and I warn them to avoid such situations.

Despite my warnings, however, students do fall victim to such propositions. Usually they find such “markets” advertised in the back of a magazine or newspaper, where a headline shouts to them to be part of some impressive national collection of prose or poetry. Frequently there is no initial entry fee, and it isn’t until later, when their work has been “accepted,” that writers find that they must purchase a copy of this very expensive volume if they are ever to see their words in print. Sadly, it’s all too often the enthusiastic but not especially talented student who gets involved in this scheme. It’s heartbreaking when such a student runs into class beaming with pride and holding out an “acceptance” letter from some such venture. I hate having to disillusion a young writer about the “honor,” but so too do I hate having him or her give any support to such a scheme. My best advice, then, is to offer a red alert to students about such opportunities long before they begin to send work out and to be on the watch for any similar duplicitous enterprises.

Is there an entry fee?

An entry fee is certainly not always a sign of a dubious publication. Some highly respected publications for students find it necessary to require a nominal entry fee in order to offset their own costs of production, payment to writers, etc. The key word here is nominal. *Merlyn’s Pen*, for example, requests a postage/handling fee of \$2.00 if a writer’s school subscribes to the magazine; \$5.00 if the school does not (and it is worth noting that editors do critique each manuscript). *ByLine* generally has a \$1.00 entry fee for its monthly student contests. For many students, particularly high school age students, such fees are manageable, but for those students who have financial constraints or who simply want to submit to many publications, there are student publications that charge a young writer nothing, other than postage, for submissions.

Usually commercial markets open to writers of all ages require no fees, though some smaller literary journals do demand that those who submit work be subscribers to the journal. A careful reading of any market listing will inform the writer of any such costs and/or requirements.

Contests, however, both those for students and those open to all writers, frequently do have entry fees. Sometimes these fees can be quite high, up to \$25.00 per manuscript, though \$10.00 is an average rate for contests geared to adult writers. I try to steer my students away from expensive contests, especially those where the competition is stiff because practiced adult writers, even published writers, are likely to enter. But there are students who have the money and the inclination to enter such competitions, and, as long as I know they understand the costs and the

slim odds of winning, I recognize that the decision to enter is theirs. Sometimes there are benefits that offset the entry fee, a written critique of the writer's work, for example, or a subscription to the publication sponsoring the contest. The important thing is that students learn to be careful consumers and to examine any publication opportunity carefully before they invest money—or time—in it.

What about contests for student writers? Should I enter?

Contests are exciting; there's no denying that. When a glossy poster arrives from Scholastic, Inc., bearing a full-color picture of Tracy Chapman and the promise of an in-school concert for the winner of this year's song lyrics contest, my students are filled with energy and immediately start scribbling song lines in their notebooks. When I find an envelope in my mailbox from the Skirball Institute on American Values touting the question "Will One of Your Students Win \$5000?", I admit I'm eager to open the envelope.

Contests, with the lure of big prizes and the glitz of advertising that accompanies them, are often excellent motivators for students, partly because they make it seem so easy to win. Of course, it's not that easy, and it's the teacher's responsibility to make sure students understand that. But the truth is, it's not at all easy to be published in any publication, and so I tell my students that the decision about sending work to a contest or a magazine should not focus on the chances of publication. Rather, I tell them, you need to decide if you want to do the kind of writing the contest requires, or if you have that kind of writing tucked away in a drawer or notebook ready to be pulled out and revised.

Scholastic's "Write Lyrics" songwriting contest, for example, offered a rare and welcome opportunity for the musicians in my classroom who have virtually no outlet for the songs they love to write. Though some of these students have turned their songs into poems and submitted them to poetry markets, most of this group of writers simply pen their songs and put them away, imagining the day when they will be "discovered." This contest gave them a perfect opportunity to share their work with a panel of judges and perhaps win an award, not to mention a visit by Tracy Chapman!

On the other hand, my enthusiasm about this year's Skirball Institute Essay Contest on American Values was not mirrored by my students. This year's essay was based on the question "What does U.S. History Teach Us About the Role of Immigration in the Creation of American Society?" The question is certainly an interesting and timely one, but it was not one which my students in this particular year felt knowledgeable about.

Had this been an issue they had studied in depth in a social studies class, I suspect there would have been students who would have tackled the essay eagerly.

As a quick look at the Contest List in the Appendix indicates, there is a wide variety of contests open exclusively to student writers, most of which have no entry fee. Some stress the creativity and imagination central to the writing of poetry and fiction; others are looking for a more academic approach seen through research and essay writing. Not surprisingly, student writers tend to prefer the former, but I have had students seize on the opportunities presented by the latter. Recently I read an announcement from the American Zinc Association regarding an essay contest on the properties and uses of zinc. In truth there was probably a bit less enthusiasm in my voice than when I described the songwriting contest, for example, and I didn't imagine a room full of students fighting over the copy of the guidelines. But suddenly, one young woman looked up with a bright smile on her face.

"I just wrote a research paper on zinc," she said. "Can I see those guidelines?"

The fact is, there is probably a contest for everyone!

And that's the point. Writing contests exist because they focus on particular interests. Through their specific requirements, they encourage certain writing styles, topics, and themes, and so they provide students with opportunities to try something new or to find a perfect niche for the writing they already do.

I particularly encourage two disparate groups of writers to peruse the contest information regularly. One is the group that struggles to find something to write about. Contests often provide specific subjects and ideas that give the writer the first push onto the paper. When the International Rivers Network sponsors a poetry contest whose theme is "Watersheds," a young writer whose interests have been more scientific than literary suddenly sees an opportunity to indulge both pursuits. On his own, however, I doubt he would have ever thought that his ecological concerns were material for poetry.

The other is the group that has notebooks full of writing, some completed pieces, some works-in-progress. These students can often find a "home" for a particular piece in a writing contest. Shawn, who has been writing plays since September, is overjoyed to learn that next year, when he's a junior, he can enter the Princeton University Secondary School Ten-Minute Play Contest, open only to eleventh graders. I've told him that gives him plenty of time for revision! But, I remind him, you have to remember to follow through, to actually get your entry in the mail.

I'm candid with my students about this aspect of any writing contest designed exclusively for students: getting your entry in is half the battle! Any time I announce an interesting contest, one that features a flashy prize or one that offers an appealing writing challenge, almost all the students in the room are caught up in the excitement and assure me that they are going to enter. I know the reality is that maybe one or two will enter any given contest, but I encourage all of them, never knowing who will be the one or two this time. When the postmark deadline rolls around, I ask who in class entered. One or two hands go up, and twenty-plus pairs of sheepish eyes go down.

My point is not to shame those who didn't follow through, but rather to give them a vivid picture of what I know is happening in classrooms all over America. When a major contest is announced, every student wants to enter. Yet when it comes to doing the work by a certain date, the field of entrants narrows dramatically. I want my students to understand that you can't win unless you enter, and that simply by entering you have put your words into the world and given them a chance to shine. That in itself is an accomplishment to be proud of.

I'm happy when students are interested in writing contests. I'm happy to see them inspired to write and pleased that they are learning how to follow specific guidelines and meet absolute deadlines. And on some level I share their excitement about the prospect of "winning." But I am always reminding them that writing is work and that the real prize is the accomplishment a writer feels when he knows that a piece of writing "works," when it says what he wants it to say and means what he wants it to mean. Then that piece of writing has meaning and importance that extends beyond any contest requirements.

The market listing says "Query." What does that mean?

When a publication is seeking nonfiction work—particularly articles, feature stories, how-to pieces, and interviews—it will often ask the writer to query first. A query letter is written in order to interest an editor in a manuscript on a certain subject. Like a cover letter, it is short and to the point, preferably no more than a page long. In it, the writer gives a brief but detailed description of the article she has written or plans to write, explaining the structure of the piece, the central facts, the interviews involved if applicable, and also her own particular qualifications for writing the piece. The aim is to pique the editor's interest so that he offers the writer the opportunity to submit the article for consideration.

Certainly writing a compelling query letter is not a simple task, and as a writer I have sometimes found writing a query letter more daunting

than writing the article itself! For that reason, and because often quite a bit of time passes before a response to a query is received, I try to steer students away from markets that require a query, preferring that they focus their energy on the piece itself. However, on occasion, a student really wants to pursue an article for which a query is required. One boy, an ardent student of karate for many years, wanted very much to write a first-person piece for *Inside Karate* about how karate had shaped his growing up. He struggled with the query letter, and, though it did not evoke a positive response from the editor, he realized that writing it did help him in the development of the piece, which he ultimately wrote anyway simply because the topic was so important to him.

There are, however, many markets for nonfiction, particularly in student-written publications, that do not require a query letter, and I encourage students to try those markets first if they are appropriate for their work.

Is there a deadline for submissions?

Students often balk at due dates, frequently begging for just one more day to complete an assignment. Deadlines, I tell them, are adult versions of due dates, and deadlines are firm and fast. Writers who choose to submit to contests and/or publications that have specific deadlines must adhere to them, and with experience they learn to do so. More than once I've had a student dash breathlessly into my classroom after school in search of my signature on an entry form so she can get her manuscript in the mail with the day's postmark!

Deadlines teach students discipline, and that's clearly a good thing. Moreover, when deadlines are imposed by an outside source, rather than by a teacher, they frequently carry more weight. No "let-me-explain-why-this-is late" story, whether fiction or fact, will earn a writer extra time in a writing contest, and that awareness often makes a writer work more steadily on a piece in order to meet a deadline. My second-semester seniors, caught in the throes of senioritis, often appreciate contest or publication deadlines because such deadlines inspire them to finish pieces that otherwise might linger forever not "quite" done.

Some pieces of writing, however, need time to mature. It may take a semester, a school year, or even longer for a piece to develop into a polished work. In such an instance a mid-November deadline, for example, would only be detrimental, causing an author to hurry the piece and send it out long before it's ready for serious evaluation. A piece of writing isn't finished because a deadline arrives. A piece of writing is

finished only when its author, in his own honest appraisal and aided by the advice of trusted readers, determines that it is his best work.

Although contests do impose deadlines, most publications do not. Some publications, however, especially those geared to student writers, read work only during the school year, and submissions must be received during those months. Small journals also often have specified reading periods during which manuscripts must be submitted. This information can usually be found in the market listing.

What is this particular publication really like?

Market listings as well as Writer's Guidelines supplied by a publication are extremely helpful in describing a publication. However, the best way to know if a magazine/journal might accept one's own style of work is to read the magazine itself and, even better, to read more than one issue.

For some magazines that's easy. I doubt there's a middle or high school classroom in America where some student isn't hiding a copy of *Seventeen* in the covers of her notebook! Magazines that students are very well acquainted with need no further study. But there are a vast number of lesser-known publications students would likely have more success publishing in, if they knew of their existence and understood the particular slant and style of work generally accepted by each.

Even the smaller magazines/literary journals are sometimes available for perusal at public or college libraries. Sometimes they can be purchased at local bookstores. But often these publications are readily available only to subscribers, which makes studying a number of them a very expensive proposition.

The best bet for an interested writer, then, is a sample copy, which is usually offered at a reduced rate. Often market listings will make a notation regarding the cost of a sample copy, and requests can be sent to the same address as submissions. A sample copy can be an invaluable investment, and I would encourage teachers to seek them out, particularly those publications devoted solely to student work. Not only are such publications very appreciative of and very worthy of financial support, but also they frequently offer specific writing suggestions and guidelines for student submissions. The quality of student publications varies greatly too, and I like having an array of such publications available to my students so that they can decide for themselves where they would most like to send their work.

It is an equally good idea to study the magazines/journals open to adult writers, but even at a minimal price, the cost of a collection of

sample copies can become prohibitive and well beyond the means of most students—or even teachers. Aspiring writers, then, need to be selective, reading the market listing carefully to see if a publication does, in fact, seem to be a potential market before investing in a copy of it. I try my best to keep my collection of publications growing and up-to-date, and if a student does decide to send for a sample copy, I encourage her to share it with her classmates, even those who are not interested in it as a possible market, simply because the examination of any literary publication contributes to their growth as enthusiastic writers and readers.

Is my work right for this publication?

On one level, this is an easy question to answer. If a market listing says that a certain publication accepts only poetry and a writer submits his best short story, that short story is never going to be published, regardless of its quality. Students need to understand that when a market listing lists *Needs* or *Publishes*, that is quite literally what a publication needs, and editors are not going to be interested in anything that does not fall into the categories described.

I understand why one of my students would like to see his fictional account of being lost in the wild published in *Outdoor Life*, but if the magazine does not publish fiction, then that is not a viable market for the story and he needs to look elsewhere. Even if a magazine does publish fiction, perhaps it's looking for a particular kind of fiction—sci-fi, maybe, or humor—in which case an adventure story still isn't going to be received with interest.

Students must then examine the needs of each publication in terms of genre, style, and length and be very aware of the “No’s”: *No how-to’s . . . No fiction with explicit language . . . No why I like _____ articles*. Some of this is merely a matter of reading a listing closely and following directions, and so, on that level, deciding if a work is right for a publication is relatively easy. But even if a piece of writing seems to fit the expressed needs of a publication, it still may not be exactly right for the publication.

There are subtleties involved here. Adult readers are generally cognizant of the fact that all magazines have a certain slant. Sometimes it is as obvious as a left- or right-wing leaning to all their nonfiction; sometimes it's as subtle as a particular voice in all their fiction. The slant is often a reflection of the audience which comes to expect a certain quality to the magazine's content.

It is difficult to explain this elusive characteristic to young writers. My older students can recognize the difference between *New Yorker* fiction

and *Yankee* fiction, for example, but I know that younger readers would be hard pressed to grasp that difference, and I'm sure even the older ones would find it difficult to see the finer distinctions in some of the literary journals. In order to explain the concept, I try to offer them examples more within their ken, having them bring in a variety of teenage magazines and asking them to explain how the magazines differ from one another in terms of their portrayal of the teenage world. I also ask them to tell which magazine they like best, and while there are definitely majority favorites, there are usually one or two that are defended passionately by certain students who like the slant they offer.

The truth is it's often next-to-impossible to know the perfect place to send your work. If we could determine it more accurately, no doubt more of us would be published! But it still should be a consideration for young writers. If nothing else, such careful study of literary publications can only make them more astute readers.

Should I tailor my writing to fit a particular publication?

Young writers often experiment with voices and styles. They adopt and abandon certain styles in much the same way they don and discard fashions or change their hair from blonde to blue to green. Such experimentation is positive in that it helps them grow and discover who they are as writers and what writing style they are most comfortable with. A publication that requires pieces on a certain theme, in a certain voice, or of a certain length can provide an impetus for students to try something a little different and to perhaps discover a new talent.

I have one student who recently happened upon a sonnet writing contest on the Internet, scrolled through sample sonnets, and then came to me intrigued by the form and wanting to know how to write her own. Rarely have I had students begging to write sonnets, but this contest triggered a new writing interest, and one for which she showed real ability.

Certainly, too, writing can be tailored in minor ways to produce major results. If a magazine wants stories of fifteen hundred words or fewer and a writer's story is 1650 words, then some careful revision and editing can create a story that fits the publication and is very likely a tighter and better story as a result. Or perhaps a student's essay about a hunting experience in his hometown could, with some minimal adaptations and additions, be made into a first-person essay for a regional column in a hunting magazine. Changes of this sort do not tamper with the heart of a piece, but simply alter its size and shape so that it better fits the publishing world.

What I caution students against, however, is sacrificing sincerity for a sale. When Jim, a frequent patron of the local McDonald's, spots an issue of *How On Earth!*, a quarterly published by the Vegetarian Network, on the bulletin board and tells me he's going to write a piece in praise of a vegan diet for the "Living Vegetarian" column, I can't help but ask if he's made a radical change in his diet.

"Nah," he says, "but I know a bunch of kids who don't eat meat. I can make it up. It'll be easy."

That's not tailoring; that's fictionalizing, and it's probably not a good idea unless you're writing a short story. I firmly believe students should write about what matters to them and I believe too that, if they do so, there will be a market for their work. I suggest to Jim that his essay might focus on what it's like to be a meat-eater in a vegetarian crowd, and he gives me a look that says he'll think about it. I want my students to be proud of the words they put in print. I want them to own the thoughts and ideas they struggle to express. They argue sometimes that professional writers have been known to sacrifice their literary integrity for the sake of a quick sale, maybe in the form of a steamy romance novel published under a pseudonym, and I can't dispute that. But, I ask them, at sixteen do you really want to sell your writing soul?

Preparing a Manuscript

I've chosen a market. Now what?

On a given day in my English class two students approach me. Jen clutches pages of yellow lined paper torn from a legal pad and a copy of submission guidelines taken from the bulletin board in the back of the room. Andy holds a market guide with sheets of his manuscript poking from its pages. Both have worked long and hard on their respective pieces, rewriting and revising until they feel satisfied with their work. Both have scoured the market listings, searching for the best place to send their work. Both are eager to send their work out, and they have come to me for help. But both know they are still a long way from a final product, a piece put in proper manuscript form, ready to be read by an editor. Although I tell each of my classes as a group the how-to's of preparing a manuscript for publication, I know it is only at this point—the moment when a student is ready to put his work in the mail—that he will really understand and absorb the details of manuscript preparation. I know I will answer the questions Jen and Andy are asking over and over again as other students reach that moment, and that's O.K. because it is through these questions and answers that students turn into real writers.

What is proper manuscript format?

Although certain contests and publications may require specific variations in manuscript formats, there is one standard format that marks the writer as a professional, and unless guidelines specify a variation, a writer should adhere to this basic format. I am adamant that my students do so when they submit work for publication. Even the students who are not generally concerned about details understand why. You have to look the part. If you want an editor to think you're a writer, maybe even an adult, professional writer, then your manuscript had better look like the work of a professional. No fancy paper, no handwritten scrawls, no cross-outs, no decorations, no lovingly constructed manuscript covers. The content of the piece is where the writer makes his own mark. In format he should look like every other professional writer.

Sample pages for prose and poetry manuscripts are included in the Appendix. They are presented according to the following basic rules of manuscript preparation:

1. All manuscripts must be typewritten. Typing may be done on a typewriter, a computer, or a word processor. Print should be black. Use pica type or a standard computer font such as Courier or Times.
 2. Use twenty-pound white bond paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Do not use erasable paper, because of its tendency to smudge.
 3. Make margins of 1-1 1/2 inches on all sides of the page. It is best not to justify the print.
 4. Prose should be double-spaced. Poetry should be typed as you want it to appear on the page.
 5. Manuscripts should be typed on one side of the paper only. Each poem should be typed on a separate page. Each poem should include a heading as described below.
 6. Use a paper clip, not staples, to keep pages together. Generally a title page or cover sheet should not be used.
 7. Heading—Page one of the manuscript should include a heading. In the upper left corner, using single spacing, type your complete legal name, your address, and your telephone number with area code. Beneath that, type your social security number, which a publisher must have in order to pay a writer for his or her work.
-

8. Word count—In the upper right corner across from your name, indicate the number of words in the manuscript. If necessary, you can estimate (twenty-six lines of type per page generally averages 250 words per page), but most word processing programs can give the exact word count. Poets should indicate the number of lines in a poem rather than the number of words.
9. Title and Author—Approximately one-third of the way down the first page, center the title of the work in capital letters. Double-space and center the word “by,” and then double-space and center again and type your name or pseudonym as you would want it to appear on the work.
10. Double-space twice, indent, and begin the body of the work.
11. Page two and on—The author’s name and the page number must be indicated on each subsequent page. A key word from the title is optional. Some variation in format is possible, but a simple format is to put the last name, a dash, and the page number in the upper right corner (e.g., Rubenstein-2).
12. At the end of the manuscript, double-space, and type the words THE END.
13. Make a copy of the manuscript. Although a reputable publication will always do its best to return a manuscript in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided by the writer (see below), mistakes can happen or mail can get lost. The writer should always retain a copy of the work.

One reminder: sometimes a contest or publication will have unique rules for submissions, perhaps, for example, requesting a cover sheet with name and address, in order to make the submission itself anonymous to judges. A writer should always study the submission guidelines carefully and follow them exactly.

Do I really need a cover letter?

Yes, I tell Jen and Andy and every other student who comes to me with this question and a perfectly prepared manuscript in hand. They’re generally not pleased with my answer, seeing the cover letter as just one more formality and a useless one at that. “I don’t have anything to say,” they complain. “What’s the point?”

The point is that a cover letter, like a properly prepared manuscript, is a mark of a professional writer who is inviting an editor to read his work. It’s true that, unlike published writers, most adolescents don’t have pub-

lishing credits that they can showcase in their letters, nor do they generally have any professional experience relevant to the piece they're submitting that they wish to make an editor aware of. But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't write a courteous, concise cover letter that presents them as serious writers. (Nor, though I don't tell my students this, does it mean I should miss this perfect opportunity to teach them about business-letter format!)

A cover letter (see sample letter in the Appendix) is simply a business letter, stating in a clear, businesslike manner the relevant information. Written in proper business-letter format, it should be typed single-spaced with a space between paragraphs and should include a heading (the writer's address and phone number, and the date) and an inside address (name and address of the publication that the manuscript is being sent to). The salutation should include the name of the editor (e.g., *Dear Mr.* or *Dear Ms.* followed by the last name) which usually can be found in the market listing or the masthead of the magazine. The body of the letter should be polite, succinct, and direct, including only pertinent information. Sometimes, when a publication makes particular mention of its interest in young writers, I suggest that students mention their age. Otherwise, no personal information need be included unless a brief biography is required. Sometimes submission guidelines, particularly for student publications, will request other information, and a cover letter is the place for that material.

Does anything else go in the envelope?

Occasionally a publication or contest will require an entry form and/or a release form, guaranteeing that the work is the original work of the author. In some instances, the form will require a parent, guardian, or teacher signature if the writer is under eighteen. When any such forms are required, the writer should fill them out carefully and completely and attach them to the manuscript.

What about envelopes and postage?

Students, especially younger ones, generally do not have much experience with correspondence by mail, and the evolution of e-mail seems sure to exacerbate that situation. For that reason, they often find the "packaging" of their manuscript something of a challenge.

The first thing I tell my students is always to include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) with sufficient postage (the same amount that goes on the mailing envelope) to ensure return of the manuscript. The

only exception is in those cases when the submission guidelines specifically state that a manuscript will not be returned. The SASE is another mark of a professional writer, and generally editors will not even read a manuscript that does not come with an SASE. The writer's name and address should be typed or neatly printed on the envelope.

A manuscript of three or fewer pages plus cover letter can be folded in thirds and mailed in a standard-size white business envelope. The trick, for my students, tends to be how to fit that same size self-addressed, stamped envelope inside! There's usually someone who is completely baffled by the task until a classmate demonstrates folding the envelope also in thirds.

A manuscript of such length can also be sent folded in half in a 6" x 9" envelope.

A longer manuscript of five pages or more should be sent unfolded in a manila envelope, usually 9" x 12". The SASE should be of the same size, folded in half and enclosed.

Envelopes should be addressed carefully and, whenever possible, should include the editor's complete name. Naming an editor helps to ensure that the manuscript will reach an editor quickly, and also indicates that the writer has taken the time to find out who the appropriate editor is. Manuscripts that are not directed to a particular person are apt to be relegated to the very bottom of the slush pile. If a market listing or magazine masthead does not include an editor's name, the writer can call the publication and ask for the current editor's name. At the very least the writer should note "Fiction Editor," "Poetry Editor," etc. on the envelope. The envelope should always include the writer's return address.

A thirty-two-cent stamp will pay for first-class postage for a manuscript of up to one ounce, usually two to three pages plus SASE. Each additional ounce requires twenty-three cents postage. There is also an assessment for oversized mail. It is best to take a long manuscript to the post office to determine the correct postage since any envelope with insufficient postage will be returned to sender. Certainly in these days of rising postal rates, attempting to publish can become quite costly, and young writers need to be guided in making wise choices of potential markets so that the endeavor does not become a financial burden. Some student-written publications will accept one envelope of student submissions sent in by a teacher to reduce individual costs.

So is it best for the teacher to send a packet of class submissions to a magazine?

Generally I believe it's best for students to send their submissions individually unless a publication specifically states that it is willing to receive

the work of an entire class. *Merlyn's Pen*, for example, notes on its cover sheet that teachers can send the work of several students in one large envelope, including one cover sheet and the required two dollars fee per student. *Stoneflower Literary Journal* and *Writes of Passage* are two other publications that will accept submissions through a teacher.

Most publications, however, are understandably not eager to take on the role of teacher/corrector and prefer to see only the best work of individual students. They are, moreover, not likely to publish a number of pieces similar in subject, so if a class assignment is submitted, it is reasonable to assume that only the very best pieces on a particular topic might be chosen for publication. It would seem wiser for students to send their work to different places.

I also believe that older students ought to approach publishing in the same way adult writers do and that they deserve to be treated as adult writers. Unless there are special circumstances, I believe a teenage writer should take individual responsibility for his or her work and learn how to present and submit it as a professional writer would. As noted above, I do not encourage my students to include their age in their cover letters unless a publication geared to young writers requests it or unless a publication states that it is especially interested in the work of young writers. High school age writers should, I feel, enter the competition on an adult level. If a piece of writing is good enough for publication, there is no way an editor can—or need—determine whether it is the work of a fifteen-year-old or a fifty-year-old. The piece should stand on its own, separate from its author.

Can I send my manuscript to more than one place at a time?

The question of simultaneous submissions (the practice of sending the same manuscript to more than one publication at the same time) is a tricky one, both for student and adult writers.

It used to be absolutely verboten to send a manuscript to more than one publication at a time. To do so marked one as unprofessional, if not out-and-out disreputable. That notion has changed somewhat, however, as editors recognize that a great amount of time generally elapses from the time a writer puts his work in the mail to when the editor sends out a response to it. Many publications take three to six months to respond to a manuscript, which means that a writer is fortunate if he can send his piece out three times in the course of a year!

To ameliorate this situation, many publications now state "Simultaneous submissions O.K." in their market listings, giving the writer the freedom to submit his work to more than one market. However, I cau-

tion students not to pepper the markets with any one piece but rather to choose potential markets carefully and submit to perhaps three at the most and only to those that designate their willingness to accept simultaneous submissions. Also, students should know that if a writer is lucky enough to have his work accepted by one of the publications, he must immediately inform the others and withdraw his submission.

If a market listing states that the publication does not accept simultaneous submissions—and that is often the case with student-written publications that do try to respond quickly to submissions—under no circumstances should a writer send his work to more than one place. Instead, as I tell my students, he should work on revising and polishing other pieces of writing so that he'll have plenty of pieces to submit to a variety of markets.

My manuscript is in the mail. Now what?

The truth is, now you wait. Some days you wait with hope in your heart, eager to go home and check your mail, sure that there's going to be an acceptance letter in it. Other days all you can think about are the things you didn't like about your manuscript—that second-to-last line that just didn't click, that paragraph of description you should have cut even more—and you dread opening the mailbox because you're positive your big brown envelope will be there waiting.

All writers suffer such ambivalent feelings, and, though I admit I don't always heed my own good advice, the best solution is to immerse yourself in another writing project. For students that might be another class assignment or maybe another contest. Writers are people who write, not people who wait around until someone tells them they're writers.

I also advise students to keep careful records of their submissions. Some keep this list in their writing class folder; others keep a list at home. Even though student writers are not as prolific as their adult counterparts and generally don't have more than a couple of pieces out in the world at any given time, it's still a good idea to keep a written record of each piece, noting where it was sent and when. When a decision is reached on a manuscript, the writer can record that information as well, and I defy any writer, young or old, not to savor every second of the time it takes to pen the word "Accepted"!

If a manuscript is rejected, I encourage students to take a few days to reconsider the piece, particularly if there are editorial comments that could help in revision. But if the writer feels no changes are in order, then he should get it back in the mail right away. Nothing takes away the sting of rejection as much as renewed hope.

Occasionally a student will send out a manuscript, wait patiently even beyond the response time stated in the market listing, and yet hear nothing. When that happens, I suggest the student send a polite letter with a SASE inquiring about the status of his manuscript, another excellent occasion for a business letter. It may be that an editorial staff has simply gotten behind in its reading or that the manuscript is being held for final consideration, but in some instances a manuscript has been lost in the mail or a magazine has suspended publication, and a writer who doesn't inquire about the situation will find himself waiting forever.

Certainly there are risks involved in the attempt to publish. But for me, and for my students, the rewards far outweigh these risks. Young writers who understand both the risks and the rewards and who are taught to present their work as professionals do can go forward into the publishing world with courage and confidence, knowing they and their work are ready.
