

Writing Essay
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I wrote this essay in spring 2006 as part of my application to become a Swarthmore College [Writing Associate \(WA\)](#). I was accepted to the program.

It was the morning of January 21, 2001. My first class of the school day was Earth Science, and my teacher, Richard Lasselle, had promised the class a test. As I knew very well from previous experience, Mr. Lasselle's exams were extraordinarily challenging, so I was not surprised when the very first question on the test asked me to use two new formulas—the potential and kinetic energy of a particle—that I had never seen before. As I pondered over the problem, I thought to myself, *This is a question that only Mr. Lasselle would write.*

And at the time, that statement was probably true. My previous teachers had, in general, focused their tests and homework around recall of factual information, and as a result, I learned that memorizing was the best way to succeed in school. In Mr. Lasselle's class, things were completely different. Instead of asking me to recapitulate old information, his questions forced me to apply and manipulate that information toward solving a novel problem. For example, in the case of the first question on the test, I had to use the fact that energy is conserved in order to find the velocity of the particle given the amount of potential energy it had lost. Through questions like these, I learned more than information: I learned how to think. Over the course of the school year, I became better and better at analyzing problems, using logic, and—more generally—figuring out how to teach myself. In the process, I came to understand what William Butler Yeats meant when he said, “Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.”

The same principle applies to all areas of learning, including the WA program. It is easy for someone to write corrections on a paper and then tell the student to make the changes. What is more challenging, but ultimately more useful, is to sit down and ask questions that allow the

student to figure out revisions on her own. This may not always work. For example, there may be stylistic conventions or grammatical points that must be stated explicitly. But particularly on the macro level of argumentation, organization, and clarity, a WA could do a lot just by asking the right questions. For instance, when a student is developing his paper's thesis, a WA might ask him to give a precise outline of the logical progression of his argument. I know that this approach helps me a great deal, not only in avoiding fallacious reasoning but in figuring out exactly what it is that I'm trying to say. This logical progression also provides a natural structure for the paper as a whole, with each paragraph or section representing a defense of one particular step.

Thinking about writing as problem solving is a good idea in general, as it breaks the process into manageable pieces and contributes to clarity of thought. However, it's especially important in cases like the WA program where students will not have the resource forever. So while WAs do perform the technical tasks of proofreading and editing, their most important function is to help students teach themselves. Indeed, as Mr. Lasselle demonstrated, that's the purpose of an educator in any context.