BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 1

by Richard P. Sinay

Genre: Memoir

Key Takeaways

• Sinay argues that English departments often prioritize literary terminology and traditional grammar drills over the core literacy practices students need: sustained reading, purposeful writing, vocabulary growth, and comprehension.

• Drawing on George Hillocks's research and his own teaching experience, Sinay maintains that isolated grammar exercises do not improve writing and may hinder it; grammar and usage should instead be addressed in the context of students' own drafts.

• Reading is presented as a foundation for language acquisition: students build vocabulary, comprehension, and an intuitive sense of grammar by reading accessible material regularly and writing about what they read.

• Writing should be taught as a process of generating ideas, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing—not as a one-time product submitted for a grade.

• A strong English department needs a coherent four-year curriculum, shared course outlines and lesson materials, reliable rubrics, and assignments that prepare students for college writing, including MLA-style research and argument papers.

• Sinay recommends reading and writing labs, independent-reading programs, and Title I support where eligible, with books and instruction suited to students' demonstrated reading levels.

• Literature can build cultural knowledge and enrich language, but Sinay questions teaching difficult works without regard to students' readiness; he favors selecting texts that students can meaningfully understand and discuss.

• The memoir portrays hiring, department leadership, and teacher evaluation as consequential institutional problems, citing the author's experiences with favoritism, inadequate subject knowledge, and resistance to professional development.

• For community colleges, Sinay calls for more specialists in composition and reading, fewer remedial grammar-only courses, better placement based on reading and writing ability, more full-time faculty, and stronger preparation for transfer-level work.

• Sinay's overarching appeal is for educators to question entrenched traditions, engage with current research, assess whether instruction produces measurable student growth, and share classroom practice rather than teaching in isolation.

Who Should Read This Book

This memoir is best suited to English teachers, literacy specialists, teacher educators, department chairs, school and college administrators, and policymakers interested in how English instruction is organized. Readers will find concrete classroom recollections alongside recommendations for curriculum design, writing assessment, independent reading, teacher preparation, professional development, and community-college support. It may also interest parents and students who want to understand why reading, writing, and literature instruction can vary so widely between schools. Compared with research-focused books on composition or literacy, Confessions is an anecdotal, opinionated memoir rather than a systematic review of evidence. Its strongest contribution is the practitioner's long view across multiple schools and colleges, plus its insistence that departments examine whether inherited practices actually help students. Readers should approach its claims—especially those concerning hiring, school rankings, and the effects of grammar instruction—as the author's perspective, and use the book as a starting point for discussion alongside current research and local evidence.

Chapter Summaries

Part I: Teaching at the High School — Introduction

Sinay introduces the book as a memoir of problems he observed while teaching English and reading at California high schools and community colleges. He emphasizes that he loved teaching and felt respected by students and colleagues, but argues that longstanding departmental traditions often went unexamined. He uses Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" as a

metaphor for educational practices that continue simply because they are familiar, even when they may not serve students well. The memoir's purpose is to provoke discussion rather than target named individuals. Sinay previews concerns about teacher preparation, grammar instruction, writing assessment, literature teaching, hiring, and school leadership. His central proposal is that English education should be redesigned around improving students' literacy, with teachers trained to teach reading and writing as well as literature.

Chapter 1: Imperial Junior High School (1973–1977)

Sinay begins his career teaching eighth-grade English at Imperial Junior High. The department rotated students among four teachers, separating writing from reading and dividing literature into poetry, short stories, novels, and drama. With no ready-made poetry curriculum, Sinay built lessons around popular songs such as Elton John's "Benny and the Jets," Gordon Lightfoot's "If You Could Read My Mind," and Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water." Students enjoyed identifying metaphors, similes, and other poetic devices, and the principal praised the lesson. Sinay also used humor and an approachable persona to connect with students. At the same time, he began to question whether teaching literary terminology actually improved reading. He felt unprepared to teach writing, grammar, speech, and reading skills, despite his English training. He describes grammar-heavy composition classes as displacing actual writing and cites Hillocks's research to support his later view that isolated grammar drills do not improve writing. He came to see reading as fundamental to vocabulary and language development, while recognizing that his students' curriculum did little sustained reading. Seeking better preparation, he earned graduate degrees in English and reading and developed an enduring belief that new teachers need curriculum materials, practical training, and a stronger focus on literacy.

Chapter 2: Brea-Olinda High School (1977–1978)

At Brea-Olinda, Sinay was assigned grammar classes for students who had failed the English portion of California's high school competency test. Some students had repeated the course several times and resented losing an elective to study grammar. Sinay sees the arrangement as a mismatch: students who had struggled with a writing competency were being required to pass a grammar course rather than receive targeted instruction and another opportunity to demonstrate writing ability. He recalls that the hostile circumstances made students dislike both the class and English more broadly. The chapter also recounts a department exercise in which teachers graded the same student essay and produced wildly different marks, from A to F. For Sinay, this demonstrated how inconsistently writing was evaluated and how little formal preparation teachers received in assessing it. He reflects on his own student-teaching experience, when a mentor corrected students' papers and assigned separate grades for content and mechanics. Later, he came to favor teaching the writing process and helping students revise their own work. His year at Brea-Olinda ended when budget and enrollment pressures led to layoffs, but it reinforced his concern that traditional grammar instruction and

unstandardized grading could frustrate students without teaching them to write.

Chapter 3: Fullerton High School (1978–1980)

Fullerton hired Sinay to teach reading, allowing him to apply his graduate training in a Title I reading lab. Students read books at an appropriate level, built vocabulary, and practiced comprehension; pre- and post-testing helped show their progress. Sinay presents the lab as a model of how targeted reading instruction can support students whose reading lags behind their grade level. Materials that are too difficult, he argues, can frustrate students and interrupt comprehension, whereas reading just above a student's current level can foster growth. The school's English department also provided course materials and lesson plans for new teachers and was experimenting with writing instruction as a process, influenced by USC professor Ross Winterowd. Students received feedback and were expected to revise rather than simply submit a finished product. Sinay notes practical challenges, especially the time required to conference individually with large classes, but regards the effort as an important improvement over correcting every error himself. After serving briefly as department chair and then vice-principal, he was again displaced by enrollment-related staffing changes. Moving among schools, he argues, gave him a comparative perspective and helped him recognize what he calls "School Myopia": the tendency to assume one's own school is excellent because one has little experience elsewhere.

Chapter 4: Canyon High School (1980–1981)

At Canyon High School, Sinay taught both reading and English during a one-year replacement appointment. He recalls discovering that the teachers' lounge had been turned into a student game room, an anecdote he uses to question the school's academic priorities. He argues that schools differ substantially in their academic expectations and resources, and that leadership, student motivation, and the surrounding community all influence the curriculum a school is willing to offer. Sinay compares Canyon with University High School in Irvine, which his own children attended and which he describes as highly academic. He points to the different numbers of students admitted to Stanford as an example of unequal preparation, while treating SAT averages as one indicator of a school's academic culture. The chapter's broader point is that educational opportunity varies by school: families may seek out districts with stronger academic programs, and educators should not assume that a school's local reputation reflects how well it prepares every student.

Chapter 5: Laguna Hills High School (1981–1982)

After failing to get an interview for a reading-and-English position in Irvine, Sinay accepted a long-term substitute job at Laguna Hills High School. There, he taught reading classes and encountered a vocabulary program he considered a strength. The department chair wanted to hire him permanently, but an administrator reportedly judged him too expensive because his graduate coursework placed him high on the salary scale. Sinay also found that the English

department relied heavily on coaches, some teaching English on emergency credentials despite lacking English degrees. The chapter develops the book's recurring critique of teacher hiring. Sinay describes perceived cronyism, nepotism, and decisions based on coaching needs or cost rather than subject preparation. He recounts being passed over for jobs despite his qualifications and teaching experience, including an earlier interview in which an athletic director said he would get a position before someone else was hired. The experience left him disillusioned but also sharpened his conviction that schools owe students a fair search for qualified teachers, especially in academic subjects.

Chapter 6: Valencia High School (1982–2008)

Sinay spends twenty-six years at Valencia High School, dividing his account into teaching reading, literature, writing, and oral communication, as well as research, leadership, hiring, and evaluation. He describes arriving as a reading specialist to find no functioning lab, few appropriate books, and little established curriculum. He gradually built a program with vocabulary work, daily reading, and comprehension practice, sometimes spending his own money on materials. After test results showed that the lowest-performing quartile had made the school's strongest gains, a vice-principal credited Sinay's classes. Sinay proposed a broader reading program but says he was not given leadership of the department; he eventually left reading instruction, and he reports that the scores later fell. The chapter's literature sections ask whether English classes are meant chiefly to teach literary history and terminology or to improve literacy. Sinay explains cultural and linguistic reasons for studying literature, while questioning the value of difficult texts when students cannot understand much of their language. He describes reading aloud to model fluency and pronunciation, teaching vocabulary in context, and encouraging independent reading. He also recounts colleagues' apparent gaps in literary knowledge and the lack of shared pedagogical discussion, using these stories to argue for better subject training, organized curricula, and departments that evaluate student growth rather than relying on tradition.

Chapter 7: Hallmarks of a Great English Department

This section gathers Sinay's recommendations for secondary English departments. He calls for course descriptions, course outlines, lesson plans, and common materials to be available for every class so new teachers can begin effectively rather than inventing an entire curriculum. He also recommends that departments consult local colleges about placement and writing expectations, assess students' linguistic growth with appropriate measures, hire the strongest candidates through fair processes, and have academically qualified department leaders who support ongoing professional learning. For reading, Sinay proposes independent-reading programs, Title I support for eligible schools, carefully selected literature suited to students' abilities, and vocabulary instruction based on the texts students read. For writing, he advocates a sequenced four-year program, practice in multiple forms, MLA research and argument papers, process-based instruction, consistent rubrics, and grammar

and usage taught in the context of actual writing. He also recommends reading and writing labs, professional development through organizations such as the National Writing Project, and regular discussion of research and classroom practice.

Chapter 8: What California and Colleges Should Do

Sinay proposes separating the conventional literature major from a distinct English-teaching major for prospective secondary teachers. The teaching major would retain relevant literary study but add focused preparation in the works commonly taught in schools, composition and rhetoric, reading instruction, vocabulary, comprehension, and nonfiction. His aim is to prepare future teachers for the practical demands of grades seven through twelve rather than assuming that a literature degree alone equips them to teach every part of English language arts. He also assigns responsibilities to education departments: future English teachers should learn how to assess writing, teach grammar in context, teach different literary genres, and use varied pedagogical approaches. Sinay argues that the school day and course structure should provide adequate time for reading and writing instruction, rather than expecting literacy to develop through short, frequently interrupted classes. The conclusion acknowledges that his own career and departmental resistance limited how much change he could achieve, but he hopes the memoir will encourage serious reconsideration of English instruction.

Part II: Teaching at the College — Introduction

The second part recounts Sinay's twenty-eight years teaching part-time at seven community colleges, including his unsuccessful pursuit of full-time positions. He describes reaching the final two candidates four times and says that, in his view, hiring was shaped by politics, personal connections, and affirmative-action considerations as well as qualifications. A professor once advised him to change his name to "Ricardo" to improve his hiring prospects, an episode Sinay presents as evidence of how politicized he believed the process had become. He also renews his central instructional argument: many college English teachers are trained primarily in literature but are assigned to teach composition, reading, and grammar. Sinay argues that this mismatch, combined with entrenched grammar-heavy remediation and limited attention to research, weakens student preparation. He previews the chapters' focus on hiring, composition instruction, reading programs, and practical reforms for community colleges.

Chapter 1: Cypress College (1978–1983)

At Cypress, Sinay learned to teach college students in a four-unit back-to-college course covering reading, writing, and study skills. Students practiced paragraphs and essays, learned to read textbooks and articles through skimming, scanning, and annotation, and studied note-taking and time management using Walter Pauk's How to Study in College. The course served returning adults and, over time, attracted younger students as well. Sinay argues that

a course of this kind should be standard for students entering or returning to college. Cypress also reinforced his distinction between a literature degree and preparation to teach composition or reading. Sinay describes taking further composition courses at UC Irvine because his graduate study in English had not trained him adequately in writing instruction. He recalls seeing an apparently unprepared instructor obtain a full-time job through a personal connection and learning that part-time faculty could be treated as subordinate to full-timers. Although his own evaluations were strong, no full-time position opened during his Cypress tenure. The chapter frames both practical instruction and fair employment as essential to a sound college department.

Chapter 2: Cerritos College (Summer 1987)

Sinay taught a summer prerequisite composition course at Cerritos after finishing second in a full-time hiring process. The class placed heavy emphasis on grammar, particularly for second-language students. Within the constraints of the course, he encouraged students to read more and keep journals about what they read, believing these habits would improve their language more effectively than grammar study alone. While preparing lessons in the library, Sinay overheard a full-time instructor assure a part-time colleague that she would receive an advertised job, apparently before the process had run its course. He withdrew his application the following day and chose not to apply there again. An administrator later praised his ability to connect with students, but the experience strengthened his conviction that qualifications and teaching skill did not always determine hiring. The chapter closes with a departmental principle: reduce excessive grammar instruction and give students more opportunities to read and write.

Chapter 3: Saddleback College (1983–1990)

Sinay began teaching composition at Saddleback after an unproductive referral to Irvine Valley College, where he says his applications and messages went unanswered. At Saddleback, he built a reputation through part-time teaching and gradually developed relationships with full-time faculty. Those relationships exposed him to hiring practices he considered heavily dependent on personal networks. He describes how committees could score candidates, select finalists, and pass recommendations to college leaders, while arguing that these stages could be manipulated to favor friends. Sinay recounts multiple unsuccessful applications, including positions for which he believed his combined English and reading qualifications closely matched the posting. In one case, he says colleagues told him he was the strongest candidate, but a different applicant was hired; in another, he believed a candidate’s friendship with committee members decided the outcome. He also describes confronting a college president after a hire he considered especially unjustified, and says his complaints helped prompt district-level review and changes to hiring procedures. Beyond employment, he criticizes the absence of reading and writing support in some college programs and argues that composition and reading should be taught by appropriately trained

specialists.

Chapter 4: Santa Ana College (1990–1993; 1995–2007)

Sinay taught a range of English courses at Santa Ana College but found little substantial reading instruction or reading-lab support. He argues that students with weak vocabulary and comprehension need targeted reading courses and labs, not simply placement into grammar-heavy classes. At Santa Ana, he says, placement relied heavily on grammar tests, and students with low scores could be required to complete several grammar courses before reaching freshman English. He questions whether grammar tests adequately measure writing or general language ability and recommends reading assessments and writing samples as better placement tools. In his view, prerequisite courses should prioritize reading, vocabulary, comprehension, paragraph writing, and practice with actual compositions. He recounts students themselves asking why they were studying grammar when it did not help them communicate, and advising them to read at an appropriate level and write about what they read. The chapter's broader criticism is that departments can preserve long-standing courses even when research and student needs call for a different approach.

Chapter 5: Rancho Santiago College (1999–2006)

Sinay describes Rancho Santiago as a pleasant college where he taught part-time, though he had limited contact with faculty outside his classes. His main account concerns a full-time interview in which panelists asked candidates to identify subtle grammar errors. Sinay could identify most but not all of them and questioned why the department emphasized grammatical puzzles rather than asking more about teaching writing, the writing process, or student learning. He also criticizes the lack of a dedicated reading lab and the continued use of grammar-heavy prerequisite courses. Sinay argues that students who need preparation for college should receive instruction in reading, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing, while a lab can provide additional practice. He reports receiving strong evaluations from students and administrators but says that good teaching did not guarantee access to full-time employment. The chapter links the interview and the program structure to his broader claim that departments may prioritize traditional grammar knowledge over the teaching skills students need.

Chapter 6: Fullerton College (2003–2005)

Returning to Fullerton College, where he had earned his associate degree, Sinay taught in the reading department. He reflects on the influence of counselor Richard Schultz, whose encouragement and friendly bets helped motivate him as a student. Sinay presents this relationship as an example of how a small act of support can help someone persist through years of education and professional development. Although a dean hired him without an interview for part-time work, Sinay later applied for a full-time reading position and describes an interview panel whose reactions made him suspect that some members had already

favored another candidate. He says a colleague who knew his work supported him, but the position went to someone he considered less effective and more connected to the panel. The episode reinforced his view that strong qualifications and student evaluations could be outweighed by institutional relationships. He eventually stopped pursuing full-time college work, in part because the financial tradeoff no longer made sense.

Chapter 7: Pikes Peak Community College (2017–2018)

After moving to Colorado Springs, Sinay returned to community-college teaching and was hired at Pikes Peak, where he also substituted for other instructors. The experience gave him an unusually broad view of classrooms and departmental practices. He argues that some instructors taught the vocabulary of argumentation and logical fallacies without having students actually write arguments, and that course assignments did not always match the stated learning goals. He advocates teaching students to develop a thesis, support it with evidence, and practice argument through the writing process. Sinay also critiques course outlines that he considers repetitive or unclear, and says that a prerequisite reading-and-writing course lacked guidance from reading specialists. He argues that students need explicit reading instruction—such as textbook strategies, vocabulary development, and comprehension—not just general references to “critical reading.” He further questions administrative structures that combine departments without ensuring relevant expertise and criticizes heavy reliance on part-time faculty. His proposed community-college model includes clearer course materials, more composition and reading specialists, reading and writing labs, and better alignment with the writing students will encounter after transfer.

Chapter 8: Hallmarks of a Great English Department in Community Colleges

This section brings together Sinay’s college-level recommendations. Community colleges should distinguish among the work of literature, composition, and reading specialists; ensure first-year writing teaches students to produce arguments and research papers; and provide clear course outlines and lesson plans, especially for part-time faculty. Sinay also advocates a reintroduction-to-college course that teaches reading, writing, and study skills, drawing on his successful Cypress experience. He calls for reading assessments and placement processes that identify students’ actual needs, rather than relying exclusively on grammar tests, and for reading and writing labs that support practice beyond class. He recommends increasing the proportion of full-time faculty, reducing nepotism and cronyism in hiring, preparing students for transfer-level writing, and replacing grammar-only remediation with sustained reading and writing. The chapter’s guiding principle is that college English should build usable literacy through practice, feedback, and appropriate support.

Notable Quotes

""“Teaching is perhaps the most privatized of all the public professions.”"

""“One can only write what one has read.”"

""“I never let my schooling interfere with my education.”"

""“The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read.”"

Full Summary

Sinay frames his memoir as a challenge to traditions that, in his view, have kept English instruction largely unchanged for decades. He loved teaching and believed students and colleagues respected him, but he came to question whether schools were improving literacy or merely repeating familiar practices. He compares English departments’ attachment to tradition with the ritual in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”: a practice can persist simply because people have stopped asking whether it serves anyone. His concern is that teachers are trained chiefly in literature, while students need sustained reading, purposeful writing, and instruction grounded in what research shows helps them learn.

After completing his credential, Sinay began at Imperial Junior High School in 1973. He had hoped to teach near home in Orange County, and his student-teaching connection to the University of Southern California helped him secure an interview with a USC alumnus in the district office. He accepted the job immediately, later recognizing how connections can shape hiring. For four years, he taught eighth graders, led the yearbook, and learned that young students required organization, energy, and readiness.

Imperial’s English department rotated students among four teachers in ten-week blocks. English, labeled writing, and Reading, labeled literature, each received forty-five minutes. Sinay initially saw the arrangement as promising, but the “reading” curriculum consisted of genres—poetry, short stories, novels, and drama—rather than a sustained program to strengthen reading. Assigned to poetry, he found no textbook or shared lessons, so he created his own. Using cassette recordings and copied lyrics, he taught poetic devices through popular songs such as Elton John’s “Benny and the Jets,” Gordon Lightfoot’s “If You Could Read My Mind,” and Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” Students identified metaphors, similes, and other techniques; the principal praised the lesson, and former students later remembered it fondly.

The success did not resolve his doubts about the purpose of English class. Students learned terminology—assonance, alliteration, imagery, meter, and more—but Sinay wondered whether this made them stronger readers or simply “Little Literature Professors.” He tried to move beyond vocabulary about form, asking students to interpret a poem’s message and write about what it meant to them. He also noticed that the drama teacher had students

perform skits without reading the play, while most colleagues treated literature and its terminology as the substance of reading instruction. Students entered with very different language abilities, and Sinay worried that literary terms did little for those who most needed to develop everyday reading, writing, and speaking vocabularies.

He was also unprepared to teach writing or grammar, despite being trained to teach literature. Composition class gave disproportionate time to grammar drills and too little to writing. Later, George Hillocks's research at the University of Chicago helped explain what Sinay had suspected: traditional exercises in parts of speech and sentence structure did not improve writing and could make it worse. He began giving students more opportunities to write paragraphs and short essays, teaching the structure of introductory, developmental, and concluding paragraphs. To make the central paragraph memorable, he compared it to a hamburger: its development was the "meat" of the essay. His reading studies also led him to see reading as the basis of vocabulary growth, an intuitive grasp of grammar, and better writing. Looking back, he regretted that his poetry classes had included so few books and so little sustained reading.

While teaching, Sinay earned an M.A. in English at Cal State Fullerton in 1976, completed coursework for an education master's and administrative credential, and pursued a master's in reading, finished in 1978. Yet the more he studied, the clearer it became that his literature degree had not equipped him to teach reading or writing. He left Imperial wanting to work with older students and to find more effective ways to help them acquire language.

In 1977, Brea-Olinda High School hired him to teach grammar to students who had failed the English portion of California's competency test. Instead of receiving instruction and another chance to take the test, sophomores, juniors, and seniors were assigned a one-semester grammar course and had to score at least 70 percent on its final. Many had failed the course repeatedly and had to surrender electives for a subject they disliked. Sinay taught three such classes, where students arrived angry and often left more frustrated. He questioned the vice-principal who had created the requirement and appealed to the department head, but neither his arguments nor his developing knowledge of reading research changed the policy. He distinguishes grammar from usage: students should learn choices such as "their," "there," and "they're," but in the context of their own writing, not as disconnected drills.

Brea-Olinda also exposed the arbitrary nature of writing assessment. In a department exercise, teachers graded the same strong student essay: some gave it an A, while most assigned a C or D, and one gave it an F for being "pretentious." Sinay saw this variation as evidence that teachers needed preparation and shared standards for evaluating writing. His own student-teaching mentor had graded papers separately for content and mechanics, then corrected students' errors herself. Sinay adopted that model for years, before recognizing that correcting a paper without letting the student revise did not teach the student how to edit or

improve. When the 1978 oil embargo led to the dismissal of forty newly hired teachers, Sinay lost his job, but his reading master’s degree helped him find his next one.

At Fullerton High School, where he taught from 1978 to 1980, Sinay joined an established Title I reading lab. Students read books suited to their levels, built vocabulary, and practiced comprehension; beginning- and end-of-semester Nelson Reading Tests measured their growth. He saw students advance by reading material just above their current ability, while books far beyond their vocabulary created frustration and obstructed understanding. The school also supplied English teachers with lesson plans and tests, so new instructors did not have to invent an entire curriculum. There, Sinay encountered Ross Winterowd’s approach to composition: students should draft, receive feedback, and rewrite, treating writing as a process rather than a finished product. The method raised practical problems—especially how to conference with students while keeping a large class on task—but it offered a better direction than simply grading completed essays. After a brief stint as English department chair, Sinay became vice-principal of student activities. Declining enrollment soon cost him that position and another teaching job, and he moved on to a one-year replacement post at Canyon High School.

At Canyon in 1980–81, he taught reading and composition but had little contact with either department. He was struck that the teachers’ lounge had been turned into a student game room, with pinball machines and arcade games, while teachers worked in a small office. The scene suggested to him a school whose priorities were not strongly academic. He argued that schools differ greatly in the opportunities they provide, and that student motivation and leadership help determine how demanding a curriculum becomes. His later comparison was University High School in Irvine, where his children studied and ten students a year entered Stanford, against Canyon’s less academically focused environment. After another uncertain year, he applied to teach reading and English at Woodbridge High School but did not even receive an interview, despite his two relevant master’s degrees. Then a long-term substitute opening at Laguna Hills High School offered work in reading classes while the regular teacher was on maternity leave. Sinay found an impressive vocabulary program, did well with students, and was told he might be hired full-time—until an administrator called him too expensive. The English department, he learned, largely consisted of athletic coaches who taught English, and the school wanted him to coach as well.

At Valencia High School, where he remained for twenty-six years, Sinay began as a reading teacher with a master’s degree in reading but found no reading lab, no books for sustained silent reading, and no real curriculum. The room he inherited contained little more than a desk and worksheets. He gradually built a program himself, buying books with his own money, establishing vocabulary work, and giving students regular opportunities to read at a level they could manage. He urged the district to seek Title I funding for disadvantaged students, but it declined to pursue the grant. When school testing later showed that the lowest-performing

quartile was the only group making substantial gains, the vice-principal credited Sinay's reading classes. Sinay argued for a schoolwide independent-reading program, but the school would not put him in charge of reading, and he eventually left the program. The following year, the scores in that quartile fell and continued to decline. To him, the episode showed how weak leadership could undo effective work and deny students the support they needed.

His experience teaching literature at Valencia sharpened his doubts about what English classes were meant to accomplish. Literature, he believed, could develop cultural knowledge, expose students to rich language, and offer material for thoughtful discussion and writing. But those benefits depended on students being able to engage with the books. Seniors studying British literature, for instance, were asked to move from Beowulf and Chaucer through Shakespeare and later writers, often without the historical knowledge needed to make the works meaningful. Sinay explained that literature could teach students about a society's history and authors, and that writing about what they read could strengthen their language. At the same time, he questioned whether works far beyond students' reading abilities actually improved literacy. Teaching a demanding text without attending to readiness, he argued, could make comprehension collapse rather than expand.

His criticism was not that literature had no place, but that literary terminology could take priority over understanding. Students did not need to master every label for a poetic device before they could consider a poem's meaning. More useful questions might include who is speaking, who is being addressed, and what the words mean in context. Sinay also read aloud to students, giving characters distinct voices, modeling pace and fluency, and helping students pronounce unfamiliar words. He taught vocabulary from the works being read rather than handing out detached lists. In his view, a strong literature program should be organized across all four years, adjusted to students' levels, and paired with independent reading. Students needed books they could actually read, including accessible choices such as John Steinbeck, rather than being pushed into works whose language shut them out.

Writing instruction at Valencia brought another conflict. After joining the senior English group, Sinay found that students spent an entire semester writing a project comparing two poems, a task he regarded as poor preparation for college composition. Drawing on his community-college teaching, he proposed instead an MLA-style argumentative research paper, supported by sources and designed to develop critical thinking. The department chair objected when Sinay said he would replace the old assignment, and one colleague broke down in tears. The principal ultimately let Sinay teach his own paper for a year, on the condition that he train the other teachers to use it. The project prepared students for the documented arguments required in college; many former students later recognized its value in freshman English. Sinay's broader point was that high schools needed to ask local colleges what students would be expected to write, then build assignments toward those demands.

The practices he wanted from an English department extended beyond any single assignment. Courses needed shared outlines, lesson plans, tests, and materials, so new teachers would not have to invent a curriculum alone. Departments needed common rubrics so students' writing would not receive wildly different grades from one teacher to another. They should plan a coherent sequence of writing across four years, teach the writing process, and address grammar and usage in students' drafts rather than through repetitive isolated drills. Reading and writing labs, a sustained independent-reading program, and Title I support where eligible could give students the books, instruction, and time their literacy development required. Department leaders, he argued, should understand current research, support teacher learning, and prepare students for college rather than simply preserve familiar routines.

Sinay also called for changes in teacher preparation. Colleges should offer distinct paths for students who want to study literature and those who intend to teach English in secondary schools. Future teachers needed preparation in the literature they would teach, but also in rhetoric, composition, reading, vocabulary, comprehension, and the teaching of different genres. Education departments should train them to assess essays consistently, teach grammar in the context of writing, and choose appropriate teaching approaches. The aim was to prepare teachers for literacy instruction, not merely to reproduce the training of literature specialists.

His move into college teaching began while he was still working in schools. At Cypress College, starting in 1978, he taught a four-unit "back-to-college" course for students entering or returning to higher education. It combined reading, writing, and study skills. Sinay taught students to build paragraphs and essays, read textbooks and magazine articles, skim, scan, and annotate, manage their time, and take notes from books and lectures. For study skills, he used Walter Pauk's How to Study in College. The class appealed at first to homemakers returning to education, then increasingly to younger students who had heard that it was useful. Sinay believed such a course should be standard, even mandatory, because it gave students a foundation for college work.

At Cypress, he also noticed that most English instructors held degrees in literature, not composition, reading, or study skills. A literature master's, he argued, did not automatically prepare someone to teach writing. He supplemented his own background by taking composition courses at UC Irvine. Meanwhile, he learned how precarious college employment could be. A high-school friend had warned him that full-time hiring depended more on personal connections than teaching ability, and Sinay saw a colleague secure a position despite appearing unable to plan or conduct a lesson. Part-time teachers, he found, were expected to defer to full-time faculty, who could influence whether they were hired again. His own evaluations at Cypress were excellent, but no full-time position opened during his five-and-a-half years there.

In the summer of 1987, Cerritos College hired him to teach a prerequisite composition course, much of it focused on grammar for students learning English as a second language. He encouraged students to read more and write in journals about what they read, even though the course itself centered on grammar. While preparing lessons in the library, he overheard a full-time instructor assuring a part-time teacher that she would get an upcoming job because the arrangements had already been made. The conversation persuaded Sinay that he was being used as a candidate to make the hiring process appear open. He withdrew his application the next day, finished his summer teaching assignment, and did not apply there again. An administrator who observed his class praised his ability to connect with students, yet the experience left him questioning whether strong teaching and qualifications could outweigh a hiring decision already settled behind the scenes.

At Saddleback College, I began teaching composition in 1983 after the English department chair first directed me to Irvine Valley College for a part-time position. There, the department head ignored my calls and messages, and I later learned that he and the Saddleback chair were at odds. Months afterward, Saddleback needed instructors for a growing number of courses and hired me by phone. I worked to establish myself, teaching first-year composition and other writing classes, while learning how much college hiring depended on personal connections.

The hiring process appeared orderly on paper: committees scored applications, interviewed candidates, and sent their top choices to the president and vice president. But friends could be given high scores at every stage, making an inside candidate look like the strongest applicant. When Saddleback advertised two half-time positions combining reading and composition, I interviewed before a committee made up only of English faculty. The jobs went to two women who already had relationships with committee members, although I held master’s degrees in both English and reading and the posting required composition teaching. Years later, I applied for a full-time reading-and-English position after teaching successfully at the college for nearly six years. I made the final two, and the president acknowledged my strong reputation, but she selected a woman who had recently moved from Texas. A department chair told me I had been the best candidate and believed the president was seeking to hire women.

Another English position went to a friend of committee members who had not yet taught a college class. I challenged the hire directly with the president, who insisted that she, not the committee, had made the decision. The dispute exposed deeper conflict over hiring, and faculty members eventually raised concerns about a run of appointments favoring women. A district board member later asked me to describe what I had witnessed. My account helped prompt a new hiring system intended to reduce bias, cronyism, and nepotism. By then, I had moved on, but the experience confirmed how damaging opaque hiring could be to a department and its students.

Santa Ana College, where I taught from 1990 to 1993 and again from 1995 to 2007, presented a different problem: its students needed reading support, but the college had no substantial reading program or lab. Many arrived from underprivileged communities without the language preparation college demanded. Yet placement relied on a grammar test, and students who scored poorly could be required to take as many as three grammar-heavy courses before freshman English. Passing a test of grammar knowledge, Sinay argues, does not establish a student's writing ability or reading level. A reading test and a writing sample would reveal more, while properly placed students could build vocabulary, comprehension, and the ability to handle college texts through reading instruction.

Sinay taught some of those grammar classes and remembered students asking why they were studying rules that did not help them communicate. He advised them to read material they could understand, then write about it and keep a journal, even though the department required him to follow its grammar-centered curriculum. Santa Ana did have a well-organized writing program that taught writing as a process, but Sinay believed its remedial courses should replace isolated grammar drills with substantial reading and writing, including paragraph development, sentence combining, and sentence modeling.

At Rancho Santiago College, now Santiago Canyon College, the hiring interview itself revealed the department's priorities. The committee tested candidates on five sentences containing supposed grammatical errors. Sinay spotted four but could not identify one. He regarded the exercise as a misplaced measure of an English teacher's fitness: knowledge of grammar puzzles mattered less than knowing how to teach students to write. He was asked little about writing instruction, and no one asked whether students practiced drafting, feedback, and revision. The college had a learning center, but no dedicated reading or writing lab, leaving students with weak skills without the systematic support he considered essential.

At Fullerton College, where he taught in the reading department, returning to his alma mater brought back the encouragement of his counselor, Richard Schultz, who had once motivated him with a hamburger-and-shake wager for good grades. The division dean hired Sinay without an interview, and he taught there for a year. When a reading position opened, he interviewed but did not reach the final round. He believed that a panelist's hostility and the successful candidate's connections had determined the outcome; the dean nevertheless told him he was well qualified. The episode echoed his wider experience that strong classroom evaluations and relevant credentials did not always outweigh insider relationships.

Moving with his wife to Colorado Springs gave Sinay one last chance to see how another state's colleges taught English. At Pikes Peak Community College, he taught two classes and substituted for absent professors, allowing him to observe instruction across the department. He found that instructors often taught the names of argumentative fallacies without requiring students to construct arguments. In one class, students were studying argumentation halfway

through the semester but had not written an essay taking a position. A department presentation offered an expository assignment as a model, further blurring the difference between explaining a subject and arguing a claim. Sinay's view was that students needed to develop a thesis, support it with evidence, document sources, and practice the entire task through multiple drafts.

He also found writing treated as a finished product rather than a process. Students, he insisted, should generate and organize ideas, draft, share work for feedback, revise, edit, and submit. The course documents supplied to him were cluttered with overlapping objectives, outcomes, competencies, and outlines; clear shared materials and lesson plans would have served instructors and students better. A transitional reading-and-writing course left him uncertain about the college's reading curriculum. When he asked what reading skills he should teach, the department co-chair could not answer. In his judgment, students needed a genuine reading program, with instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, textbook reading, and strategies such as skimming and scanning. He also criticized the college's division, which combined English and mathematics under one dean, and its reliance on part-time faculty, some of whom appeared unprepared to teach composition.

From these experiences, Sinay sets out the qualities he believes community-college English departments need. They should distinguish among composition, literature, and reading instruction, and hire instructors prepared for each. Composition teachers must know rhetoric and teach varied forms of writing, especially documented argument; literature specialists should teach literature, and reading specialists should lead reading programs. Departments should provide reading and writing labs, assess entering students with reading measures and writing samples rather than relying on grammar tests, and offer introductory courses that develop reading, writing, and study skills. Students should be prepared for the work required at four-year colleges, including MLA-style research and argument papers, and departments should consult universities about the writing expected after transfer.

Just as important are shared course outlines, lesson plans, and reliable rubrics, so new and part-time instructors can teach coherently rather than inventing the curriculum alone. Departments should support ongoing professional learning, keep up with research, and reduce their dependence on part-time instructors. Hiring should be transparent and based on the best-qualified candidates, not personal networks. Sinay's own career ended in 2018 after twenty-eight years of part-time college teaching; he never secured the full-time position he had sought. Yet his final appeal is directed beyond his own disappointments: students' literacy depends on institutions choosing purposeful reading and writing instruction over inherited routines. Reading, meaningful writing, thoughtful feedback, and revision—not grammar drills detached from language in use—are the work through which students can become more capable readers and writers.

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