

**Gazing Beyond the Cage: Learning the Intricacies of Writing**

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I used to hate writing. I still remember how I sobbed terribly in second grade when asked to write a mere paragraph. I disliked the amount of freedom it gave me. As I grew older, I came to the realization that the freedom they gave was smaller than I thought, and that schools stifled our imagination by restricting how we write. I would like to talk about my experience as an English writer from an early age, and how I eventually grew to enjoy writing.

Despite being born in Canada, my exposure to English did not begin until I was in kindergarten. My parents immigrated to Canada from Vietnam a couple years before I was born, so their English was not very strong. They knew multiple languages, such as Vietnamese and Teochew Dialect, but they opted to teach me how to speak Cantonese because they thought it would serve me better in Canada. However, they never taught me how to read and write. As a result, English ended up being the first language that I knew how to read and write in. Since I started learning English at a later age, I had a sizable disadvantage in learning compared to others my age, who were already approaching fluency. Not unlike Julie Wan (2018), “I lacked commonalities with the other children and fundamental, preschool level intelligence” (p. 3). My subpar English led to me falling behind in other subjects as well, simply for the fact that I could not understand any lessons. For many years after that, English was always my lowest mark.

However, things started looking up around sixth grade, when my friends introduced me to Archive of Our Own (AO3), a website that hosts literary works written by millions of users. From then on, I spent my spare time browsing the website and finding exciting stories to read. I was amazed to see the vast number of ways to write, as the only writing I knew beforehand were elementary school paragraphs: nothing but splotches of ink resembling words. I remember all the times editing my classmates’ essays and noticing how similar they are to each other. As Vershaun Ashanti Young (2011) said, “teachin one correct way [to write] lend a hand to choppin off folk’s tongues” (p. 62). Thinking back on it, I realized that Young was right—schools gave us the same cookie cutter to write with, and due to this, there was no individuality.

The more I read stories on AO3, the more I appreciated the freedom of writing. I began to think that school was too confining. Teachers would always tell us to separate essays into 5 paragraphs and to never start sentences with “but”. For the sake of my marks, I listened.

But on the inside, I was dying to escape from the cage.

I finally got my chance to spread my wings in 10th grade, when I was assigned a creative writing assignment about Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and essentially given complete freedom over what to write. It was the first time I was able to write however I liked in school. From then on, I steadily developed a unique style for writing in school. I believe that the experience with the creative writing assignment was a major factor in my writing style today.

The earlier years of schooling are a cage for writing. In my preteens, the seemingly wide space inside was all I knew. One day, however, I learned to look beyond the cage, and what met my eyes was a rich forest of writing I had never touched. I wanted to break free from my cage, which paled in comparison to the land before me. Even now, I have not tread a fraction of what I saw. One day, even this lush area will be unfamiliar no more, and I will again lay my eyes upon another world, behind another cage.

### References

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Wan, J. (2018). *Chinks in my armor: Reclaiming one's voice*. University of Central Florida.  
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