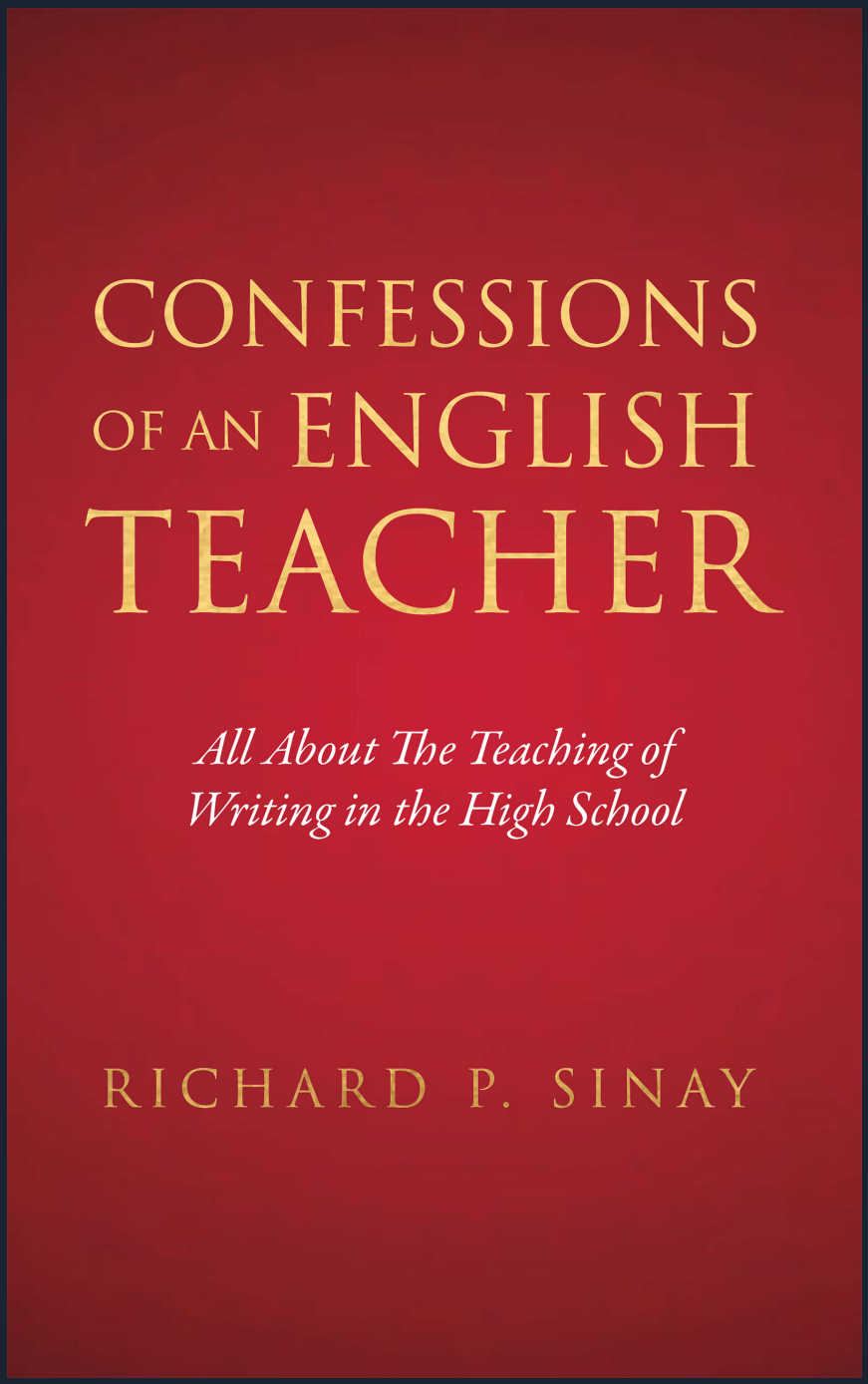
15 min Summary
BookGist.ai



Confessions of an English Teacher Book 4

Richard Sinay

BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 4

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• Sinay argues that many English teachers enter the classroom without formal preparation in composition, because English degrees emphasize literature and teacher-training programs often provide little subject-specific writing pedagogy.

• Writing instruction should be coordinated across all four high-school years, with assignments that build toward the kinds of writing students will encounter in college.

• Teach writing as a process: help students generate ideas, focus a topic, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit instead of simply assigning a paper and grading the finished product.

• Sinay contends that isolated grammar drills do little to improve writing; grammar, usage, and mechanics are more useful when taught in response to students' actual drafts and during editing.

• Reading supplies much of the language and knowledge writers need. Pairing reading with writing gives students material to interpret, discuss, and use as evidence.

• Teachers can make writing instruction more manageable by conferencing selectively, having students practice editing, modeling assignments, and staggering deadlines across classes.

• Assessment should be clear and consistent. Sinay's COLM framework organizes evaluation around content, organization, language, and mechanics, with feedback during drafting taking priority over elaborate grading systems.

• English teachers should write alongside their students and share their own drafting and revision experiences, so writing is demonstrated as a practice rather than treated only as an object to evaluate.

• Departments need shared expectations, mentoring, and ongoing professional learning to reduce inconsistent assignments and grading and to better prepare new teachers.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is especially useful for new and prospective high-school English teachers, English-department chairs, teacher educators, and school leaders responsible for writing curricula. Readers will find concrete ideas for sequencing research assignments, teaching revision and editing, integrating grammar into drafts, giving feedback, and assessing writing with a straightforward framework. Sinay's candid stories also offer a view of the workload, institutional resistance, and professional isolation that can shape the job. Readers of books on composition pedagogy will recognize familiar themes such as writing as a process, the value of feedback, and the connection between reading and writing. Sinay's distinctive contribution is his memoir-like account of trying to apply those principles within a traditional high-school department, particularly through his effort to establish an MLA research-paper sequence. The book is opinionated and grounded in personal experience rather than a comprehensive review of current research, so it works best as a provocation and practical perspective to discuss alongside more formal composition scholarship.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Writing Since the 1960s

Sinay traces writing instruction from the product-focused classrooms of the 1960s, where students submitted essays that teachers marked heavily in red, through the process movement of the 1970s and 1980s. That movement introduced drafting, revision, peer review, conferencing, and portfolios, but, in his account, also left teachers and students unsure how to interpret changing grades and expectations. He then reviews the influence of state standards, high-stakes testing, college-readiness initiatives, and Common Core, which increased emphasis on argument and informational writing. Sinay's central concern is that policy shifts do not ensure effective teaching when instructors have not been trained to teach the writing those policies demand. He also stresses the relationship between reading and writing:

reading gives students language and ideas that they can develop in their own work.

Chapter 2: Why English Teachers Are Not Prepared to Teach Writing

Sinay's central confession is that English teachers often receive little direct preparation in teaching composition. English degrees, he says, generally center on literature, while prospective teachers write literary papers without necessarily being shown how to plan, structure, or teach them. Education programs and subject-methods courses, in his experience, also failed to provide practical instruction in composition pedagogy. He illustrates the problem through his own graduate seminar: a professor could recognize and praise a strong argument, but had not explicitly taught students how to build one. Student teaching is not a dependable remedy if the supervising teacher lacks composition training or time to mentor. Sinay's proposed implication is that universities and schools must make writing instruction a deliberate part of teacher preparation rather than leaving new teachers to learn through trial and error.

Chapter 3: Why the English Department Needs a Writing Program

Sinay argues that writing should be a coordinated department-wide responsibility, not a private activity improvised behind each classroom door. He recounts establishing a sequence of MLA-style research papers: a shorter assignment for freshmen, progressively longer papers in later grades, and a senior argument paper. The sequence was intended to build skills gradually, although some teachers did not implement it because they did not feel equipped to teach the assignment. A shared program, he maintains, can align high-school writing with college expectations, make assignments more coherent, and help teachers learn from one another. He recommends planning a manageable number of meaningful papers across four years, preparing teachers to teach them, and providing mentoring for colleagues who need support. The point is not simply to require more writing, but to ensure students repeatedly practice increasingly demanding forms.

Chapter 4: Why Composition Courses Should Be Part of an English Major

Sinay contends that composition courses belong in English-degree programs, especially for students preparing to teach. Literature study may give future teachers familiarity with texts, but it does not automatically teach them how to write or teach a composition. He recalls learning to construct literary arguments largely by reading scholarly criticism and inferring how those writers developed claims from textual evidence. His own essays on Hemingway illustrate the difference between being able to produce a successful paper and having been taught a reliable method for doing so. A professor recognized and praised his argument, but did not provide a systematic explanation of thesis development or structure. Sinay therefore calls for explicit coursework in composition and literary writing, so future teachers can explain the practices they are expected to teach rather than relying on the same unsupported trial-and-error process they experienced.

Chapter 5: The Effects of No Composition Training

Sinay shows how inadequate preparation can lead teachers to confuse literary assignments with college preparation. He describes a senior project that required students to spend much of a semester comparing poetic devices in two poems. Students disliked the assignment, and Sinay judged it poorly suited to their likely college writing needs, particularly because it did not teach the documented argumentative research paper required in many college courses. He challenged the longstanding assignment and proposed an MLA-style paper arguing a position on a controversial issue. After presenting his case and examples of college writing to the principal, he was permitted to teach the new paper and later helped colleagues adopt it. The episode supports his broader point: without composition training, teachers may reproduce familiar but ineffective assignments. He advocates formal composition coursework and sustained professional learning to help teachers design writing that builds transferable skills.

Chapter 6: The Argument Against Teaching Grammar in Isolation from Writing

Drawing on his high-school and community-college experience, Sinay criticizes remedial courses built primarily around grammar exercises. He argues that placement systems often treat weak grammar-test results as evidence that students cannot write, then require extensive drills that consume time without giving students meaningful practice as writers. He cites research, including George Hillocks Jr.'s work, to support his position that isolated traditional grammar instruction does not reliably improve student writing and may impede it. Sinay's alternative is to give students substantial opportunities to read and write, using grammar references when questions arise rather than making worksheets the centerpiece of instruction. He does not argue that mechanics are irrelevant; rather, he argues they should serve students' writing goals. Teachers can identify recurring problems in drafts and address those directly. The chapter asks educators to reconsider whether grammar exercises are producing better writing or merely occupying instructional time.

Chapter 7: How to Teach Writing as a Process

Sinay defines writing instruction as guiding students through the work of composing, not merely assigning an essay and grading its final form. A useful process can include choosing and narrowing a topic, generating and organizing ideas, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing. He emphasizes that this is not necessarily a rigid formula: writers may use structured planning or discovery writing, in which they write to find out what they think and then reorganize their ideas. His own writing provides an example of repeated drafts and feedback, and he describes how conferencing and collaborative learning helped shape his teaching. He urges English departments to discuss composition regularly and encourages teachers to pursue conferences and training when school leadership does not provide it. A practical classroom principle is to model the process on a shared assignment before expecting students to apply it independently, while keeping the task within a realistic

timeframe.

Chapter 8: How and Where to Get Trained to Teach Writing

This chapter surveys ways teachers can develop composition expertise after entering the profession. Sinay describes attending a University of California, Irvine, summer institute where teachers studied process-based writing instruction, examined student work, and continued learning through follow-up coursework. He also points to the National Writing Project and its local sites as sources of sustained professional development. He names professional organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English and state affiliates, as additional resources, while emphasizing that attending a workshop matters only if teachers bring what they learn back into the classroom and share it with colleagues. Ideally, several teachers from one department would train together, then help establish common practices. Sinay sees this training not as an optional extra but as a remedy for preparation programs that leave teachers without the skills needed to teach composition.

Chapter 9: The Teaching of Grammar in the Context of Writing

Sinay offers classroom examples of grammar and mechanics taught through students' own compositions. Students might combine simple sentences into compound sentences, practice punctuation, check the correct use of "their," "there," and "they're," or revise sentences by adding adjectives, adverbs, and dependent clauses. Such lessons connect terminology to an immediate writing purpose instead of asking students to complete decontextualized exercises. Instruction can also respond to genre: a narrative provides an occasion to teach quotation marks, while an argument offers a reason to practice transitions. Teachers may analyze professional writing as a model, then invite students to notice and try comparable choices. Sinay also uses his young daughter's early command of punctuation, which she attributed to reading, to underscore his conviction that reading supports language development. His practical recommendation is to select grammar lessons based on patterns in students' recent drafts.

Chapter 10: How to Handle the Paper Load

Sinay describes the grading burden created when English teachers are responsible for large numbers of students and argues that this workload can undermine effective writing instruction. He recommends giving feedback during the writing process, including conferences, so that students can use advice before a paper is finished. Because one teacher cannot meet with every student at once, he suggests scheduling feedback across class periods and avoiding assignments that require grading from every class simultaneously. He also asks teachers to make students responsible for editing through shared checklists and peer review, rather than correcting every error themselves. Modeling an assignment before students write it can improve the work and make evaluation more manageable. Sinay argues that the goal is not to maximize the number of essays, but to teach students how to construct them. He further

advocates smaller classes or additional preparation time for English teachers, given the labor involved in reading and responding to student writing.

Chapter 11: The Haphazard Nature of Writing Evaluation

Sinay opens with a departmental exercise in which roughly fifteen teachers graded the same student essay, assigning marks that ranged from an A to an F. Their explanations varied widely; one teacher called a polished essay “too pretentious.” For Sinay, the incident captures how subjective and inconsistent assessment can confuse students and damage their confidence, especially when they cannot understand how a grade follows from the work. He traces that inconsistency to limited preparation, isolated classroom practices, and weak departmental leadership. Portfolios and rubrics, he notes, do not solve the problem automatically if teachers interpret criteria differently or fail to provide meaningful comments. He contrasts inconsistent assessment with organized departments that coordinate curriculum and expectations. His recommendation is for departments to establish shared assignments and clearer evaluation practices so that students encounter more consistent standards across grade levels and classrooms.

Chapter 12: How to Evaluate a Student Essay Using COLM

To make evaluation more transparent, Sinay proposes the COLM framework: content, organization, language, and mechanics. He suggests assigning each category a quarter of the total grade. Content concerns the strength and relevance of ideas and support; organization considers coherence, unity, and transitions; language addresses sentence structure and usage; and mechanics covers areas such as punctuation and spelling. The framework is intended to make expectations visible and keep grading focused rather than turning assessment into an elaborate, confusing exercise. Teachers should explain deductions with reference to the criteria, while students should receive guidance as they draft and revise. Sinay says he used this approach with thousands of high-school and college papers and found it practical and rarely disputed. His larger point is that formative feedback during composition does more to improve a paper than increasingly complicated scoring after submission.

Chapter 13: Showing Students How to Write a Paper Is Teaching Writing

Sinay argues that students learn to write a form by being shown how it works, not by being handed a prompt and left to guess. In his college composition classes, for example, he guided students reading The Catcher in the Rye from drawing an interpretation to shaping a thesis and selecting evidence from the novel. He contrasts that approach with his own college experience of receiving assignments with little instruction on organization or argument. He recommends that high-school and introductory college courses teach both literary essays and documented argumentative research papers, while also considering forms students may need in other disciplines. Research writing requires students to read competing sources, identify

relevant evidence, and develop a position; literary writing requires interpreting a text and supporting that interpretation. Sinay emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing: what students read becomes material for new thinking and further writing. Modeling a paper step by step helps students eventually undertake the process independently.

Chapter 14: English Teachers Should Be Writers

Sinay believes writing teachers should practice writing themselves, rather than serving only as evaluators of student work. When his students wrote an MLA research paper, he wrote one too, shared his drafts, and invited feedback. This allowed students to see that writing involves uncertainty, revision, and collaboration, and that the teacher was subject to the same challenges they faced. He also recommends that teachers experience the path toward publication, even on a small scale, because preparing work for readers makes the demands of writing more tangible. Sinay describes how a large body of exploratory writing eventually became the books in his series, and how outside readers helped him refine manuscripts. His message is that writing is often a process of discovering what one wants to say. Teachers who engage in that process can explain it more credibly and respond with greater understanding to students' difficulties.

Chapter 15: Why What English Teachers Do Matters

Sinay uses stories from former students, acquaintances, and family to examine the public reputation of English teachers. One doctor remembered receiving praise for an essay alongside a C+ grade; another anecdote recounts a teacher who wanted to give a strong paper an F because it seemed pretentious. Such experiences, he argues, leave students uncertain about evaluation and can make writing feel personally threatening. He also recalls people worrying that an English teacher would correct their grammar, and others describing English classes as frustrating because of unpredictable grading, excessive time spent on single texts, or burdensome assignments. Sinay links these reactions to the responsibility teachers have to treat student writing respectfully and make evaluation intelligible. He cites a survey reporting that many students described school-related feelings negatively, using it to encourage educators to examine whether their practices support learning and student well-being.

Chapter 16: How I Learned How to Write a Literary Essay

Sinay recounts learning literary analysis by reading scholarly essays, particularly criticism of Hemingway. By studying how critics made claims and supported them with evidence from literary works, he inferred that a literary essay is a form of argument. He observes that explicit instruction analyzing those models could have made the task clearer for English majors and, later, for their students. His experience was largely one of learning through trial and error: professors assigned essays and sometimes commented on scope or argument, but rarely

explained how to build the paper. One professor did provide useful guidance on organizing exam essays, which Sinay remembers as an exception. The chapter returns to the book's central concern: students can be expected to write literary papers only if someone teaches them the form. Sinay calls for composition instruction to be included in English or teacher-preparation programs.

Chapter 17: The Roguish Independence of English Teachers

Sinay uses "roguish" to describe teachers who work in isolation and make major curricular decisions without coordination. He shares examples of a teacher spending an entire semester on Hamlet, a new teacher left to guess which literature to teach, and departments in which a common assignment or pacing plan was inconsistently followed. Such independence, he argues, can deprive students of essential material and leave new colleagues without support. He also revisits the MLA research-paper requirement, which his former department eventually discontinued despite its value for college preparation. In his view, individual autonomy becomes harmful when it overrides shared educational goals and established expectations. He calls for leadership, mentoring, and common curriculum planning—not to eliminate teachers' judgment, but to ensure that students receive coherent instruction and that new teachers are not forced to invent courses without guidance.

Chapter 18: How I Managed to Get the MLA Paper Established

Sinay tells the story of replacing a semester-long senior project that compared poetic devices in two poems with an argumentative MLA-style research paper. When he joined the senior team, students already dreaded the inherited assignment. Having taught college composition, he believed a documented argument on a controversial topic would better prepare them for the writing they would encounter after high school. His challenge to the assignment provoked conflict with colleagues and the department chair, but the principal heard his case, reviewed examples, and agreed that Sinay could introduce his paper the following year and train other teachers. Sinay describes helping colleagues understand argumentative theses, research, and MLA documentation. The paper was taught for many years and, in his account, helped students prepare for college composition. He is troubled that it was later abandoned, interpreting the episode as evidence that useful programs can disappear when departments lack sustained coordination.

Chapter 19: How My Literature Professor "Taught" the Literary Essay

Returning to a graduate Hemingway seminar, Sinay describes how a professor asked whether anyone knew how to write a thesis after hearing several unsatisfactory papers. Sinay read the opening of his own essay, "The Role of Circularity in The Sun Also Rises," and the professor praised its argument and used it as a model. Sinay's interpretation connected the novel's title, its characters' repetitive lives, and the circular image of the ending. The professor's recognition showed Sinay what a successful literary argument could look like, but

it did not amount to explicit instruction in how to construct one. Sinay had learned by reading critics and experimenting, while many of his professors assigned papers without teaching topic selection, thesis development, or evidence. He argues that recognizing good writing is not the same as teaching it. English and education programs should give future teachers direct preparation in composition, including how to teach literary analysis.

Chapter 20: What People Said When I Told Them I Was an English Teacher

Sinay collects public reactions that reveal how people remember English class. A doctor recalls receiving a C+ on a paper praised as outstanding; Sinay's uncle jokes that he must watch his grammar. Other people describe confusing grades, excessive attention to a single literary work, and assignments they considered unreasonable. These stories suggest that some students associate English teachers with judgment and correction rather than with help in becoming more capable writers. Sinay also recounts receiving sympathy for the difficulty and low pay of teaching, while noting that students could enjoy English when a teacher worked with them rather than against them. He contrasts negative classroom memories with his pride in having students enter his classes expecting a positive experience. The chapter's practical implication is that a teacher's treatment of students and their work shapes both individual learning and the wider reputation of the profession.

Chapter 21: The Complicated Life of the English Teacher

Sinay catalogs the breadth of an English teacher's responsibilities: teaching writing, grammar, usage, spelling, literature, reading comprehension, vocabulary, research, and literary analysis, while also preparing lessons and assessing a large volume of student work. Teachers may have multiple course preparations and must read the books they teach, as well as respond to independent reading and other assignments. The chapter underscores a tension running through the book: English teachers are held responsible for improving literacy but, in Sinay's view, are often not trained or given sufficient time to do so. He recommends learning process-based composition instruction, teaching mechanics within student writing, and preparing students for documented research. He also argues that manageable class sizes and additional preparation time are necessary if teachers are to provide meaningful feedback rather than merely keep up with grading.

Conclusion

The conclusion recaps the book's three strands: the institutional background that leaves many teachers underprepared, practical methods for teaching and assessing writing, and personal accounts of the culture and pressures of English teaching. Sinay reiterates his calls for composition coursework in teacher preparation, coordinated departmental writing programs, process-based instruction, contextual grammar teaching, manageable assessment, and teachers who write alongside their students. He presents the book as a practical reflection

drawn from decades in high schools and community colleges, not as a scholarly research monograph. Sinay hopes new teachers will carry its ideas into their classrooms and emphasizes that he valued his career despite the shortcomings of the systems in which he worked. The closing message is both critical and constructive: improving writing instruction requires better preparation and collaboration, but teachers can begin by showing students how writing is actually done.

Notable Quotes

> *"“A teacher is only a professional if they continue to learn more about how to teach their subject.”"*

> *"“The first draft of a writing is never the best effort by any writer.”"*

> *"“They need to learn to generate their ideas, organize them in an outline, draft a rough draft, and then receive feedback about the rough draft.”"*

> *"“Teaching writing is showing the students how to do a particular kind of paper, and their ability to do it will be ensured.”"*

Full Summary

Sinay traces writing instruction from the 1960s, when English classes centered on British and American literature and treated writing as an add-on. Students were assigned essays to complete at home; teachers returned them covered in red ink, with separate grades for content and grammar. The paper was a finished product to be judged, not work to be developed through instruction. Sinay recalls that even when his senior English teacher took extra time to respond to his stories and essays, she did not explain how to develop ideas, construct a thesis, or organize a piece. Students were largely left to work those things out alone.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Writing Process Movement shifted attention toward prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Peer review, conferences, multiple drafts, and portfolios became more common, and students sometimes revised work enough to change its grade. Teachers also emphasized writing for different audiences and purposes, though Sinay says the new approaches could leave teachers and students unsure of what a grade represented. From the 1990s into the early 2000s, national and California standards, along with tests such as the California Standards Tests and the High School Exit Exam, made measurable writing outcomes more prominent. California State University developed expository reading and writing courses, while Common Core later stressed college readiness, critical thinking, rhetorical analysis, and evidence-based argument using informational texts. Sinay sees a

persistent contradiction: schools were expected to teach these forms even though teacher preparation had not equipped English teachers to teach them. Beneath these successive reforms, he argues, lay a broader failure to value reading and writing as the foundations of literacy.

The central confession, then, is that English teachers commonly enter high schools without training in how to teach composition. An English degree is principally a degree in literature: students read literary works and write papers about them, but professors typically assign those papers rather than teach how to compose them. Sinay describes graduate students presenting interpretations of Hemingway stories and receiving criticism when their arguments failed. When he offered an interpretation of recurring symbols of good luck in “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio,” the professor praised it as the kind of original claim he wanted. Yet the professor had not taught Sinay how to make the argument; he had only recognized a successful result. Teacher-preparation programs, Sinay contends, do not fill the gap. Their general education courses have little connection to teaching English, and methods courses rarely provide substantial instruction in composition. Student teachers may also depend on mentor teachers who themselves lack writing pedagogy. The result is that novices learn through trial and error, often without colleagues or a coordinated program to guide them.

Sinay argues that English departments need to break out of the isolation Parker J. Palmer describes: teachers work alone behind classroom doors and rarely discuss what happens there. Departments should build a four-year writing sequence that prepares students for college assignments and gives teachers shared expectations. At Sinay’s school, he established a plan for students to write an MLA-style argumentative research paper at each grade level: freshmen would produce a three-page paper with a couple of supporting documents, sophomores a five-page paper with three, and juniors a seven-page paper with five. Seniors would complete a longer research paper. Students chose controversial issues and positions, and Sinay taught the work through the writing process. But some teachers did not require the assignment because they were not confident teaching argumentation. A writing program, he says, must therefore include teacher training as well as assignments, and should make continuity possible when new teachers join the department. He suggests that even one paper per quarter would give students sixteen opportunities to develop across high school, including repeated practice with MLA documentation.

That preparation should begin in college. Composition courses belong in an English major because literature courses alone do not teach students how to teach writing. Sinay’s own literary essays emerged through reading scholarly criticism and noticing how writers made claims supported by textual evidence. In a graduate seminar, a professor praised Sinay’s argument about circularity in The Sun Also Rises, but again the praise was not a lesson in how to build such an essay. English majors may learn to write by trial and error, Sinay says, but that experience does not automatically equip them to teach. Courses should address

composition and the history of writing, rather than assuming that repeated exposure to literature prepares future teachers to teach every kind of writing students will need.

The consequences of that assumption became clear when Sinay joined a senior English team whose long-running “research” paper asked students to compare two poems through their poetic devices. The project occupied an entire semester, lacked MLA-style documentation, and had earned a grim reputation among students. Sinay viewed it as poor college preparation and proposed replacing it with a documented argument on a controversial issue, drawing on his experience teaching college composition. His colleagues resisted; one teacher became distraught, and the department chair appealed to the principal. Sinay explained that community-college students needed to know how to write an MLA research paper, showed the principal examples, and won permission to teach his version while preparing the other teachers to adopt it the following year. The paper was eventually taught for many years, though Sinay later learned it had been discontinued. The episode illustrates how untrained teachers can mistake literary analysis for the full range of writing students need, leaving students to suffer through assignments that neither teach composition effectively nor prepare them for college.

Sinay also challenges the belief that grammar drills produce stronger writers. He recalls community-college placement systems that sent students who performed poorly on grammar tests into remedial courses filled with exercises on parts of speech, clauses, and sentence types. In his view, these courses consumed time without addressing the actual work of writing. He cites George Hillocks Jr.’s research, which found that isolated grammar exercises did not improve writing and could make it worse, and Patricia A. Dunn’s argument that grammar instruction may improve students’ knowledge of linguistics while failing to improve their prose. Reading, Sinay maintains, supplies language and models; writing about what students read gives them practice using it. Grammar still matters, but teachers should address it in the context of students’ own drafts rather than through worksheet after worksheet.

Teaching writing means guiding students through a process, not simply assigning a paper and grading it when it is done. Students need to generate ideas, narrow a topic, organize their thinking, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit. Sinay points to his own books, which went through several drafts, and to his experience learning to conference with students through work associated with Ross Winterowd at the University of Southern California. Such teaching requires English departments to discuss composition and support teachers in learning how to do it. A paper should not take an entire semester merely because students have been left to struggle without guidance; Sinay believes a five-to-seven-page research paper can be taught and completed in about six weeks. The process is not necessarily a rigid sequence: students can plan and revise methodically, or write to discover what they think and then organize and polish their ideas. In either case, they need to see writing as repeated work with feedback, not a one-time performance.

Sinay's own route to better writing instruction was a summer institute at the University of California, Irvine, where teachers learned to guide students through the writing process, shared their students' papers, and continued their study in a fall course. For teachers who have not had this preparation, he points to workshops offered through the National Writing Project, which has more than two hundred sites, including fifteen in California. The National Council of Teachers of English and its state affiliates, such as the California Association of Teachers of English, also provide professional development. The crucial test, however, is whether teachers bring what they learn back to their classrooms. A department could make that transfer more likely by sending several teachers to a six-week institute, then having them share the training with colleagues. Sinay argues that this kind of preparation belongs in teacher education, rather than being left for teachers to pursue on their own time and at their own expense.

Grammar, in his view, becomes useful when students apply it to their own writing. During editing, a teacher might ask students to combine two simple sentences into a compound sentence, introducing both conjunctions and the comma that joins the clauses. Students can check their drafts for the correct use of "their," "there," and "they're," or add adverbs to sharpen verbs and adjectives to modify nouns. They might look for dependent clauses at the beginnings of sentences, or practice quotation marks while writing narratives and transitional words in argumentative pieces. Teachers can also analyze grammar and punctuation in professional writing so students have models to imitate. Sinay recalls that his four-year-old daughter used commas and quotation marks in her stories because, as she explained, that was how they appeared in her reading. The practical lesson is to choose grammar instruction in response to problems appearing in recent student drafts, rather than delivering disconnected exercises.

Managing the paper load requires teachers to make selective use of their time. With large classes, Sinay found it impossible to conference individually with every student in every class at once. He sometimes met with half a class one day and the other half the next; when teaching juniors and seniors, he assigned work to one group while he used class time to respond to the other group's writing. He also had students edit their own work, using a checklist, and sometimes exchange drafts with classmates. Since editing every paper himself was too burdensome—and his corrections did not ensure students would avoid the same errors later—he made editing a skill students practiced together. Assignments should be taught, not merely handed out, and the first paper can be modeled in detail so students understand how to construct it. Teachers can stagger essays across different classes, assigning one level's paper when they have another level's work to assess. In his view, learning how to build a piece of writing matters more than producing the greatest possible quantity. Smaller classes, he adds, would make it more feasible to give students the attention writing instruction requires.

Sinay's concern about assessment begins with a department meeting in which about fifteen teachers graded the same student essay. Their judgments ranged from A to F, and their explanations seemed arbitrary. The teacher who gave the paper an F called it "too pretentious," despite its strong organization and correct mechanics. Sinay connects such inconsistency to the distrust and anxiety people often associate with English teachers. His doctor, for instance, remembered receiving a C-plus on a paper praised as an outstanding story, while another student could see no comments at all on a returned assignment. Portfolios passed from one grade to the next revealed markedly different standards: some teachers supplied only a grade, while others marked every error or used elaborate rubrics that students found confusing. Rubrics can make criteria explicit and help teachers agree on scores, but they do not solve the problem when instructors use different rubrics—or ignore them altogether. Sinay argues that departments need shared assignments and consistent expectations, supported by leadership that encourages teachers to work together.

His alternative is COLM: content, organization, language, and mechanics. Each category can count for twenty-five percent of the grade. In content, the teacher assesses the strength of the ideas and their support; in organization, coherence, unity, and transitions. Language concerns sentence structure, paragraphing, grammar, and usage, while mechanics covers punctuation and spelling. A teacher who lowers a score should be able to identify the weakness that justifies the deduction. Sinay used this framework to evaluate thousands of high-school and college papers, finding that students rarely disputed the results. He does not regard the final grade as the main teaching moment: by the time the finished paper arrives, the most important feedback should already have been given during drafting and revision. Evaluation can therefore remain straightforward instead of becoming a complicated system of forms and scores.

Showing students how to write a particular paper is, for Sinay, the work of teaching writing. In freshman composition, he had students read The Catcher in the Rye, draw conclusions from the novel, turn a conclusion into a thesis, and identify evidence that would support it. This contrasts with the approach he experienced as a student, when professors assigned literary essays with little guidance about topic, structure, or evidence. High-school and college-preparatory courses, he argues, should teach both the argumentative MLA-style research paper and the literary paper, along with other forms students will need in college. Research writing requires students to read competing arguments, as they might when examining gun control, and select material that supports their own position. Reading literature can likewise supply the basis for interpretation and argument. A French professor and neighbor once expressed the reciprocal relationship simply: reading becomes writing, and writing becomes reading, which prompts further writing.

Sinay also insists that English teachers should write alongside their students. When his students worked on MLA research papers, he wrote one himself, shared it with them, and

invited their feedback. They could see their teacher confronting the same decisions and revisions, rather than acting only as the person who judged their work. Later, when preparing books for publication, he asked three people to read his manuscripts and comment before he sent them to a publisher. He credits a professor friend, a successful author who described his own process on a blog, with helping him understand how nonfiction writing develops. Sinay's own substantial body of unpublished writing took years to reshape into books; sometimes, he suggests, writers need to produce a great deal before they discover what they mean to say. Teachers who try to publish can learn firsthand the difficulty of developing and revising a manuscript.

These classroom practices matter beyond grades because writing is personal, and students may carry painful memories of how their work was judged. Sinay recalls his uncle's nervous response on learning that he was an English teacher: "I had better watch my grammar then." Others described resentment over arbitrary evaluations, or over assignments such as memorizing 250 vocabulary words. Many people expressed sympathy for the demands of teaching, but their memories also suggested that English classes had made more enemies than friends. Sinay cites a Yale survey in which nearly three-quarters of 21,678 high-school students reported negative feelings related to school, a finding he says should prompt educators to reconsider students' experiences. He remembers that students who entered his own classes often seemed glad to be there, and he attributes the difference to working with students rather than against them.

Sinay's own route to the literary essay began not with direct instruction but with reading. As an English major at Cal State University, Fullerton, he studied dozens of professors' essays on literary works, including twenty analyses of Hemingway stories. He gradually recognized their shared method: each writer made a claim about a text and used evidence from it to persuade readers of an interpretation. Had professors shown students how those essays worked, he argues, English majors would have struggled less and been better equipped to teach writing themselves. Instead, most of his papers were returned with a grade and a few remarks, while students were left to discover how to narrow a subject and develop an argument through trial and error. One professor who explained how to organize exam essays was a notable exception.

That lack of shared instruction, Sinay believes, helps explain why English teachers often operate as independent practitioners rather than as members of a coordinated department. In his school, the physical separation of some teachers into mobile classrooms reinforced the sense that each could do as they pleased. A senior teacher, for instance, spent an entire semester on Hamlet, neglecting the wider survey of British literature the course was meant to cover. Another example involved a new teacher who was looking for Huckleberry Finn in September, unaware that the junior curriculum was supposed to begin with early Puritan literature. Sinay supplied her with a Puritan unit and its test, and she followed his plans

successfully for the year—support a department could have provided as a matter of course.

The independence could also undo an established curriculum. After Sinay retired, his school's English department eventually dropped the MLA research paper he had helped introduce, despite its value in preparing students for college writing. He also recalls a conference where a veteran teacher described an unusual approach to teaching poetry through "research," an idea Sinay found difficult to justify. Even within groups responsible for the same grade level, teachers moved at very different speeds: some took twice as long as colleagues to teach a play such as The Crucible. For Sinay, such variation is not harmless personal style. Without leadership, coordination, and support for new teachers, students' education depends too much on which classroom they happen to enter.

His effort to replace a senior poetry-comparison project with an argumentative research paper began when he joined the senior English group after about fifteen years of teaching. The existing assignment asked students to spend a semester comparing poetic devices in two poems. Students dreaded it, and Sinay found that its supposed thesis amounted merely to a statement comparing the poems. Drawing on his experience teaching college composition, he proposed an MLA-style paper on a controversial issue, supported by research and designed to prepare students for the work they would meet in college. The project would also develop argument and critical thinking.

When Sinay announced that he would no longer teach the poetry paper, the department chair objected and took the dispute to the principal. Sinay explained that many graduates would attend community colleges, where students were expected to write documented MLA papers, and showed examples of college work. The principal agreed that Sinay could teach his alternative, on the condition that he train the other teachers the following year and that the old assignment continue for one more year. Sinay then introduced his colleagues to the argumentative thesis and the use of research to support claims. The MLA paper was taught to hundreds of seniors over roughly fifteen years, and many left confident they could handle college assignments. Its later discontinuation, despite the preparation it offered, struck him as evidence that the problem of uncoordinated writing instruction remained.

Sinay returns to the gap between knowing how to write a literary essay and knowing how to teach one through the story of a graduate seminar on Hemingway. The professor had asked students to develop original interpretations, then grew dissatisfied with several papers. When he asked whether anyone knew how to write a thesis, Sinay volunteered and read his essay, "The Role of Circularity in The Sun Also Rises." He argued that the characters were trapped in a repetitive life without clear progress or resolution, drawing evidence from the novel, including its ending. The professor praised the argument and wanted to use the paper as a model for future students. Yet he had not taught Sinay how to construct it. Sinay had learned by studying other scholars' claims and evidence, and by making his own attempts. A model,

he suggests, can reveal what effective writing looks like, but students also need explicit guidance in how to produce it.

The public responses to English teachers form another measure of the profession's complicated reputation, but Sinay's concern extends beyond any single anecdote: classroom practices can leave people feeling judged, confused, or alienated, while the job itself carries expectations that outsiders may not see. English teachers are responsible for students' writing, grammar, spelling, mechanics, literature, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and research skills. They must prepare lessons and read the works they teach, often across several different courses, while also assessing essays and other assignments. Sinay argues that this workload makes it difficult to provide the sustained attention writing instruction requires. He believes English teachers should have four classes and two preparation periods, so they have time to help students improve.

The work also demands expertise that teachers may not have acquired in college. They must teach literary analysis and help students interpret texts, while addressing usage and language skills that can easily be neglected when time is short. Sinay points to the need for a deliberate sequence of instruction in common usage distinctions, alongside the teaching of writing and preparation for college. The English teacher's job is therefore not simply to cover a reading list or mark papers; it combines many kinds of instruction, each requiring preparation and time.

Sinay closes by presenting the book as an account of experience rather than a scholarly study. He hopes that the knowledge he gained through years of teaching high-school and college students will be useful to new English teachers, and that his observations will encourage better preparation and more thoughtful classroom practice. The system's limitations did not erase his affection for the work: despite its demands, he says, he loved teaching English and enjoyed his career enormously.

Generated by BookGist.ai • November 2026

www.bookgist.ai