



AN ACORN NO MORE

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Why Do It?

Why, after reading and grading countless college and high school composition papers for these many semesters, would I become a “reader” for the College Board Advance Placement (AP) English Language and Composition exam? There was the offer of a modest stipend, paid travel expenses and meals, plus a room at an ocean-side hotel in Daytona Beach, of course. But still! Reading and grading composition papers is not everyone’s “cup o . . .”

It was then with a hesitant heart, then, that in June 2009 I joined some five hundred other college and high school English teachers to read and grade the AP Language and Composition exams at the beach. With that many “comp” teachers in the same place, the air resonated with book talk, student stories, and samples of vanity press poetry collections. A new phenomenon for me was the number of teachers tethered to their laptops, literally sprawled about the hotel lobby floors, taking advantage of the free WiFi and electricity provided by the Hilton hotel. The leather-elbow-jacketed scholar-lecturers had morphed into a multi-modal apostleship.

This was my first exposure to the world of AP. My name

badge identified me as an “acorn,” a beginner. I teach at Oakland University, so the acorn metaphor was particularly apropos. What I learned through war stories of more experienced AP readers, through the literature provided by the College Board, and through what I personally observed, follows here.

The Exams

The College Board offers thirty-seven exams, ranging alphabetically from Art History to World History. A sampling of major science, math, and foreign languages is available, as well as Latin Virgil, Human Geography, and Studio Art: 3-D Design. Two English tests, stressing composition theory, are among the more heavily endorsed—English Language and Composition and English Literature and Composition.

Nearly 1.6 million predominantly high school students took more than 2.7 million AP exams in 2009. An estimated three hundred forty-four thousand took a stab at the English Language and Composition exam, down a little, as I was informed, from 2008. From a colleague I learned that about 63% of the exam takers were women—about the same proportion of female teacher-readers for the first day group assembly. My university Writing and Rhetoric department and my class student enrollment have a like proportion. Hmm! Has it always been thus for the composition of English composition classes? The upside of the AP program is that the students can receive college credit before matriculating; the downside is only a little more than 15 percent score a three or above on the exam that is required by most colleges. Both of my sons, older and younger, scored fours and fives respectively, I’m proud to report.

The exam takers had two hours to write three essays on the English Language and Composition exam. The first was a synthesis approach to the topic of the efficacy of the space program or the lack thereof. Since all three responses are in the

same “blue book,” I casually observed that about one-third began with “Space, the Final Frontier.” I’m told a number credited not Neil Armstrong with the first walk on the moon, but both Lance and Louie. The second, the one I labored through, asked a student for a rhetorical analysis of a satiric comparison between environmentalists and anti-environmentalists from Edward O. Wilson’s book, *The Future of Life*. More of what I learned from those responders later. The third was an argumentation attempt at a quote from Horace, which observed that adversity in one’s life can sometimes prove beneficial. About half of these essays began with or ended with the fatuous and ultimately unprovable quote, “what doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger.”

Education Testing Services (ETS) was responsible for the logistics of the reading and scoring operation. To execute an undertaking of this magnitude takes a great deal of planning, and ETS carried out the function meticulously. Each reader-table consisted of a leader, an experienced AP reader, and eight readers with several or no years practice. Another “acorn” and I were positioned within arms reach of Carl, our table leader, who monitored our adherence to the scoring rubric. Through the practice of “range finding” in which everyone participated—groups of readers examining together several sample papers, “acorn” readers like me quickly learn how to score, appropriately and fairly, each essay. These readings helped me to recognize a “superior” paper—an eight or a rare nine—as well as less effective essays that “range” down to zero.

Each reader in turn sports an ID number and is given what seems like an endless stream of books of 25 essays accompanied by a scoring sheet. When I completed the sheet with my honest evaluation of the student’s effort, I would raise my hand, and then someone would appear at my side immediately and trade me the “read” book for another. What started out slowly for me—my table leader was a little concerned about my pace at the outset—became faster as I became more experienced.

Despite the challenge of reading the sometimes baffling

cursive writing on the exams, I estimate I read some half-a-million words in the seven-day period from the 11th to the 17th. For a comparison of amount (but not of quality), I did a rough count of the words in the novel I've been reading, Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and estimated that her novel contains some two hundred thousand words.

The Hand of the AP Teacher

The hand of the AP teacher was evident in essays that stressed rhetorical fallacies and Aristotle's rhetorical triangle. I encountered a few thousand *ad hominem* references, one *ad homonym*, and an army of *straw men*. *Ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* pervaded the essays as well. I even saw one reference to *bozos*, but one cheeky student directed that epithet at the testers who chose the topics that he or she had to write about.

Imperfect usage abounded in a good number of the essays I read. The adverb *off* had some colloquial uses that caught my practiced professorial eye. I noted *first off* and *right off*, as well as the awkward *off of*. One student opined that in his book, *Wilson used a great deal of syntax*. One would hope that anyone who writes anything would use both diction and syntax! One AP teacher and fellow reader told me that he always makes his students preface *diction* with an appropriate adjective. In my reading I came across *satirical diction*, *biting diction*, *condescending diction*, *name-calling diction*, and *critical diction*. Seems some students took his advice.

Some student-writers fall in love with a word. *Myriad*, which my voice music coach son Andrew informed me was a nasal sound and difficult for singers to master, was a favorite of several. *Plethora*, a plosive sounding word, was another. One student wrote it *phuthora*, and my fellow acorn thought the student had a hard time transitioning from the space essay and combined the *dwarf planet* with the word. One teacher, who overheard me talking about the students' lingual love of *myriad* and

plethora, added several others to the list including *soporific*, *insipid*, and *sardonic*.

I compiled a list of what I call “interesting but off-target diction.” *Sartorial* for satirical was one. I read Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and his satirical tailor had very little to offer in the environmental debate. *Juvenal* for juvenile was another. Some others that merit “the close but no cigar” dictum: *Hippocratic*, *ludicrousity*, *humoristic*, *unsettlement*, *sudynims*, *caciphonious*, *oftenly*, *negatory*, *indepthly*, and *upsurd*. Students appear to have added these words to their lexicon; they’re just a hair or two off in tendering them.

I liked the expression *nip pick*, which one paper had. I think that some people *nip* and *pick* at us all the time. *One fail swoop* could work if it referred to the unsuccessful attempt of a bird of prey at its target.

Unintentional Humor and Intentional Wisdom

One student’s attempt at a “grabber” opening: *Several years past and many more to come*. Another explaining satire: *He uses the technique repeatedly, two times to be exact*. In the category of the confused writer: *They (the other side) bash the opposing viewpoint but don’t say anything negative about their own views*. An example of a sweeping generalization: *Terminology creates a world of confusion, anger, doublespeak, and more*.

Students waxed wise as well: *The environment is a significant part of the earth*. True! *Environmentalists control all nature*. Not true! *Calling someone fat won’t make you any thinner*. Okay! *Where there is laws, there is always people to break them*. That’s why we have laws! *Opinions are like belly buttons; everyone has one*. Agreed! *We are all too similar to be radicals*. Don’t necessarily agree! *Politicians’ promises are like empty candy wrappers; the good part is missing*. I’m on board with that! *When you point a finger at someone else, there are four pointing back at you*. I thought this was keeper at first, but all I could do was point my thumb up, not back, no matter how hard I tried! That one needs some work.

Vacation?

One of my most revered teachers declared that *a vacation was a change of occupation*. In contrast, my former department chair, a regular on these AP junkets, loudly proclaims that *AP programs are not a vacation; they're work*. In truth, they are both. The food was abundant, the gently rolling sea was easily accessible, the hotel room was air conditioned, free, and straightened up each day, and the colleague interchange was stimulating. Yes, one had to “pound the books” for eight hours a day, but the evening was free and allowed us all to do as we pleased. Brian Doyle, a traitorous Boston Red Sox fan with New York roots, regaled us with some of his poignant essays and stories. Several outings were arranged, one to a minor league baseball game and the other to a historic house tour. We shared our published and unpublished poetry with each other one night—for me this was the highlight of my stay.

A student from Missoula, Montana said it all for me when, after completing an essay-and-a-half he felt too exhausted to continue: *I'm finished. I'm sorry*. I participated in my first *reading* and am truly sorry it is over. But, should I be invited back, I will return as a reader next summer in Louisville, Kentucky, minus my acorn status.