P. Anonymous

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From Folktales to Fan Fiction, and Beyond

I am not a perfect writer, nor am I an avid reader. Despite the fact that all six of my secondary school teachers and many of my friends see me as someone who reads voraciously and writes eloquently, this is just a farfetched notion that they have put in their heads. I tell my friends and family in Hong Kong this, too: my grades in English are far from their assumptions.

At the end of primary school, English was my worst subject. I was a C student who could barely comprehend every new short story and novel thrown my way, let alone write an essay that stayed on topic. At the end of senior year, I became one of the few students who passed the AP English Literature exam with a 3 or higher, and I dreamt of reading and writing about far more informative and enjoyable works in college English classes. These two points on the spectrum differ by quite a long shot, but in truth, my reading and writing style has not changed.

When it comes to writing, I spend hours refining, rewriting, and rereading until I am certain I can earn the most positive reception. I could be writing a detailed, graded analysis of the parallels between the four girls and their parents from Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*. I could be writing a more loosely organized analysis of something a bit more trivial, such as the changes made between the original canon portrayed in Dive, a Japanese novel series from the nineties, and the adapted canon portrayed in this year’s animated series adaptation of the novels. I could even be writing an emotional, over the top fan fiction to express my undying love for a character and my anger for his dissociative identity disorder being written off. Or, I could be more hands-on: subtitling clips from a dubbed episode of my favorite animated series, while also noting the nuances the Japanese language has and how they were interpreted into Cantonese.

For each form of writing, I vary greatly in style, form, and method of appeal. I often ask myself, before I begin writing, what the goal of my essay, story, or analysis is. I adapt to what I perceive as my audience’s wants. Am I going to impress my English teacher? Am I trying to persuade my one thousand strong Tumblr following? Or am I just trying to find a way to entertain myself and my close friends? Sometimes I try to sound more knowledgeable and concise, other times I am limited by 140 characters. Organization, my biggest weakness, is something that comes to my mind only after I finish a draft and have it proofread by other people. But because I have a set goal in mind for my piece, I am never afraid to ask for help, and be willing to improve. If I do not continually strive to achieve my goals in writing, my grades and my reputation online could both suffer.

The same can be said about my reading style, as well. Over the summer, I read a very entertaining essay by Sherman Alexie detailing his childhood experiences exploring superhero comics and how he taught himself to read in this way. I immediately felt the connection between his upbringing’s influence on his gradual mastery of reading, and the diversity of the materials with which I surrounded myself. Much like Alexie, I had a very unique exposure to reading that took into account the influences of my parents and my multicultural background. My first books were not mystery and adventure novels, but were children’s folktales printed both in traditional Chinese characters and British English. Being raised mostly by a mother who grew up whilst Hong Kong was still under British rule, I learnt spelling through such books, and some of the tales I read were further built upon by audio CDs in Cantonese that I enjoyed listening to more than reading the printed characters. Upon moving back to America from Hong Kong before I entered kindergarten, my mum found it extremely important that I was continually exposed to her mother tongue. But when I graduated from kindergarten with notes from my teacher that my English was accented and I lacked clarity, my father moved all of his scientific journals and copies of academic magazines to my room for the “enhancement of my vocabulary”. I found myself drawn to technological advances and computer programming, even though the publications were meant for adults far older than I was at the time. Eventually, due to my schooling, I was forced to embrace “proper” English fiction and learn the advantages of reading not only children’s books and young adult novels, but works of literary merit as well. It was partly because of this new emphasis that my mum’s efforts to keep my biliteracy were fruitless: while I am still fluent in the Cantonese dialect, I can no longer read anything more complex than a social media post.

Luckily, I was placed into a very supportive environment in secondary school where I was strongly encouraged to further explore of the world of fiction, and soon I had a very clear idea of what types of stories I liked and disliked. But, it was not until I entered my third year that I realized just how easy it was to look for a deeper meaning within what I was reading. As someone who looked for pure enjoyment, understandable situations, and relatable characters at first, rejecting anything that didn’t fit what I was looking for, I must admit that I was closed-minded. Two of the novels I read in my third and fourth years of secondary school, Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, changed my mindset completely. I learned not to judge, but to explore content and question what was being directly said, and to think about the direct and indirect meanings within scenes. This was how I finally learned how to analyze and interpret, after being told at the end of fifth grade that this was my tragic flaw.

Once I was able to figure that out, I was able to apply what I learned with each work, be it a novel, an article, a social media post, or a fan fiction, and consider it as an influence to my ever-changing style. While I never commit the crime of plagiarism, I do consider the works of those that are famous in any area as role models and signposts to keep me focused. As I begin ti enter the world of college writing, I decided that the best English course for an ambiguous yet ambitious freshman like me would be English 1A. Although I knew I could not go with more flexible choices due to my ambitious desire for credits, I am even more positive now, looking back on my many influences and experiences, that the rigor of English 1A will far surpass my AP English Literature experience.

Note: Much as I would have liked to give her credit, this student would only allow me to post her excellent essay if it were anonymous, so here it is. I added the title and Americanized the spelling, but otherwise it is as she wrote it. Enjoy.