



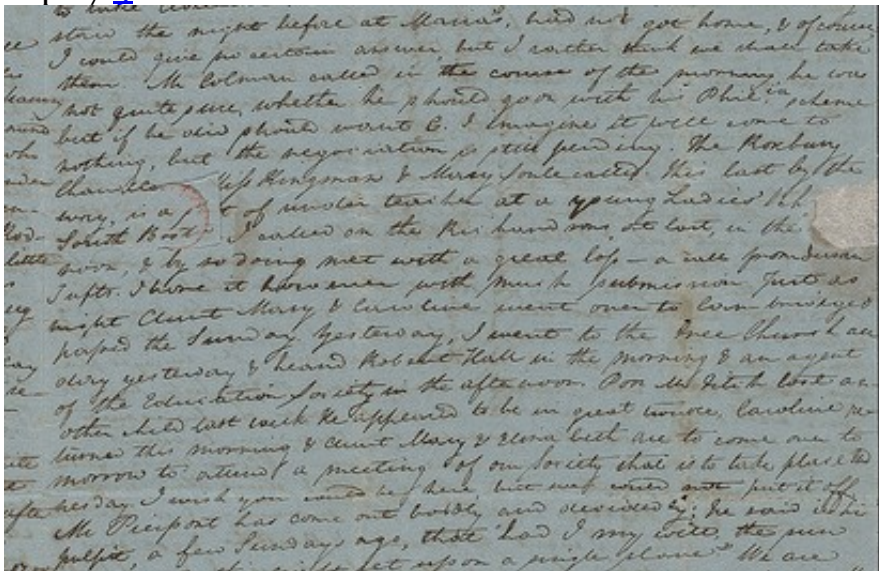
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# [Guest Post] The Writing Mentor I Never Met

By [Brandon Monk](#)

Sep 27 9



**This is a guest post by Noelle Sterne.**

Sorting some old files recently, I discovered a letter written to me in my late teens by a high school English teacher. She wasn't my teacher, and it wasn't my high school. But as I read Miss Jacobs' letter, I was struck by the truism that we rarely credit, much less remember, those who influenced us most in our early years. With shock and awe, I realized how her words have continued to shape my writing and writing life.

I never met Miss Jacobs in person. The only time I saw her was at a Saturday conference for aspiring writers in New York City, which I learned about from a notice in my suburban high school newspaper.

Through the haze of years, I felt again the excitement as I took the train into the city. In a vast auditorium full of noise, I slid low in the seat, a mouse in the ocean. The panelists, four or five, sat high up on the stage, but I can picture only Miss Jacobs. She was middle-aged and motherly, portly in her flowered dress, with a round face and black-gray hair pulled back in a soft bun.

What the others spoke about I don't know, and at this distance, even Miss Jacobs' exact words escape me. But they were strong enough to make me respond, at the close of her talk, to her invitation.

In those days, I was a poet first and prose writer second. I was also in the torments of adolescence—woefully lagging in social skills and obvious physical attributes and intellectually ahead of my peers. Two longings warred constantly: acceptance into the right social circle and recognition of my talent.

I wrote at that time as much for comfort as from compulsion. A few teachers had commented on my writing, and my mother praised it always. But I craved professional validation of what I hugged as my anguished, budding genius. So I jumped at Miss Jacobs' offer to send work to her.

I sent four of what I thought were my best poems. Even after so many years, her reply astounded me. To appraise my poems was one thing, but Miss Jacobs went way beyond this task. Her passion for teaching glowed, as did her drive to bolster an adolescent girl whose major preoccupations were unattainable popularity, paltry physical progress, and writing.

## **The Letter's Structure**

Miss Jacobs' letter was long—two full 8½ by 11 pages, lines tightly handwritten. She used her high school letterhead for the first page and on both wrote out to all edges of the paper, front and back, even squeezing in caretted afterthoughts.

Her gusto still blazed from the now-discolored pages, with frequent all-cap enunciations, many underlinings, and liberal exclamation points. And she sustained the delicate balance between unflinching assessment of my poems and encouragement, perfectly handling the eggshell ego of a sixteen-year-old who had mailed in her soul.

## **The Letter's Wisdom**

The letter revealed how seriously she took her mission. It was a masterful model of the outline form she must have taught to countless English classes. Each of the letter's four parts had distinct purpose and content. Rereading, I stopped often, marveling at how from every part Miss Jacobs' presence reverberated down the years.

### *1. Introduction and Writing Principles*

First, Miss Jacobs thanked me for my “flattering letter.” She then referred to my probable confession that I could only write in turmoil, responding with two all-capped principles:

I. DO NOT WRITE UNTIL YOU HAVE PASSED THROUGH THE TURMOIL AND ARE OVER IT!!!

II. The creator must remain apart from the thing he creates.

ART IS NOT LIFE. IT is a RE-CREATION OF LIFE!!

Back then, as a poet, I had no idea of poetic forms, and my “art,” I see now, consisted only of cathartic journaling. The catharsis kept spilling out even when I changed focus to prose. I wrote long essays and hardly disguised stories about my emotional blocks, writing struggles, and envious eruptions of anyone about my age who looked like they'd reach writing fame. Now I cringe even to think of these pieces, much less exhume them from dusty cartons.

Not long ago, as I sketched out a spiritual-motivational essay on the synchronicity of our lives, I began writing about those past travails. But having passed through the turmoils, as Miss Jacobs would have said, I saw I was no longer wallowing but narrating. Her principle held: I'd passed through and was re-creating. Much later, validating her dictum, I published this essay.

### *2. Critique of My Poems*

Next Miss Jacobs reviewed the four poems I'd sent. Two were pubescent love poems (too many crushes in

high school), one a rhymed narrative of a hanging (too many TV westerns), and the last an alternately morose and sunny discourse on Life (typical adolescent seesaw).

She first commented on the poems as a whole, noticing their “emotional sincerity and a natural musical expression.” Even at this distance, her words buoyed me. In her overview of the poems, she had sharp words for three: “honest but uncontrolled emotionally,” “undisciplined poetically, too prosy,” “Put this away for a year!” For only one she had outright praise: “It’s young but mature in handling.” Then, referring to specific stanzas and lines, she pointed out flaws in rhymes and rhythms.

I recall feeling disappointed but not destroyed, cushioned by her approving words. To my chagrin, I never revised these poems or sent them out. But Miss Jacobs’ editorial lessons keep surfacing. Today, in my professional roles as writing coach and consultant for clients’ manuscripts, I comment on their strengths, give generalized and forthright assessments, and fortify them with specifics.

### *3. Indispensable Writing Tools*

In the letter’s third part, Miss Jacobs recommended specific writing tools. She suggested I obtain a certain rhyming dictionary, a book on poetic forms, and a thesaurus, a tool that at the time I’d never heard of.

A true coach, Miss Jacobs supplied models and practical resources. I bought all three books and fell in love with that first thesaurus. Now, my online thesaurus is constantly open and my collection of print editions always within reach.

### *4. The Summary*

As in any good piece of writing, Miss Jacobs ended her letter with a summary. As in any good critique, she ended with support:

Keep writing verse. Who knows, with your ability in prose (I refer to your good letter) you may one day do a novel. They say lyric writers often turn into novelists.

Keep reading verse.

Above all, have faith in yourself.

Without inflated praise or damning dismissal, Miss Jacobs achieved the ideal blend: she recapped my poems’ weaknesses, reiterated strengths I could accept, and expressed confidence that shored me up me to keep writing.

## **Miss Jacobs’ Influence**

I kept writing—during personal upheavals, loss of parents, job and location changes, business crises, long depressions, and painful phases when all I could manage for a year was a self-pitying poem on my birthday.

Eventually, though, I gained momentum, finished pieces, and submitted them. When the inevitable rejections flooded in, Miss Jacobs’ shadow urged me on, and I counterattacked by sending out more. “Above all, have faith in yourself.”

In my consulting work too, I’m astonished at how often I’ve used her model of bolstering, directness, and tangible advice. Inside all of us, she knew, hide fragile sixteen-year-olds, feeling like ugly, witless failures and breathless to have our genius recognized. Miss Jacobs showed me how to judge without smashing the self and cheer on without dripping syrup.

And she keeps surfacing. After I’d published a story in a small magazine, the editor asked for my opinion on a story he’d written. Highly autobiographical, the story suffered from the emotional extravagance Miss Jacobs had swooped on in my poems.

When the editor and I looked at the story, without knowing it I echoed Miss Jacobs’ twin principles. “Art Is Not Life,” I said, and reminded him he had indeed come through the turmoils he recounted. So I suggested he write like a stranger, detached. Several weeks later, he sent a thankful and exuberant note. He had revised the

story and mailed it out.

Miss Jacobs' image appeared again last year. A friend confided she wanted to write a book but felt fearful and could "never find the time." I advised her to write something, anything, for fifteen minutes a day. Then I verbalized Miss Jacobs' words whispering in my head, "Keep writing, and believe in yourself and your work."

A week later, my friend called. "The first chapter's already finished!" Since then, she often reminds me, "I'm doing what you said—fifteen minutes a day and believing in myself." At the last call, she proudly announced her book was almost completed. Miss Jacobs must have been beaming.

## **Finding Miss Jacobs**

Thinking about these incidents, I felt impelled to reach Miss Jacobs. I called the New York City high school number on her letterhead. The receptionist said the high school had been converted into six different schools. She transferred me to the personnel office. The clerk said, "We don't keep those records. Try the City Superintendent's office." He transferred me to the man in the Superintendent's office, who said it wasn't his area. He transferred me to the woman in charge of microfiche records.

She was empathetic but businesslike. "That's a long time ago, but please hold." Hope flared. She returned to the line, sounding sincere. "I'm sorry. If the records still exist that far back, they're probably downtown in the vaults. I bet the mayor can't even get into them." She laughed, but I didn't.

I called New York City information. Of the three numbers, one was unlisted. The people who answered the other two said they'd never taught high school nor had any of their relatives.

A computer wizard colleague produced a printout of phone numbers for the last twenty-five years, with the forty-four current ones in bold. I called most of them but the story was the same: no high school, no English teaching, no luck.

## **Talking to Miss Jacobs**

I gave up. Sitting at my desk and staring at the letter, I yielded to the belated grief—for never having responded to Miss Jacobs, never having thanked her, never having followed up on the poems she gave such attention to. I sobbed for what she had confirmed: a muddled youth of potential with faintly displayed promise, and the beginnings of a stumbling writing career. I wept for the small spurts of adult success, despite cliché bestseller dreams, and for continuing to slog away, no matter how much time had passed, unconsciously following her counsel.

Then I prayed. I prayed that, wherever she was, Miss Jacobs could hear me. I prayed that other students had given her the praise she deserved and that their tributes compensated for my dereliction.

And I talked to her. I told her about uncovering her letter after all these years and the reverent shock of its insights. I told her how amazingly correct her prophecy had been that "lyric writers often turn into novelists," and that several novels were indeed in the works.

I told her I live by her principles and relentlessly troll my thesaurus. I told her I'm writing more than ever: stories, essays, writing how-tos, three self-help books, two novels, and barely managing the constant bursts of new ideas. And I told her how I help other writers, following her inspiring refrain: "Keep writing . . . have faith in yourself."

## **Celebrating Miss Jacobs**

Like many teachers and mentors, Miss Jacobs will never know all she did, the values she helped mold, or the sustenance she gave to a languishing teen at a critical moment. She'll never know that her caring and wisdom remained alive, like a steadfast background chorus, in a writer's thorny development. I'll never be able to tell her any of this, but now, at least, I can remember her, honor her, and continue to celebrate her through my writing and my life.

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Author, editor, ghostwriter, writing coach, and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne writes fiction and nonfiction and has published over 250 pieces in print and online venues. She has contributed many guest blogs and in July 2012 started a column in *Coffeehouse for Writers*, “Bloom Where You’re Writing.” With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, for over 28 years Noelle has assisted doctoral candidates to complete their dissertations. Her latest project-in-progress helps doctoral candidates specifically, a practical-psychological-spiritual handbook: *Grad U: Complete Your Dissertation—Finally—and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live With You*. In her book, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books), with examples from her practice, writing, and other aspects of life, she uses “practical spirituality” to help readers let go of regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. Visit Noelle at [www.trustyourlifenow.com](http://www.trustyourlifenow.com)

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## Comments



1. [Christina Hamlett](#) says:  
[September 27, 2012 at 12:50 pm](#)

Beautifully said, Noelle! And how blessed you were to have someone who recognized your talents at a fragile age and encouraged you to never give up on your dreams. Miss Jacobs sounds like a treasure who continues to look over your shoulder as you write and whisper, “Well done, my dear. Well done.”

[Reply](#)



- o [Noelle Sterne](#) says:  
[September 27, 2012 at 4:03 pm](#)

Thank you so much, Christina! Your words made my eyes fill with tears and show your understanding of the essence of this piece and, indeed, the blessing of Miss Jacobs.

[Reply](#)

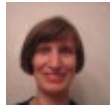


- [Christina Hamlett](#) says:  
[September 27, 2012 at 4:09 pm](#)

You’re very welcome, Noelle. I was fortunate to have my own mentor for 20+ years. Her name was Sylvia Burack of PLAYS Magazine and she guided my playwriting career in immeasurable ways. Not only do I still have every letter she ever wrote me (including all of the rejections!) but when she finally retired, I was the one to whom she shipped her IBM

Selectric typewriter that she had used to compose all of them. (My husband offered to clean all the speckles of White-out off the keys but I wouldn't let him!) By the by, I shared this ReadLearnWrite link on FB and have already brought several of my colleagues to tears.

[Reply](#)



2. [Anita](#) says:

[September 27, 2012 at 4:07 pm](#)

What a great teacher. You honor her by carrying on her legacy. .

[Reply](#)



3. [Noelle Sterne](#) says:

[September 27, 2012 at 4:26 pm](#)

Again, Christina, many thanks. You are blessed too to have had Ms. Burack's guidance—and I certainly understand about keeping her Selectric intact! Appreciate too your sharing this post.

Anita—You are right, and I trust Miss J. knows—somewhere—how much she has given.

[Reply](#)



4. [Anjali Amit](#) says:

[September 30, 2012 at 9:26 pm](#)

Such a beautiful paean of praise. As you are fortunate to have had her in your life she is too, in your remembrance of her.

Anjali

[Reply](#)



o [Noelle Sterne](#) says:

[October 1, 2012 at 11:38 am](#)

Thank you, Anjali. I feel very fortunate to have "met" Miss Jacobs and now to share her wisdom with other writers.

[Reply](#)



5. [Jessica McCann \(@JMcCannWriter\)](#) says:

[October 1, 2012 at 3:33 pm](#)

What a beautiful tribute, not only to Miss Jacobs, but to all the other teachers just like her who take the

time to respond in such a personal and powerful way to a young person. In a time when many of us are jaded and frustrated with the education system, this is a great reminder that it's not about the system after all. It's about the people who make a difference, once student at a time. Thank you for taking the time to express it so well.

[Reply](#)



6. [Noelle Sterne](#) says:  
[October 1, 2012 at 4:29 pm](#)

Appreciate your thoughts, Jessica. You remind me of several exemplary teachers/administrators in the current "system" who truly care about and give to their students. It is about each individual relationship, and I am sure you know better than I how children can be heartened and encouraged by even one comment by a teacher. Let's keep telling these stories.

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## About Brandon



My name is Brandon Monk. I'm an attorney in a small town in Texas. Teachers are scattered throughout my family tree and my dad used to tell me all the time I should teach. I ended up going to law school, but there was some part of me that wanted to give something back in a different way than the practice of law allows. So, I ask you:

Have you been away from reading for some time?

Did you read less last year than you wanted to?

Do you want to contribute to a community that views reading as an essential activity, as essential as breathing?

I want you to **read, learn, and write for life.**

I want reading to be the activity through which you **seek answers to the questions you can't answer** anywhere else.

I want reading to be the activity through which you **find new questions or new ways of asking old questions.**

I want you to **be inspired to read** and I want you to **inspire others** to read through your stories and advice.

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