

The Power in Your Hands:

Writing Nonfiction in High School

By Sharon Watson

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The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School

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Table of Contents

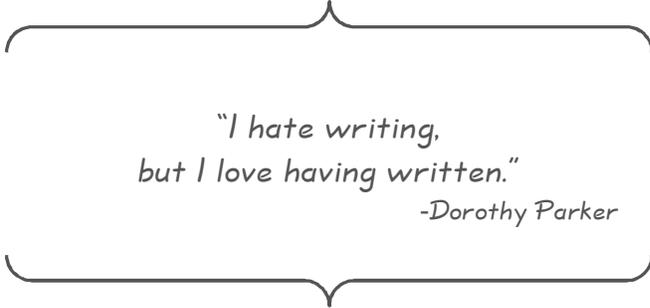
Part 1: Before You Write	1
Chapter 1: Thinking & Planning	1
Your Writing Self	2
The Planning Phase	4
The Trick to Finding a Topic	5
Chapter 2: Opinions	7
The Structure of an Essay.....	8
Your Toolbox: Point Orders, part 1	9
Your Toolbox: Point Orders, part 2	13
The Introduction: Hooking the Reader	18
Conclusions: Finishing Strong	22
First Sentence Anxiety Disorder.....	25
First Drafts.....	26
How Much Time Is this Going to Take?.....	26
Part 2: Persuasion	29
Chapter 3: Persuasion Essentials	29
What Is Persuasion?.....	29
Purpose Statement	32
The Main Idea	33
Digging Deeper: Introductions.....	37
Call to Action	38
Paragraph Types.....	41
Unity and Completeness.....	44
Digging Deeper: More on Paragraphs.....	45
Chapter 4: Persuasion—Next Level.....	53
Persuasion Don't List, part 1	54
The Don't List, part 2.....	57
Persuasion Do List, part 1	60
The Do List, part 2	64
The Persuasive Attitude	69
Chapter 5: Persuasion—Logical	73
Porcupine Park Goes Belly Up?.....	74
The Logistics of the Logical Appeal, part 1.....	76
The Logistics of the Logical Appeal, part 2.....	79
The Logistics of the Logical Appeal, part 3.....	82
The Logistics of the Logical Appeal, part 4.....	85
Chapter 6: Persuasion—Compare and Contrast.....	93
Similarities and Differences	95
Jellyfish—Not Just Another Pretty Face.....	98
A Mailbox and a Deadly Accident	99
Digging Deeper: A New Structure	101
Chapter 7: Persuasion—Moral/Ethical	107
Intro to the Moral/Ethical Appeal.....	109
Structure for a Moral/Ethical-Appeal Essay.....	110
Structure for a Moral/Ethical-Appeal Letter.....	112

Culture Hits the Shift Key	115
I Am Sooo Offended	116
Chapter 8—Persuasion: Emotional Appeal.....	121
No Kleenexes?	121
Can You Feel the Love?	124
A Speech Loaded with Appeal.....	130
Emotional Appeal Strategies, part 1	134
Strategies, part 2: Loaded Words	136
Strategies, part 3: Cultural Experiences, Allusions, & Repetition	140
Strategies, part 4: Figurative Language & Stories	143
Strategies, part 5: the Slimy Strategies	146
Chapter 9: Persuasion—the SAT Essay	151
Choose a Side	151
Resources	156
Chapter 10: Proofreading.....	157
Be Your Own Editor, part 1	160
Be Your Own Editor, part 2	162
Be Your Own Editor, part 3	162
Digging Deeper: Critiquing	165
Part 3: Exposition	167
Chapter 11: Letters	167
Letters of Condolence	168
Thanks but No Thanks.....	172
Be Your Own Editor: Item #2	173
Be Your Own Editor: Item #3	174
Be Your Own Editor: Word Order	176
E-mail Etiquette	180
Chapter 12: Process Writing (How-to).....	185
Writers Have Audiences.....	186
“Good” English	191
What Is Exposition?.....	192
I Know How To	193
How to Write a How-to.....	195
Chronological, Schmonological	199
Parallelism	201
Digging Deeper: Four Types of Process Essays	204
Chapter 13: The Position Paper and Documentation	217
Taking Notes	219
Paraphrasing and Plagiarizing	221
Organize	222
The Modern Language Association Strikes Again	225
The Long and Winding Quote	228
The MLA Method: Book, Periodical, DVD	231
The MLA Method: Web site, Bible, Encyclopedia	237
Chapter 14: A Devotional.....	245
Gender-neutral Language	245
The Devotional	249

Chapter 15: Newspaper Writing	253
Man Bites Dog.....	254
Hard News.....	255
Attributions	259
Hard News Guidelines.....	261
Feature Writing.....	264
Capture Your Reader.....	267
A Kick and a Punch	269
A Young Reporter	270
Chapter 16: Biographies.....	275
I Came, I Saw, I Conquered: Patterns of Three	276
More Threes.....	277
The Biography and the Angle.....	280
Beyond "He was born. Then he died."	283
Transitions.....	288
Chapter 17: Compare and Contrast	291
Method #1: Block.....	295
Method #2: Elements or Features	297
Method #3: Similarities and Differences	301
Chapter 18: Literary Analysis	307
Take It Apart.....	307
Setting	310
Characters and Characterization.....	312
Conflict	315
Plot	319
Point of View.....	323
Dialogue or, if You Prefer, Dialog.....	325
Voice.....	327
Theme and Symbols.....	329
Digging Deeper: Motif.....	331
Text and Context.....	332
Secondary Sources	333
You and Your Interpretation	334
A Teeny-Tiny, Minuscule Punctuation Lesson	335
Chapter 19: The Definition Essay	343
Beyond the Dictionary	344
Some Tools for Definitions.....	346
Part 4: Description	351
Chapter 20: Descriptive Essays	351
An Object	352
A Place.....	353
A Place, part 2	357
Describing a Person.....	359
Describing a Person, part 2	360
Part 5: Narration	367
Chapter 21: Personal Testimony or Spiritual Journey.....	367
No Christianese	368

You Can't Say <i>That</i> Name Here!.....	369
Your Story.....	370
Chapter 22: Interview into Narrative.....	375
The Interview.....	376
The Narrative.....	378
Chapter 23: Personal Narrative.....	383
Sensory Info and Reactions <i>Again?</i>	386
Part 6: Reference.....	393
Your Toolbox.....	393
Be Your Own Editor.....	395
Nonfiction Evaluation Form.....	396
How-To/Process Writing Evaluation Form.....	397
Newspaper Writing Evaluation Form.....	398
Point Orders.....	399
Paragraph Types.....	399
Paragraph Essentials.....	399
Don't List for Persuasion.....	400
Do List for Persuasion.....	400
Logical Persuasion List.....	401
Moral/ethical persuasive essay (or speech).....	401
Moral/ethical letter.....	401
Emotional Appeal Strategies.....	402
Methods of Persuasion Compared.....	403
How to Write a How-to.....	404
Biography Slants.....	404
Compare and Contrast—Three Methods.....	406

Part 1: Before You Write



*"I hate writing,
but I love having written."
-Dorothy Parker*

Chapter 1: Thinking & Planning

Some people say that writing is a mystery, that there are no rules, and that it is all subjective. You might be glad to know that those people are wrong.

Sure, what we *like* about the written word is subjective. Some readers enjoy fantasy or adventure novels while others prefer a thrilling article about last night's ball game or the latest scoop on fashions. But professional and school writing follow definite patterns and guidelines that are objective and measurable. Writers use specific tools to help them create newspaper articles, travel brochures, and riveting biographies. You can, too.

WARNING: Cheesy analogy ahead. Proceed at your own risk. And bring tortilla chips.

Learning to write is like learning to cook. The amateur cook learns to use the kitchen equipment, combine the ingredients, and follow a recipe. In the same way,

writers learn how to use their tools (parallelism, the thesaurus, similes, cheesy analogies, the Fog Index, proofreading skills, and so forth); combine ingredients like introductions, topic sentences, various paragraph types, and conclusions; and follow the recipe of specific structures for each type of writing.

When you combine the methods and tools in this course with the skills you will develop from practicing them, you will be unbeatable. Or at least hard to catch up with.

You will learn how to correct your own work, too, using an objective set of criteria. In addition, because of all your practice, you will develop a gut instinct about the quality of your own writing.

Your Writing Self

You may love the objectivity of writing reports; research and facts give you a thrill. Or maybe the challenge of creating an imaginative story excites you, but reports leave you baffled. This is perfectly normal. Not every student is good at every type of writing. It is a rare student that excels in both research papers and storytelling. Those are two separate writing skills and involve varying personalities and different areas of the brain.

Many things about writing are hard. Find out what makes writing a chore for you and in what circumstances it becomes easier. Understanding your writing self will help you strengthen your weaknesses and build your strengths.

Find your writing self in the following descriptions. Check all that apply to you:

- I like to write only about topics that are interesting to me.
- Writing stories is much more fun than writing reports and essays.
- I would rather walk across a burning desert at high noon with buzzards circling overhead while I drag a bone-dry water bottle than write anything whatsoever.
- It's hard for me to know how to begin and end my essays or reports.
- Writing is easier if it is very quiet around me.
- Research is interesting.
- I have trouble coming up with good ideas.
- Late at night is the best time to write.
- Writing by hand is pure torture, but writing at the keyboard is a little easier.
- It's hard to think of enough points or reasons for my assignments.
- When something interesting happens to me, I like to write it down.
- I like to try to change someone's mind with my writing.

Be aware of the conditions that help you write best. Why write early in the morning when you think best late at night?

- I have sloppy handwriting and/or bad spelling ~~skills~~ skills.
- I can't find enough information to finish a paper.
- I write best when I'm with friends or listening to music.
- I don't care one way or the other about writing.
- The ideas are in my head, but I can't make them come out and sound right on paper.
- I make lists and like to take notes; they help me remember sermons and lectures.
- I have many ideas for writing, and I keep them in a notebook so I can use them later.
- I don't like to research. It's tedious.
- If I'm not interested in the topic, I have trouble doing the assignment.
- I need a lot of time to think about the assignment before I begin to write.
- Finding a topic I'm interested in is hard.
- Forget everything else—let me write stories.
- I would like to know how to write better.
- You gotta be kidding. Checking this box is enough writing for me for one day.
- Feeling the pencil or pen on the paper helps me write better.
- I like playing with words and finding just the right one.
- I don't mind writing essays and reports, but I have trouble writing interesting stories.

Do you identify with any of those statements?

If you did not, please jot in the margin a statement or two about what is true for you about writing.

No matter what your attitude or proficiency, you will learn enough guidelines and tools and read enough examples in this course to help you improve your writing abilities. If you apply what you learn here, you will develop practical writing skills you can use anywhere for the rest of your life.

You will notice an occasional horizontal line in the text. Unless your teacher has other plans, the line (or the end of a chapter) indicates that your lesson for the day is through. Like now.



The Planning Phase

BE ADVISED: The rest of this chapter may be TOO EASY if you are an **intermediate** or **accomplished** writer! You may already know the material. Hang in there. New stuff is on the way.

Some brief definitions are in order before we proceed . . .

Beginning writer: one who has not had much experience writing for school.

Intermediate writer: one who has written some essays for school but has not had much experience in the different types of writing (persuasion, exposition, description, and narration).

Accomplished writer: one who has written many kinds of essays and reports in high school and is preparing for college and/or professional writing.

Now back to your regularly scheduled lesson.

You wouldn't build a dog house without planning it first. The same is true for writing: Before you write, plan.

And part of planning, for a writer, is the tool of **brainstorming**.

Brainstorming helps you think. It means writing down ideas in a spontaneous, free-flowing manner, which is an essential tool for any writer. This is not the time to evaluate your ideas or hold them back. Just write them quickly and evaluate them later. Often a silly idea will lead to a usable one.

When your teacher gives you a broad topic, brainstorm. Make a list of ideas you can write about within the topic. If the teacher's topic is ecology, you have dozens of options. You could write about any of the following narrowed-down topics and still be in the general topic of ecology: recycling, the effect of a natural disaster on an area's ecology, toxic waste clean-ups, or a person who had an impact on how we think about conservation. If you have trouble thinking of ideas, ask a friend, classmate, or parent for ideas or go to a book on the subject and read the chapter headings.

Brainstorming can be effective and more fun when done with others. Many times you'll glean an idea from a brainstorming session with friends or classmates that you might not have thought of alone.

Try brainstorming with the brightness turned down on your computer screen; that's one weird way to gather ideas without immediately evaluating them. When you're through, turn the brightness back up and ponder your possibilities. And your spelling mistakes.



By now you may have thought of specific topics within the general topic of ecology. Write at least two ideas in the margin. If you get stuck, talk to others or consult a book on the subject for more ideas. Discuss your topics with your teacher. You will not be writing this as a report. This is just for practice—so have fun with it.

Practice 1.1

The Trick to Finding a Topic

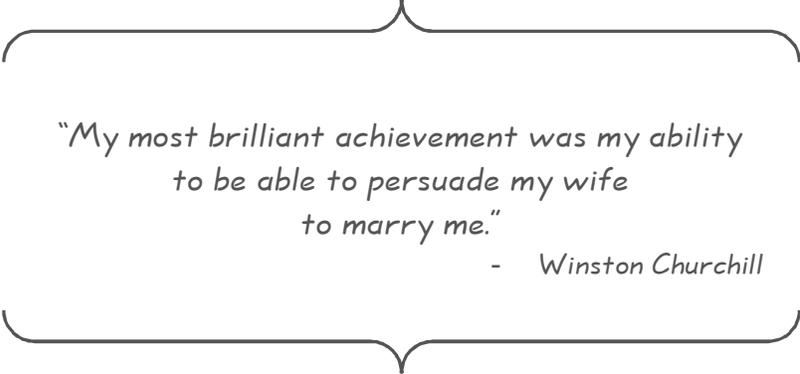
There is a trick to writing anything: find a topic that interests you. Writing about recycling might bore you to tears, but writing about saving eagles might capture your attention. When you have the chance to choose your topic, find an interesting angle and concentrate on that.

If your topic is chosen for you, hunt around until you find something about that topic that makes you tingle. It could be an electrifying finger-in-the-socket tingle or only a kids' carnival-ride sensation, but search for the thing that moves you. For instance, perhaps you have to write about World War II, but you usually give wars a yawn in history class. It now becomes your job to read about that war in order to find something that warms your blood or fires your imagination. Perhaps acts of heroism inspire you, or you may find that because one side won, your grandparents immigrated to another country. Maybe spy stories, POW (prisoner of war) facts, or stories of the Navajo Code Talkers fascinate you. Search for the interesting angle and follow it.

A bored student often produces a boring paper, and, let me tell you, your teacher already has enough boring papers to read. Let your paper be the one that stands out. You just might make the writing experience more fun for yourself, as well.

Choose a topic that is too broad or that is of no interest to you. Write it on a clean piece of paper, the back of an envelope, the inside of an old cereal box, whatever. Then brainstorm different facets of that topic in order to narrow it down or to find something of interest in it. Be spontaneous with your ideas and don't criticize them. Identify something worth writing about in that too-broad or too-boring topic. Discuss your results with your teacher. You will not be writing this for a report; just take your ideas out for a joyride.

Practice 1.2



*"My most brilliant achievement was my ability
to be able to persuade my wife
to marry me."*

- Winston Churchill

Chapter 4: Persuasion—Next Level

Not everything you write will persuade someone. Why is that?

Some people have high sales resistance and are not easily persuaded. Others will not think your reasons are legitimate or important enough to make them change their minds. After all, most people have held their beliefs for a long time or have developed them with some sense of ownership. Their beliefs become their identity.

Or perhaps you simply used weak strategies.

This chapter shows you how to strengthen your persuasive-writing skills. The first two lessons explore how NOT to write. The last ones investigate strong persuasive techniques.

Persuasion Don't List, part 1

Under the guidelines below, you will find a real or made-up letter to the editor and then a discussion of the letter with its shortcomings.

Note: You may find you agree with some of the writers. However, you are not reading to see if you agree with the views; you are reading to find poorly written views. Let's get started.

1. Don't insult a person or an entire group of people.

Why are kids so stupid? Today's teens have turned themselves into human pincushions with all those tattoos and body piercings. Yesterday I ordered soup at a local restaurant, and when the waitress smiled at me, I could see her tongue was pierced. HOW GROSS! I almost lost my appetite.

And what's with all the baggy pants? I'm tired of walking behind some kid who can't keep his pants up. PULL UP YOUR BRITCHES!

This writer is insulting the very people he hopes to persuade. Not a good tactic. Being derisive, angry, or insulting will only encourage readers to ignore you. Yelling puts the focus on the writer, not the issue; it will not engender respect or a positive change.

2. Don't wander off your subject.

I have been reading a lot about the old Crane factory and what people want to do with it. Why tear it down? If it is still in good shape, why not make it into an apartment building?

If people want to tear something apart, why don't they tear out the old railroad tracks? No one uses those any more. They make street repairs cost more, and they are an eyesore.

*What is this
writer's real topic?*

Speaking of eyesore, I would like the city to make my neighbor clean up his house and yard. His house is so full of junk that he is sleeping in a car up on blocks in his yard. And there are rats! I don't want rats in my yard or house. This is a public health nuisance.

This letter moves around. It begins with a factory, shifts to railroad tracks, and then tackles a neighborhood health issue. This weakens the effect.

Focus on one issue.

3. Don't go on and on.

4. Don't contradict yourself.

Kids today need to know their history. How can they appreciate their heritage and what they have today if they don't know where it all came from?

Without going into a history lesson about Westward expansion, which at one time was considered to be just west of the Appalachian Mountains and was encouraged by the government and helped by the Louisiana Purchase, land we bought from France, and by the War of 1812, fought with the British over land we thought we already had a right to, and even by our losses in the Texas Revolution that included the historic fight at the Alamo in 1836, which spurred us on, we have a great multi-cultural heritage.

*How many words
are in this
paragraph?*

You've also got the Cumberland or National Road, which opened in 1818 and traversed the existing nation. Then came the Pony Express and the railroad system, which further connected the nation and made travel and commerce possible. Products like lumber, silver, and produce were now widely available. This benefited both the businessman and the consumer. The telegraph was developed in tandem with the railroad, and soon after followed the telephone, to say nothing of the vast system of interstates created in the wake of—and because of—the Cold War.

Do kids today appreciate their country's infrastructure or the technology that went into connecting us as a nation? Do they know anything about their history and how to preserve its importance? There is a lack of respect and feeling for our heritage and history.

Don't write incessantly and ramble. Few people will read a long letter from beginning to end. Did *you* read the whole thing? The longer the letter, the fewer people who read it. If you have something to say to the general reading public or to a legislator, you can do it in 200 to 300 words. Opinion articles or essays in some magazines can go on for pages. But you aren't writing for a magazine yet, so keep it short and succinct.

School assignments may have longer page/word requirements. Sorry.

Incidentally, that paragraph in the above example, which is one long sentence, is 89 words long. The reading public is not ready for a sentence of that length!

As for contradicting yourself, if you say you are not going to give a history lesson but then you do, your reader will not trust you.

5. Don't rant and rave.

How dare you spell Christmas with an X! This is Christ's birthday, not X's! You may not wish to recognize Jesus or his birth or that Christmas really is the celebration of his birth, but that's what it is. Look at the word. It's got "Christ" in it! Don't insult Jesus and Christians just because we know the reason for the season!

Can you hear this writer yelling at you? It is perfectly all right to be angry about something. However, a writer needs to concentrate on using words and tools that will make the *reader* feel perturbed or concerned enough to do something constructive. Yelling, ranting, and insulting are all weak strategies.

6. Don't write without evidence; don't exclude facts.

7. Don't threaten your audience.

I'm writing about genetically engineered crops. Have you people lost your minds? You don't know what you're messing with. Messing with crops before they've been tested long-term is insane. I won't eat the stuff and I know a lot of people who won't. You better stop messing with Mother Nature or you're going to get in trouble.

I get a kick out of reading this question: "Have you people lost your minds?" Which above guideline (#s 1-5) is this breaking? Write your answer here:

A case can be made for genetically engineered crops being harmful; however, this writer fails to use any facts. Telling readers that you are not alone in your belief is not a fact. It isn't even a random poll. And threatening readers, even with Mother Nature, won't win you any votes.

*"Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity."
- G. K. Chesterton*

Chapter 18: Literary Analysis

Reading a book for pleasure is one type of experience, but reading an assigned story for literature class is an entirely different animal. For school, students analyze what they read in order to make discoveries or draw conclusions, and analyzing is an important tool for students who are training themselves to think.

In elementary school and junior high, you wrote a book report; in high school, you write a literary analysis (plural: *analyses*).

Take It Apart

Analyze simply means to take something apart to get a better look at it. In chemistry, when you analyze a molecule, you take apart all the elements— all the parts— and look at each one separately. When you talk about a car, you analyze its parts— the size of the engine, the design of the body, how low or high it sits, the suspension, the ride, the tires, the paint job, the quality of

the interior, the audio equipment, and other features. The same is true when you analyze a poem, short story, play, or novel.

Of course, you don't take it apart just to see it strewn across your desk. You determine how it works, just like the kid who takes apart the vacuum cleaner to see what makes it go.

Here are some example assignments literature teachers may give:

- How does Jack's rise to power in *Lord of the Flies* compare with Macbeth's rise to power?
- Trace Bilbo's development in *The Hobbit*. In your opinion, what is his greatest change? How does it come about?
- What are Lord Henry Wotton's views on women in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? How does the author make these views known? What is their effect on Dorian Gray?
- What is the historical significance of *Tom Sawyer*? How was it viewed when it first was published? How has it changed the way we look at novels?
- What are the symbols in *Cry, the Beloved Country*? How do they contribute to the theme and the mood?
- Explain Julian's character in "Everything that Rises Must Converge." How does the author communicate this? How does Julian differ from his mother?

Fear not. A literary analysis is simply an expository essay in which you support your view. You will write an introduction, a thesis statement, topic sentences, a variety of paragraph types, and an insightful conclusion. If it is a compare-and-contrast analysis, you will use one of the three types of compare-and-contrast models you learned in the previous chapter.

Which thesis statement below is the most appropriate for a literary analysis?

- Fahrenheit 451* is long and boring.
- Fahrenheit 451* is about firemen who burn things.
- Guy Montag learns a lot about books in *Fahrenheit 451*.
- Ray Bradbury's use of imagery in key places in *Fahrenheit 451* enhances his theme of technology versus nature.

The last thesis statement allows you to prove its soundness, and it shows you have been contemplating the book with deliberation and insight.

Along with using short quotations and examples from the story, you will also use short quotations or facts from **secondary sources** in your analysis. The story or novel is a primary source. Secondary sources include . . .

- ✓ critics' remarks,
- ✓ what the author has written about the story,
- ✓ what other authors or experts have written about the story, and
- ✓ information you find in encyclopedias, biographies, autobiographies, and online about the life and times of the author, and so on.

This chapter differs slightly from others in this course because, to prepare you to write an analysis, it's a short lesson on literature. That way, you'll know what to look for in a novel or short story.

Here's what we'll cover in the next lessons:

- Setting
- Character and characterization
- Conflict
- Plot
- Point of view
- Dialogue
- Voice
- Theme and Symbols
- Digging Deeper: Motif
- Text and context
- You and your interpretation

Near the end of the chapter, you will have a chance to critique a student's literary analysis.

Select a short story or novel with which you are familiar. Write its name below and have the story or book handy so you can answer questions at the end of each section in this incredibly long and possibly even boring chapter.

Practice 18.1