



## English: Writing About Others

### What if students could learn love and self-control through writing?

Writers often get their ideas for character and plot from real-life events. There have been a number of cases where journalists have tracked down the people written about in famous songs or books. Betsy decided to use one such case in her English class to help her students think about integrity when writing.

"I told the story of Asne Seierstad, who stayed with a bookseller called Shah Mohammed Rais and his family in Afghanistan for four months and wrote a book about it called *The Bookseller of Kabul*. The book was very detailed, and Seierstad chose to portray Rais as a respectable academic in public, but a tyrant at home with his family. Rais sent his wife of 16 years away to Pakistan when he took a second wife, a 16-year-old woman. He forced his 12-year-old son to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week selling candy in a hotel lobby. Rais was tortured and jailed under the Communists, Mujahedeen, and the Taliban because he was so committed to the preservation of literary culture. Although Seierstad changed the names in an attempt to protect the family, they were easily recognized, and Rais was found. When Rais received a copy of Asne's book, he accused her of betraying his hospitality and threatened to sue.

"I gave students a series of statements and asked them to say whether they agreed or disagreed:

- Asne Seierstad was a guest in someone's home; therefore, she should at the very least have shown Rais a draft of her book before she published it; she did not show the family respect.
- Asne Seierstad was highlighting a legitimate social issue. She changed the names, and the family knew she was writing a book about them, so she has not abused their hospitality.

"Asne Seierstad wrote about Rais and his family in a particular way because of her own views and background. We talked about ways in which her beliefs and thinking about the world and people would have to change to write differently. Could she have written about Rais and his family in a way that showed them love without compromising on the detail?

We went on to talk about how we exercise self-censure and self-control when writing about others using e-mail and social networks, as well as more formal writing.”

## What's going on here?

Betsy **saw** her English lesson on writing as a way of discussing key issues that relate to student lives as well as the lives of authors. She focused on the ends to which students were putting their skills rather than just giving them writing skills, and on the kinds of responsibility and self-control involved in writing about others.

Betsy **engaged** students in locating writing skills in the context of a provocative story that would face them with moral questions and emphasized activities in which students could apply the issues discussed to their own lives (the statements, discussion).

Betsy **reshaped her practice** by choosing a novel by a living author to focus on the author’s choices and connect more closely with students’ writing, and using story and moral questions to frame discussion of writing skills.

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Responding to Jesus’s call to **love** God and to love our neighbor means that we should treat other people with dignity and respect. This involves the exercise of self-control. Seeing people as neighbors, as someone for whom we have a responsibility, will change how we use information belonging to them and how we present them in our writing. We are not required to turn a blind eye to the mistakes of others or to condone evil, but we should not think less of people than Jesus does.

## What difference does it make?

Self-censure or self-control is a quality quickly going out of fashion in some forms of writing. Anonymity is too often used as an excuse to write irresponsibly about real people and places, especially online; new technology makes it much easier to track them down

and expose them. Reputations are made and ruined this way. Highlighting the issue may help some students see things differently and reflect on the need for restraint.

## Where could we go from here?

The issues discussed here arise in music as well as literature, and the question of how others get represented in music could be raised. Paul McCartney and Bob Dylan both wrote songs based on real people. In the case of the Beatles song “She’s Leaving Home,” McCartney was inspired by the story of Melanie Coe (<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=123>). Bob Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” also was based on a real incident, though its accuracy has since been questioned ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmusic/2010/05/hattie\\_carroll.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmusic/2010/05/hattie_carroll.html)). Integrity in writing is also relevant, for instance, to historical writing and journalistic reporting.

## Digging deeper

Self-control is listed as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:6-8). Self-control is positive; it is the right use of our power to direct our will with God’s help. The Holy Spirit works within us as individuals and as a Christian community to develop self-restraint, self-discipline, and self-control in what we think, feel, and do. Self-control restricts some things in order to let other things flourish. Self-control involves “taking the reins.” The Bible views a person without self-control is viewed as vulnerable, like a city with a hole in its defensive wall (Proverbs 25:28).

*Self-control is the exercise of inner strength under the direction of sound judgment that enables us to do, think, and say the things that are pleasing to God. Jerry Bridges*



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