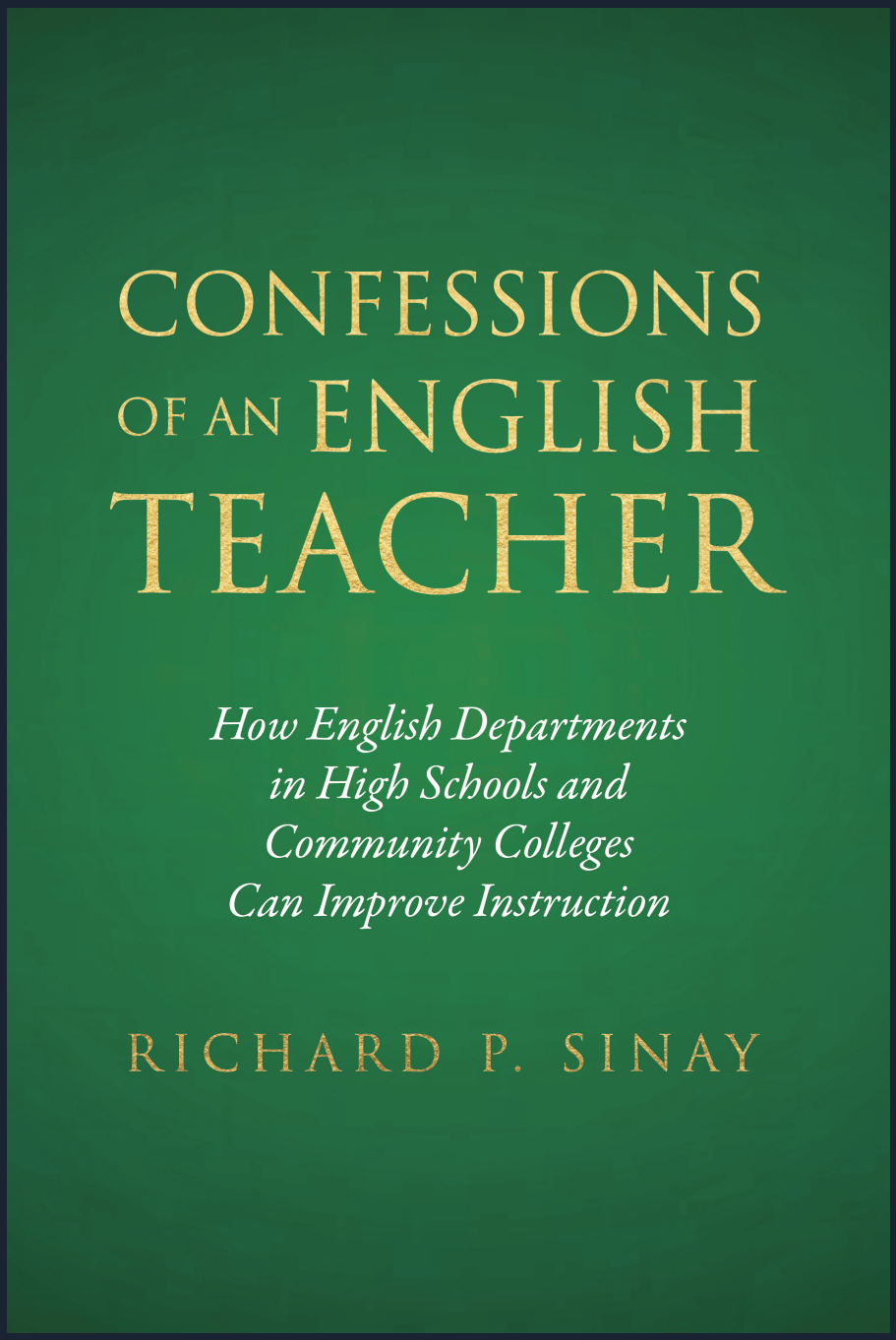
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Confessions of an English Teacher Book 2

Richard Sinay

BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 2

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• English departments should coordinate instruction across grade levels instead of leaving each teacher to design an isolated, inconsistent curriculum.

• Students who read below grade level need targeted support, including Title I programs, reading specialists, and reading labs—not simply more literature assignments or grammar drills.

• Independent reading builds literacy when students can choose books suited to their current reading abilities and are encouraged to progress toward more challenging material.

• Vocabulary is best taught in the context of authentic reading, where students can infer and understand words through the sentences and ideas surrounding them.

• Writing should be taught as a process: students generate ideas, organize, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit rather than merely submit an assignment for a grade.

• Grammar and usage instruction should be connected to students' own writing; the author argues that isolated grammar drills do not reliably improve composition.

• High school and community college writing programs should prepare students for the work they will actually encounter in college, including documented research and literary essays.

- Shared rubrics, assessment plans, course outlines, and lesson materials make expectations clearer for students and help teachers maintain continuity.
- Community colleges should improve placement practices, hire more composition and reading specialists, and reduce excessive reliance on part-time instructors.
- The author sees educational leadership, fair hiring, and professional collaboration as essential to sustaining literacy-focused English programs.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is especially useful for high-school and community-college English teachers, department chairs, literacy specialists, teacher educators, and administrators responsible for curriculum, staffing, or student placement. Readers will find concrete proposals for coordinating writing programs, teaching revision, selecting accessible reading, assessing growth, supporting students who are behind, and preparing students for college-level work. The memoir-like examples make the recommendations vivid, though the author's strong claims are best read as arguments grounded in his experience and assessed alongside current research and local circumstances. Unlike books focused narrowly on writing pedagogy or literacy research, Confessions of an English Teacher connects classroom practices to department organization and institutional policy. It ranges from contextual vocabulary and reading labs to faculty hiring, adjunct ratios, and transfer preparation. It may be most valuable as a discussion starter for departments seeking shared standards and better collaboration, particularly when paired with more research-focused resources on composition, reading instruction, assessment, and equitable teaching.

Chapter Summaries

Preface

Richard P. Sinay presents the book as a practical follow-up to his memoir, drawing on decades of work at six high schools and seven community colleges, as well as training in English, reading, and education. His goal is to turn his observations into recommendations for improving English instruction and department operations, while inviting discussion rather than claiming to have every answer. The preface's central example is a department meeting where Sinay proposed a coordinated writing program, including MLA-style research papers across high school grade levels. A principal praised the ideas, but no department follow-up occurred. For Sinay, this illustrates how promising improvements can disappear when departments lack ownership, leadership, or sustained collaboration.

Introduction to High School Recommendations

The author previews four areas for high school improvement: reading, writing, literature and nonfiction, and department organization. He advocates Title I support and reading labs for students who are significantly behind, alongside independent reading and vocabulary instruction tied to texts. For writing, he calls for a coordinated four-year program that teaches composition as a process, uses consistent evaluation, connects grammar and usage to actual writing, and prepares students for college assignments. He also argues that departments should provide course outlines and lesson plans, assess student growth, appoint qualified leaders, and hire and mentor strong teachers.

Chapter 1: Great English Departments Have a Title I Reading Program and a Reading Lab

Sinay argues that secondary schools eligible for Title I funding should use it to support students reading well below grade level. In the programs he observed at Fullerton, Buena Park, and Troy high schools, reading labs offered focused opportunities to read, hear stories, build vocabulary, and improve comprehension. He contrasts those programs with a district he says failed to pursue funding and even eliminated junior-high reading classes, leaving students less prepared for high school. Drawing on his own reading classes, the author says students' growth can be measured and that a dedicated lab and reading specialist can make a meaningful difference. He also recommends regular reading time across subjects, describing an economics teacher whose students read the Wall Street Journal and raised questions that enriched instruction. The chapter's practical lesson is to treat reading support as a schoolwide responsibility rather than an optional extra.

Chapter 2: Great English Departments Establish an Independent Reading Program

Sinay presents independent reading as a sustained way to improve literacy and academic achievement. He recalls how a high-school teacher's list of recommended books prompted him to read widely, beginning with accessible authors such as John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway before tackling more difficult classics. His experience led him to offer students quarterly reading choices, a classroom library, and conversations that checked comprehension and encouraged further reading. He proposes that departments build a common program around students' reading levels, a varied library, incentives or credit, and a clear way to assess completed books. Teachers can combine independent reading with sustained silent reading and model the habit themselves. The author stresses gradual challenge: students should begin with texts they can manage and move upward, rather than being discouraged by books far beyond their current vocabulary and comprehension.

Chapter 3: Great English Departments Have a Context-Based Vocabulary Program

The chapter challenges the routine of assigning disconnected vocabulary lists. Sinay argues that students learn words more effectively when they encounter them in meaningful sentences and authentic texts, where context helps them infer meaning. He draws on the idea of a “psycholinguistic guessing game”: readers use surrounding clues to understand unfamiliar language, and repeated reading strengthens that ability. As an alternative, he recommends selecting important words from the literature and other materials students are actually studying, introducing them in context, and checking understanding through discussion or assessment. A coordinated, grade-level vocabulary plan would make instruction consistent and relevant. In his view, weekly memorization and matching tests may reward short-term recall without producing the durable language growth that contextual learning can encourage.

Chapter 4: Great English Departments Have English Teachers Who Know Reading

Sinay distinguishes teaching literature from teaching reading. He argues that English teachers often assign and interpret texts without having the training to assess reading levels, diagnose comprehension difficulties, or select materials by readability. Reading specialists, by contrast, are trained to measure vocabulary and comprehension and to address students’ particular needs. The author urges English teachers to learn more about readability, comprehension questioning, and language development. He recommends matching independent-reading books to students’ abilities, giving students who are far behind additional reading support, and reading aloud to model pronunciation, pacing, and rhythm. He also suggests that teacher preparation should include more coursework in reading, writing, and language acquisition—not only literature.

Chapter 5: Great English Departments Have an Established Writing Program

Sinay argues that writing instruction should be planned across all four years of high school so students encounter increasingly demanding forms rather than isolated assignments. He particularly recommends a progressively longer MLA-style research paper, with students learning documentation, research, and argument at each grade level. He describes a program in which the paper grew from a short freshman assignment to a ten-page senior paper with increasing source requirements. The chapter also calls for instruction in literary essays and other forms, but emphasizes that assigning a paper is not the same as teaching students to write it. Teachers should guide students in developing a thesis, selecting evidence, organizing ideas, and using a process to reach a finished paper. Sinay criticizes the “do-your-own-thing” approach in which students’ preparation depends on which teacher they happen to have, and recommends department collaboration informed by the writing students will meet in college.

Chapter 6: Great English Departments Teach Writing as a Process

The author describes a shift from treating writing as a one-time assignment toward teaching it as a sequence of decisions and revisions. In the older approach he recalls, students received a prompt, submitted a paper, and got it back covered in corrections, with little opportunity for feedback or rewriting. Sinay argues that this made teachers critics of completed work rather than instructors who help students learn how to write. A process-based classroom can guide students through generating and narrowing ideas, outlining, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing. Sinay draws parallels with professional writers, who often produce multiple drafts and seek responses from readers. He recommends that departments make composition teaching a continuing topic of professional learning and give students structured practice with feedback and revision before expecting them to work independently.

Chapter 7: Great English Departments Have a Consistent Writing Evaluation Program

Sinay traces writing evaluation from red-ink corrections and separate content and grammar grades to rubrics, while arguing that both approaches can fail when teachers use them inconsistently. He recounts a department exercise in which teachers gave the same essay grades ranging from A to F, sometimes based on highly subjective impressions rather than clearly stated criteria. Such variation, he says, leaves students unsure what quality means and can damage their confidence. The author attributes inconsistency to teachers' isolation, inadequate preparation, and weak department leadership. He recommends common assignments and shared evaluation tools for each grade level, with teachers comparing how they apply rubrics and discussing student work together. A consistent system, in his view, can make assessment more transparent and professional while giving students feedback they can use to improve future writing.

Chapter 8: Great English Departments Know How to Teach Grammar

Sinay argues against teaching traditional grammar as a separate subject through repeated textbook exercises. Drawing on George Hillocks's research and Patricia A. Dunn's discussion, he claims that isolated instruction in parts of speech, clauses, and sentence types does not improve writing and may sometimes make it worse. He recounts how the research changed his own views, even as grammar-heavy courses remained common in schools and colleges. Instead, he recommends teaching grammatical choices while students revise their own sentences. Students can correct misplaced modifiers, experiment with sentence patterns, and combine short sentences to make their writing more varied and precise. Reading and writing, rather than drills detached from composition, should provide the foundation for language growth. The practical aim is not to abandon grammar entirely but to make it useful by addressing it in the work students are producing.

Chapter 9: Great English Departments Organize the Teaching of Usage

The chapter distinguishes usage—the conventional choice and form of words—from grammar, noting that everyday complaints about writing often concern usage rather than sentence structure. Sinay points to commonly confused words such as “there,” “their,” and “they’re,” and argues that handbooks often relegate such matters to a glossary instead of providing systematic instruction. He proposes that departments identify frequent usage errors, organize instruction across the high-school years, and revisit the terms as students revise their writing. For example, students can check their use of commonly confused words in a later draft, applying instruction directly to their own sentences. The author treats reference books as useful resources but argues that students need guided practice, not merely access to definitions.

Chapter 10: Great English Departments Know What Writings Colleges Require

Sinay recounts joining a senior English team whose long-running project asked students to compare poetic devices in two poems over an entire semester. He questioned whether the assignment prepared students for college writing, especially because it emphasized naming devices rather than making and supporting an interpretive argument. Students disliked the project, and Sinay believed the paper did not transfer well to the writing required in college. After making his case to the principal, Sinay was allowed to introduce an argumentative MLA-style research paper based on the assignments he had taught in community college. He then helped colleagues develop arguments, research claims, and use MLA documentation. The chapter’s central recommendation is that departments consult the colleges their students will attend and teach writing that serves those students’ next educational steps, rather than preserving a project simply because it is traditional.

Chapter 11: Great English Departments Teach Essays for the College-Bound

The author argues that college-bound students need guided instruction in both literary analysis and scholarly writing. Using The Catcher in the Rye as an example, he describes helping students move from reading and drawing conclusions to developing a thesis and supporting it with evidence. He contrasts this teaching with the practice of assigning an essay on a work such as Hamlet without explaining how to plan or structure it. Sinay also presents literary writing as a way to understand historical context, social experience, and human behavior. His discussion of To Kill a Mockingbird illustrates how a novel can help students consider racism and injustice in a particular time and place. He recommends using reading as a stimulus for writing: interpretation generates ideas, and writing in turn deepens students’ engagement with the text.

Chapter 12: Great English Departments Have Writing Labs

Sinay describes a writing lab as both an instructional resource and a matter of educational access. Students need a place where they can draft, revise, use word-processing tools, and receive feedback; students without a computer at home especially benefit. He recommends locating the lab near the library, ensuring it is supervised, and making it available before, during, and after school, with class visits arranged when useful. A lab can support the writing process by allowing students to produce several drafts and get responses before submitting a final version. Writing software may also help students notice spelling, usage, and sentence-level issues, though the author presents these tools as aids rather than replacements for instruction. He argues that high schools should give students access to the kind of writing support they will encounter in college.

Chapter 13: Great English Departments Have a Well-Organized Literature and Nonfiction Reading Program

Sinay recalls reading a large number of classic works during high school and describes literature as a major part of English instruction. He outlines the traditional organization in which students study short stories, poetry, novels, and plays, followed by chronological surveys of American and British literature. While recognizing the value of literature, he argues that the sheer volume and difficulty of assigned texts can make the program inaccessible to some students. He recommends choosing texts with attention to students' backgrounds, interests, and reading abilities, rather than treating traditional titles as mandatory for every class. He also calls for more nonfiction and informational reading, in keeping with contemporary standards, and says departments should consider readability, relevance, and engagement when selecting materials. The goal is a balanced program in which literature remains important but is not the only route to literacy.

Chapter 14: Great English Departments Provide Course Descriptions, Course Outlines, and Lesson Plans for All Regular Courses

Sinay describes helping a new teacher who planned to teach Huckleberry Finn without realizing that the course was organized chronologically around periods in American literature. The encounter revealed to him that the department had not clearly explained its curriculum. He also describes teachers spending extended periods on a single work or selecting content independently, despite shared course expectations. He recommends that departments give new teachers course descriptions, outlines, lesson plans, and assessments, allowing them to begin teaching effectively while they continue developing their own materials. Shared documents provide structure, help students know what to expect, and reduce needless reinvention. Sinay compares a course outline to an agreement between teacher and students: teachers should cover the planned material, and students should know what they are expected to learn.

Chapter 15: Great English Departments Establish an Assessment Program

The author argues that English departments should measure student growth instead of relying solely on broad standardized tests. Reading tests can track vocabulary and comprehension, while writing can be assessed through comparable beginning- and end-of-course samples scored with the same rubric. Sinay describes using pretests and posttests in college composition and says students' writing improved over a semester of regular essays and research work. He also proposes measuring language and literary knowledge, including usage, mechanics, grammar taught in context, and terminology students encounter in literature. Departments can create shared, criterion-referenced assessments based on what they teach. Such evidence, he argues, helps teachers understand which instruction is working, demonstrates student learning to families and the public, and offers a more direct view of classroom progress than a single standardized measure.

Chapter 16: Great English Departments Need a Leader with a Master's Degree in English, Composition, or Reading

Sinay views the English department chair as the curriculum leader responsible for organizing instruction, supporting teachers, and keeping the department informed about research and practice. He recommends advanced expertise in English, composition, or reading so that the chair can guide course design, writing assessment, reading instruction, and the development of materials for new teachers. The chair should lead discussions on current approaches such as process writing and rubric-based assessment, provide professional-development opportunities, and build unity through useful department meetings. Sinay also places responsibility for staffing on the chair, arguing that honors courses need well-qualified teachers and that hiring should prioritize merit and fair representation. In his view, weak leadership can leave a department fragmented and students poorly served.

Chapter 17: Great English Departments Have Honors Teachers with a Master's in English

Sinay argues that honors and Advanced Placement students should be taught by teachers with substantial graduate-level preparation in literature. He believes advanced study equips teachers to explain literary works in greater depth and to guide students through literary analysis, thesis development, and documented research. The chapter also raises a concern about placing underprepared teachers in advanced classes: students may recognize gaps in instruction but feel unable to challenge the situation, particularly when their grades are at stake. Sinay's recommendation is that schools establish strong qualifications for honors teaching so that advanced students receive instruction commensurate with their needs and college ambitions.

Chapter 18: Great English Departments Hire the Best Candidates

The author argues that the quality of an English department depends in part on hiring the strongest available candidates. Recalling applications and hiring practices he observed, he criticizes nepotism and cronyism, which can prevent better-qualified applicants from receiving consideration and weaken instruction for students. Sinay urges public schools to use fair, merit-based hiring and to consider the needs and composition of the student body when building a staff. He acknowledges that some former students can become excellent teachers but warns against treating personal connections or school affiliation as substitutes for qualifications. The chapter's main principle is that public education should select staff for their ability to serve students, not their relationships with decision-makers.

Introduction to Community College and English Department Recommendations

Sinay introduces community college reforms that he believes would improve student learning and transfer readiness. His proposals include creating course outlines and lesson plans for part-time instructors, aligning writing assignments with four-year college expectations, hiring more composition and reading specialists, and correcting the heavy dependence on part-time faculty. He also calls for fairer hiring, courses that help new or returning students adjust to college, improved placement, and reading departments with labs. The introduction frames these recommendations as challenges to entrenched practices, especially grammar-based remediation and staffing patterns that, in the author's view, do not adequately support students.

Community College Chapter 1: English Departments Should Establish Course Outlines and Lesson Plans for Part-Time Instructors

Sinay argues that community college departments should provide part-time instructors with clear course outlines, syllabi, and teaching materials. He recounts substituting for instructors who seemed uncertain about course expectations and suggests that shared materials would make instruction more consistent, especially given high turnover among adjunct faculty. He also questions the practice of hiring literature specialists to teach composition without adequate preparation in composition pedagogy. Because community college English courses commonly focus on writing, he advocates hiring and supporting teachers who know how to teach writing. Course materials should prepare students for subsequent study, including documented research writing, rather than leaving individual instructors to make disconnected choices.

Community College Chapter 2: English Departments Should Know What Writings Four-Year Colleges Assign

The author argues that community colleges should coordinate their writing instruction with the expectations of the four-year institutions to which students transfer. He points to California's transfer system and its writing requirements as an example of colleges specifying the

preparation students need. Sinay highlights the MLA-style research paper as a key assignment for first-year English students. Drawing on his own transfer experience and teaching, he describes the difficulty of learning research-paper conventions independently after arriving at a university. He recommends that community colleges review transfer requirements and assessments, then ensure their courses teach the kinds of writing students will need. The principle is to prepare students for their next academic setting rather than focusing only on assignments convenient for a single course.

Community College Chapter 3: English Department Should Hire More Composition and Reading Instructors

Sinay distinguishes expertise in literary study from expertise in teaching composition. He argues that many community college English instructors are trained primarily in literature even though they teach large numbers of writing classes. He recommends hiring more instructors with preparation in composition and encouraging teachers to pursue professional learning through programs such as the National Writing Project. Based on his observations as a substitute, he says students were often given assignments without being guided through brainstorming, drafting, feedback, and revision. He also questions some assignments when their connection to future college work is unclear. In his view, departments should select writing tasks for their educational value and ensure instructors can teach them as skills rather than simply assign and grade them.

Community College Chapter 4: Community Colleges Need to Change the Part-Time to Full-Time Ratios Significantly

The chapter criticizes community colleges' reliance on part-time instructors, which Sinay believes undermines continuity and can reduce instructional quality. He cites California's stated goal of a 75-to-25 ratio of full-time to part-time faculty and references reporting that districts have not consistently met that goal or used allocated resources as intended. Sinay recounts seeing part-time instructors hired with limited preparation or uncertainty about their subjects, while recognizing that the issue is structural rather than a judgment on every adjunct. He argues that colleges need more full-time faculty to strengthen mentoring, coordination, and accountability. In his view, laws and targets have limited effect when institutions can continue relying heavily on contingent staff.

Community College Chapter 5: Community Colleges Need to Control the Nepotistic and Cronyistic Hiring

Sinay argues that hiring friends and relatives can put unqualified instructors in front of students and undermine public confidence. He recounts examples from colleges he knew: an instructor who struggled to prepare lessons and another hire whose writing ability, in his judgment, was inadequate for teaching English. He says such appointments can persist long enough to become difficult to address. The author calls for transparent, merit-based hiring and

recounts that at least one college took steps to prohibit hiring friends and relatives. His broader point is that public colleges owe students and taxpayers a fair selection process focused on teaching ability and qualifications, not personal relationships with department leaders.

Community College Chapter 6: Why a Reintroduction to Community College Class Is Important

Sinay recommends a course that helps new and returning students adapt to college expectations. Based on his experience teaching such a class at Cypress College, he says it can combine reading, writing, and study skills in a practical introduction to academic work. Students can learn how to read textbooks, skim and scan, improve comprehension, develop paragraphs and theses, vary sentence structures, and avoid common usage errors. The course should also teach time management, outlining, brainstorming, and planning. Using ideas from Walter Pauk's How to Study in College, Sinay emphasizes organization as a way to help students balance several courses and make progress toward a degree.

Community College Chapter 7: Community College English Teachers Shouldn't Teach Isolated Grammar and Should Teach Writing

Sinay criticizes community college sequences that place students in grammar-heavy prerequisite courses based on the results of grammar tests. He recounts being placed in a low-level course himself, then advancing after a writing sample demonstrated his ability. He argues that grammar scores do not reliably show how well someone writes and that teaching more isolated grammar to students who score poorly is a misguided remedy. The alternative he advocates is instruction centered on reading and writing, with grammar and usage addressed during feedback and revision. He extends this recommendation to English-language learners, describing how reading accessible but challenging material and writing about it can build language ability. The chapter calls for departments to replace grammar-heavy remediation with opportunities to read, compose, and receive useful guidance.

Community College Chapter 8: English Departments Need to Improve the Assessment of Students Entering College

This chapter focuses on placement: Sinay argues that grammar tests do not accurately identify students' writing abilities and may penalize those whose high schools provided little grammar instruction. He says students should not be assigned to lengthy prerequisite courses on the basis of a measure that does not directly evaluate composition. He considers a writing sample the most direct assessment, while acknowledging that reading tests may be a more practical alternative when writing samples are difficult to evaluate at scale. He also recommends allowing students to demonstrate their ability early in a course and move to a higher level when warranted. The central aim is accurate placement that gives students

appropriate instruction without making them repeat unnecessary coursework.

Community College Chapter 9: Why Every Community College Needs a Reading Department and Reading Lab

Sinay argues that community colleges need dedicated reading departments, specialist instructors, and labs to help students strengthen vocabulary, comprehension, and academic reading. He links the need to declining literacy and describes how students who have not developed strong reading skills may struggle with college coursework. He also emphasizes the importance of reading aloud to children and of home reading habits, while recognizing that colleges must respond to the skills students bring with them. The author contrasts reading instruction with grammar-heavy remediation, which he believes does not build language proficiency effectively. A reading lab can diagnose individual needs and help students work toward college-level reading through sustained practice with texts, vocabulary, and comprehension. Sinay argues that these programs should be led by trained reading specialists, not treated as an extension of an English department without relevant expertise.

Conclusion

Sinay closes by acknowledging the workload and isolation of English teaching, particularly the extensive marking expected of English teachers. He recaps his high-school recommendations: coordinated writing instruction, process-based composition, consistent assessment, grammar taught in context, reading programs, independent reading, writing labs, thoughtfully selected literature and nonfiction, shared course materials, and qualified departmental leadership. For community colleges, he reiterates the need to support part-time instructors with course materials, align assignments with transfer requirements, hire more composition and reading specialists, improve faculty ratios and hiring practices, help students transition to college, and place students accurately. The conclusion presents the proposals as an invitation to debate and improve practice, grounded in the author's experience rather than as a final or universal blueprint.

Notable Quotes

> *"“The daily reading habit, for instance, overwhelmingly correlates with better reading skills and higher academic achievement.”"*

> *"“This is not teaching writing. This is assigning writing.”"*

> *"“Writers write, get feedback, and rewrite until the paper is as good as one can accomplish in the given period.”"*

> *"“A reading lab is a language growth room.”"*

> *"“Reading becomes writing and that writing fosters another writing.”"*

Full Summary

Richard P. Sinay presents his recommendations as the product of a long career: he taught at six high schools and seven community colleges, and studied English, reading, and education, earning degrees and credentials in all three areas. His purpose, he says, is not to provoke controversy but to start a serious discussion about how English is taught and how English departments operate. A recurring problem is the isolation of classroom teaching: colleagues may work in the same department without knowing what students are being taught from one classroom or grade level to the next.

He recalls a department meeting devoted to improving the curriculum. Sinay proposed a coordinated writing program that would prepare students for college, including instruction in Modern Language Association documentation and a research paper required across all four high school years. The principal praised the idea and expressed interest in developing it, but no follow-up came from the department chair. In practice, only some teachers required the paper. To Sinay, this episode exemplifies why English departments can remain unchanged for decades: teachers may act like independent contractors, each choosing what to teach, while promising ideas go nowhere without collective leadership.

His high school recommendations begin with support for students reading well below grade level. A student two grades behind should receive targeted reading instruction, not be expected to catch up through ordinary literature assignments. Sinay urges eligible schools to seek federal Title I funding, hire a reading specialist, and establish a reading lab. At the high school where he spent much of his career, the Placentia-Yorba Unified School District did not apply for funding during his twenty-six years there. Meanwhile, the district removed reading classes from junior high schools, sending students into high school with even weaker skills. By contrast, Fullerton, Buena Park, and Troy high schools had Title I programs and labs where students could read, listen to stories, and develop vocabulary and comprehension.

Sinay says he saw such programs work. At Valencia, he improvised a reading “lab” in his own classroom and measured students’ progress with the Nelson Reading Test and the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. He says his students made notable gains, although he had to cover about thirty percent of the program’s costs himself. He argues that schools should treat reading as a responsibility throughout the curriculum, too. Sinay advocated giving students fifteen minutes to read in every class, allowing them to explore the subject they were studying. One economics teacher who adopted the practice found students reading The Wall Street Journal and asking questions she had not covered. Reading, he insists, can support learning in every discipline, not just English.

An independent reading program is another department-wide priority. Sinay cites Dana Gioia’s observation that a daily reading habit correlates with stronger reading skills and academic achievement. His own love of reading grew in high school, where he once read

eleven Steinbeck novels during chemistry class and was required to read thirty-two works in English courses. A teacher's list of roughly one hundred classic titles encouraged him to read, though many initially proved too difficult. He began with authors he could manage, especially John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, whose accessible styles let him infer unfamiliar words from context. Starting with readable books, he argues, gave him a path toward more challenging literature.

In his own classes, Sinay offered students a library of more than two hundred novels and asked them to read a book each quarter, sometimes for extra credit. He checked understanding by discussing the book with each student. Crucially, he assessed students' reading levels with the San Diego Quick Assessment and matched them with books they could finish. He divided his collection into easy, medium, and challenging books, and resisted students' requests for books far above their current ability. Readers should be nudged up one step at a time, he says; assigning books randomly or overwhelming students with difficult language can discourage them. He connects this approach, along with reading in class and being read to, to improved test scores among his students, including growth among students who had started in the school's bottom quartile.

Sinay also rejects vocabulary lists detached from reading. He argues that students develop language by encountering words in meaningful sentences and making informed guesses from context, a process he calls the "psycholinguistic guessing game." Citing Kent State professor Timothy Rasinski, he links inadequate vocabulary acquisition to stagnant reading progress. In a context-based program, teachers select important words from the literature students are actually studying, teach them in the sentences where they appear, and check understanding through quizzes or tests connected to the reading. By contrast, the familiar routine of memorizing a weekly list, matching words to definitions, and taking a Friday test rewards memory without ensuring that students can recognize the words in authentic use. Sinay calls for teachers across each grade level to coordinate vocabulary instruction around their readings.

He distinguishes a reading teacher from a literature teacher. English teachers may assign and discuss books, he says, without knowing how to diagnose reading problems, assess comprehension, measure a book's difficulty, or determine whether a student's reading is improving. He wants them to learn more about readability and students' abilities, and to ask comprehension questions after chapters, poems, and other readings. He also advocates reading aloud to students to model pace, rhythm, and pronunciation. Students should have the option not to read aloud in front of the class if that would embarrass them, but they could read privately to the teacher instead. Sinay believes preparation in reading and language acquisition should complement the traditional English teacher's background in literature.

Writing, too, needs coordination across the department. Sinay argues that a four-year program should prepare students for the writing they will encounter in college. He recommends teaching an MLA-style documented research paper every year, with its length and source requirements increasing as students advance. At one school, freshmen wrote a three-page paper, sophomores four or five pages, juniors more than five, and seniors ten pages. The papers developed students' ability to research and support arguments on controversial topics. Students should also learn literary essays, with teachers guiding them through forming a thesis, supporting it with evidence, and completing the work rather than simply assigning a paper. Sinay names several practical guides to writing about literature, including books by Janet E. Gardner, Sylvan Barnet, and Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers.

For Sinay, assigning a composition is not the same as teaching writing. He contrasts the process with his own school experience: students were given an essay topic, submitted a paper, and received it back covered in red ink, with grades for content and grammar. There was no planning, feedback before submission, or chance to revise. Instead, students should generate ideas, narrow their subject, organize their thinking, draft, receive feedback, and revise, as professional writers do. Sinay learned to conference with students through a program connected to the Huntington Beach High School District, where teachers worked with University of Southern California professor Ross Winterowd. Yet, he says, his later department meetings rarely addressed the writing process. He urges departments to make that training a continuing, shared responsibility, because students become stronger writers when they learn to work through drafts and feedback rather than submitting a single attempt for judgment.

Usage errors are often mistaken for grammar problems, though Sinay treats them as distinct. When Jodie Foster complained about younger employees' writing, he argues, she was pointing not only to spelling but to misuse of language. English teachers, he says, devote considerable attention to grammar while leaving usage as a short glossary, if they address it at all. H. Ramsey Fowler's The Little, Brown Handbook, for example, places its "Glossary of Usage" near the back, despite the many commonly confused words it covers. Students need more than a list of definitions: they need organized practice using such words correctly. Sinay recommends reviewing frequent errors while students revise their own drafts, so they can check choices such as "there," "their," and "they're" in writing that has meaning to them. A department can sequence this work across the four years of high school, returning to important usage problems and reinforcing correct forms during feedback and revision.

Preparing students for college also requires knowing what they will actually be asked to write. Sinay describes joining the senior English teachers at his high school and discovering their long-running project: students spent a semester comparing two poems, concentrating on devices such as metonymy and personification. The assignment left students dispirited, and Sinay questioned its value. It demanded attention to terminology rather than interpretation,

and, in his experience teaching community-college composition, it did not resemble the writing students would encounter there. He argued that seniors should instead learn to produce an argumentative research paper in Modern Language Association style, with a debatable claim supported by research—the kind of work that would prepare them for college composition.

When Sinay challenged the established poetry paper, the department chair objected, and one teacher became so upset that the dispute reached the principal. Sinay explained that many graduates would attend community colleges, where they would be expected to write research papers, and showed examples of college work. The principal allowed him to teach his alternative for his own students first, then asked him to train the other teachers the following year. Sinay helped colleagues understand how a thesis makes a claim that evidence must support, and the department adopted the research assignment. Students learned MLA documentation and left better prepared for college writing. He later taught the paper to hundreds of seniors, though he laments that his former school eventually stopped requiring it. His broader point is that departments should investigate college expectations rather than assume that literary terminology exercises or any favored assignment will prepare students for the next stage.

College-bound students also need explicit instruction in literary essays. Sinay recalls teaching first-year composition through an analysis of The Catcher in the Rye. Students read the novel, drew conclusions from it, shaped one conclusion into a thesis, and learned to support that thesis with evidence from the text. This is different from simply assigning an analysis, as his own teachers had done when they told students to write about Hamlet without helping them develop ideas, organize an argument, or structure the paper. Writing about literature can deepen students' understanding of the historical and social worlds a work represents. In To Kill a Mockingbird, for instance, students can examine the injustice faced by Tom Robinson and encounter a Southern society shaped by prejudice. Interpreting characters and their circumstances can also cultivate empathy. Reading and writing feed one another, Sinay argues: students' interpretations give rise to papers, and the act of writing encourages further thought.

A writing lab can make this teaching practical. It gives students a place to draft and revise, and offers access to word-processing tools for those without a computer at home. Sinay recommends locating the lab near the library, with a monitor, and making it available before, during, and after school; classes could also schedule visits. Programs such as Grammarly can help students notice possible changes in sentences, spelling, mechanics, and usage. Most importantly, a lab supports multiple drafts and feedback from instructors or peers. Students can experience revision as an essential part of writing rather than submit their first attempt for a grade. Sinay sees the lab as preparation for college as well as a way to reduce the disadvantage faced by students without their own equipment.

The literature curriculum, meanwhile, should be organized around students' needs rather than inherited assumptions about what every class must read. Sinay recalls the thirty-two works he was expected to read during high school, from Ivanhoe, Animal Farm, and The Pearl to the classics assigned in later grades. Literature dominated English instruction, and textbooks commonly organized early high-school courses around short stories, poetry, novels, and plays, with attention to each genre's terminology. Upper grades often surveyed American and British literature chronologically. Yet long novels and comprehensive surveys can overwhelm students, and a course cannot cover everything. Teachers need to choose selectively, know the readability of assigned works, and consider whether students can connect with the material. Sinay also urges departments to reflect the ethnicity of their students in their choices, rather than treating traditional selections as untouchable. With Common Core emphasizing informational literacy and nonfiction alongside fiction, departments should add suitable nonfiction when textbooks do not provide it. Literature remains important, but it should not crowd out other kinds of reading or be assigned without regard to accessibility and relevance.

Shared course descriptions, outlines, and lesson plans can keep that curriculum coherent. Sinay recounts a new teacher who planned to teach Huckleberry Finn at the start of a junior American literature course. He explained that the course was intended to proceed chronologically, placing the novel in the era of realism; she had not been told this by her colleagues. Elsewhere, teachers might devote an entire quarter to The Crucible or a semester to Hamlet, while others chose their own sequence. Sinay argues that departments should prepare course outlines and lesson plans for regular courses, especially for new teachers. At Fullerton High School, he found files of outlines, lessons, and tests that gave teachers a foundation and helped them begin prepared. A course outline sets expectations for both teacher and students, while shared materials save new instructors from building a curriculum alone. They can then improve the resources rather than reinvent them.

Departments should also assess what students learn, instead of relying only on standardized tests. Reading tests such as the Nelson Reading Test, the Nelson-Denny, or the California Test of Basic Skills can measure vocabulary and comprehension and provide grade-level equivalents. That information can guide reading choices and help determine whether students' skills have grown. Writing can be assessed through a beginning-of-term essay and a later essay scored with the same rubric. Sinay used this method in college classes: students wrote an initial argument, practiced through essays and a research paper, then completed a comparable final task. Departments can also measure vocabulary, usage, mechanics, and literary terminology through tests aligned with what has actually been taught. Such evidence makes student growth visible to teachers, parents, and the public.

For this coordinated work, Sinay argues, the department chair must be a genuine curriculum leader with a master's degree in English, composition, or reading. The chair should know

state standards and the courses taught at every grade level, guide the creation of outlines and lesson plans, and lead professional development on current approaches to writing and assessment. The role includes organizing discussions of college writing expectations, rubrics, revision, and rhetoric, while encouraging teachers to consult professional journals and continue learning. Without informed leadership, Sinay warns, departments can leave instruction to isolated teachers and students bear the cost.

At community colleges, the same need for coordinated instruction becomes especially pressing because part-time instructors often arrive with little guidance and may teach courses whose expectations differ from one classroom to the next. Sinay argues that English departments should provide these instructors with course outlines, syllabi, lesson plans, and teaching materials prepared by experienced full-time faculty. At Pikes Peak Community College, he encountered part-time instructors who were unsure how to teach writing; when he substituted for them, he sometimes found that the class had no clear direction. A shared curriculum would help new teachers begin with a sound structure rather than improvising, and it would give students a more consistent education. Sinay also objects to departments that assign instructors trained primarily in literature to teach composition without preparing them for that work. Since composition dominates much community-college English instruction, departments should be deliberate about hiring teachers qualified to teach it.

That curriculum must also be designed with students' next step in mind. Community colleges should find out what writing four-year colleges require and prepare transferring students accordingly. In California, the University of California system establishes writing expectations for community colleges so students can arrive prepared; among the central assignments is the argumentative research paper in Modern Language Association style. Sinay points to the many writing-intensive courses his daughter encountered at the University of California, Santa Barbara, as evidence that students need durable research and writing skills beyond their first English class. At Pikes Peak, however, he found that freshman English did not require an MLA research paper, and students were instead assigned work such as reflective writing that, in his view, did not adequately prepare them for later college demands. He had faced a similar gap himself: after transferring from Fullerton Community College to Cal State Fullerton, he had to learn the research-paper format largely on his own. A community college that fails to anticipate the writing awaiting its students leaves them to confront a steep learning curve after transfer.

For Sinay, staffing is inseparable from the quality of writing instruction. Many community-college English teachers have degrees in literature, but writing academic papers is not the same as knowing how to teach students to write. He calls for more instructors trained in composition, as well as more reading instructors who can help students develop the language skills needed for college work. He describes observing classes at Pikes Peak where writing was assigned with directions and a deadline, but students were not guided through

generating ideas, drafting, receiving feedback, and revising. That approach sets a task rather than teaching a skill. He also questions assignments such as rhetorical analyses, synthesis papers, proposals, and reflective essays when instructors cannot explain their usefulness for later coursework. In his view, the writing students are asked to do should have a clear purpose and prepare them for the work they will actually encounter.

The reliance on part-time faculty, Sinay argues, compounds these problems. California had set a goal that community colleges maintain a ratio of seventy-five percent full-time instructors to twenty-five percent part-time instructors, but he cites a state auditor's report describing districts that had not met the goal and had used funds intended for full-time faculty elsewhere. He believes students suffer when colleges rely on large numbers of part-time teachers, some of whom are hired with little screening or support. He recalls seeing instructors who could not locate their classrooms, and one who openly admitted not knowing the subject but promised to try. His criticism is not that every part-time teacher is inadequate; he himself taught part-time for many years. Rather, colleges should not make a precarious workforce the foundation of instruction, while limiting part-time faculty's teaching loads and offering them little role in shaping curriculum.

Hiring must also be protected from favoritism. Sinay describes an administrator arranging a teaching job for her boyfriend, who struggled to prepare lessons and whose classes dwindled to only a few students. In another case, a department head hired a friend whose writing and spoken language, in Sinay's judgment, were plainly inadequate for teaching English. He recounts further controversy surrounding another friend hired by the same chair. These examples illustrate his concern that personal loyalty can outweigh competence, leaving students with instructors who would not have been selected through a fair process. He points to a college that prohibited hiring friends and relatives as a better model. Public institutions, he insists, owe students an impartial process that seeks the strongest candidates rather than rewarding connections.

To help students enter college successfully, Sinay recommends a course that reintroduces them to college and teaches reading, writing, and study skills together. He taught such a class at Cypress College for five and a half years and found it useful both for newcomers and for students returning after time away. Reading instruction could include how to work with textbooks, skim and scan, read rapidly, and check comprehension. Writing instruction could develop paragraphs, introductions and conclusions, thesis statements, sentence variety, and sentence combining. Students could also practice common usage distinctions, including "affect" and "effect" and "less" and "fewer." Study skills would address time management, brainstorming, outlining, reading articles, and completing assignments. Drawing on Walter Pauk's How to Study in College, Sinay had students create time-management plans so they could organize their work across courses. Such preparation, he argues, makes the college environment less bewildering and helps students persist.

Sinay’s sharpest criticism of community-college English concerns the use of isolated grammar courses as remediation. He argues that students who struggle with writing need more opportunities to read and write, not years of grammar drills. At the college he attended, a grammar test placed students in different English levels; those who scored poorly could be sent to courses devoted almost entirely to grammar. Yet a writing sample allowed students to challenge their placement. Sinay’s own essay moved him out of the lowest course and, after a further writing sample, into freshman composition, where he completed eight essays and a research paper. He believes the writing itself showed his ability more accurately than the grammar test. In his later teaching, he likewise urged English-as-a-second-language students to read material they could understand but that still challenged them, then write about it. Reading and writing, he argues, build language more effectively than excessive instruction in grammatical terminology.

Placement therefore needs to be based on evidence of students’ actual abilities. A grammar test, Sinay says, cannot reliably measure writing skill, particularly when students have had different instruction in high school. He acknowledges that evaluating writing samples takes time and that colleges may resist the work, but considers a writing sample the clearest basis for placing students in the right course. A reading test can serve as a more practical alternative, since reading ability is related to writing ability. Instructors could also let students demonstrate early in a course that they belong in a higher-level class. The aim is not to punish students for gaps in prior instruction, but to give them instruction suited to their needs. For Sinay, community colleges fulfill their promise when they support students with relevant writing, skilled composition and reading teachers, and fair assessment—so that students can move forward prepared for the academic work ahead.

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