

Case: Sabrina
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Final exams were finished but many marks were not yet posted when Sabrina dropped into the Learning Assistance Center (LAC) to see Paul Kelly, the half-time professional tutor who had worked with her almost weekly during the winter semester. Paul was glad to see her but surprised at her request. She wanted him to custom-design for her a reading and writing “course” for Spring semester. She explained that if she

could be so cruel to other which are powerless. I realized by reading this books, one have to struggle to achieve what he or she wants in life. One of the main character wich is her name was Ma showed us it is only by Perceverence one can succeed in this society of injustice and unfairness. The dilemma that the families of the farmer went was the most tragical I ever seen in my life. However reading is a wonderful habit to develop ether for instruction or for leisure.

Dr. Samuels wrote seven comments about grammar and mechanical errors, and corrected or indicated many other errors. She concluded as follows:

You have many spelling errors (but a dictionary will help), and some serious problems with using idiomatic expressions. You need practice. But clearly you have read some very large and impressive books!

I would suggest that you prepare your papers in a draft form, and then we will talk over your problems before you hand in the final paper. OK?

In the 495-word essay, Paul found approximately 100 errors.

Verbs

1. Verb Tense	7
2. Subject/Verb Agreement	7
3. Active/Passive	0

Words

4. Singular/Plural	11
5. Word Form	4
6. Word Choice/Idiomatic Expressions	6
7+ Add a Word	5
7- Omit a Word	3

Sentence Structure

8. Word Order/Combining Ideas	6
9. Incomplete Sentence	0
10. Run-on Sentence/Comma Splice	3

Content

11. Meaning not Clear	0
12. Pronoun Reference	1

Mechanics

13. Spelling (no repeats)	24
14. Punctuation	11
15. Capitalization	4
16+ New Paragraph	3
16- No Paragraph	1

Also

17. Article	1
18. Preposition	2

The in-class essay exam booklet showed no signs of on-paper invention strategies, no organizing scheme, and no editing or revision.

When Sabrina first went to the LAC for help, Paul immediately sent Sabrina's in-class English essay to the College's learning disabilities specialist who said there was "only mild LD stuff like 'the the' and some dropped or added letters." She did not think that Sabrina was an obvious candidate for special LD assistance. She felt that "the primary problem is ESL." She suggested finding out how good Sabrina's French was in an effort to

determine whether the problem was a language deficit in general or an English language deficit in particular.

Paul then sent the essay to an experienced instructor of Advanced ESL who wrote back that, although there were some signs of ESL difficulties, "the more serious problems are more consistent with what I have seen in non-academic high school L1 [English as a first language] students. Her biggest problem, I think, is that she isn't aware of the requirements and style of formal essays."

Visiting the Learning Assistance Centre

On Sabrina's first visit to the LAC, she said that she wanted help with three things: reading literature; writing, especially grammar/mechanics and writing anxiety; and finding a good dictionary.

On Sabrina's next visit, Paul used the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity with her on a short story of her choosing, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." It is the story of a nondescript, hen-pecked little man who, at the slightest suggestion, slips into a fantasy world where he is brave and heroic. At the end of each of the five switches between reality and fantasy, Paul asked Sabrina what was happening, what the possible connections were, and why there was a sudden change. She did not know. The story made no sense to her, even with a guided reading. Throughout the story, Paul also asked Sabrina about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Mitty. In the opening of the story, Sabrina focused on Mrs. Mitty and misinterpreted her as caring. By the end of the Directed Reading-Thinking

another, Sabrina said, "She expects you to be there before you have time to get there." Sabrina perceived high expectations and a lack of help, and she was intimidated.

The Mid-term Exam

Sabrina received an F on her take-home mid-term exam. She was asked to rewrite passages such as the following one, correcting grammar and style errors. (Her corrections on first pass are noted in brackets.)

And so I says to her, she is gets lots less As then you and she says that dont never mind because shes just lyed [lied] about it. She says that[,] he says [declares] that she never got no As at all! Excellent I says because I never has liked her no how.

Sabrina's rewrite was as follows:

She gets lots less the you, moreover, she says that never mind. And so I say, because she is just lied about it. She at no time got a no for answer at all. Excellent I replays since, I never have like her not ever.

The instructor's comment: "None of this makes sense, I'm afraid. The original is about getting the best grades (A) in classes."

On Sabrina's mid-term exam essay relating Plato's "The Cave" to other literature studied, Dr. Samuels made 25 corrections on the first page of the four-page essay, and then wrote "I'm sorry to say that your essay is clearly an F. You may try to rewrite it and I will do what I can to give you a pass." Paul advised Sabrina to reorganize the essay because with clearer thinking might come clearer sentences. However, Dr. Samuels advised Sabrina to correct only the grammar and mechanical errors. Sabrina chose to do this. She received a D. Failing her mid-term was traumatic. Sabrina, crying, said that it was one of the—if not the—most upsetting experiences of her life. "I never failed anything not even when I was just starting to learn English." She said that she had driven home in tears, thrown out her English books, and quit. However, a friend phoned and said that it was only a course, not the most important thing in life. And besides, said the friend, "If the teacher doesn't correct your work, she's not doing her job." Sabrina agreed and returned.

Writing the Research Paper

When Sabrina came to the LSC for help with her final project, a research paper, she said that Dr. Samuels had given no handout detailing the requirements but had explained that the students should choose any topic, develop "three things," and have five references. Sabrina and Paul spent four one-hour sessions on the project. After an hour of questioning and exploring, she choose to do a feminist analysis of three poems, "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, "Sonnet 29" by William Shakespeare, and "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning. During the discussion, Paul felt that she had little concept of what constituted an academically appropriate topic. In the second session, Paul and Sabrina interpreted the three poems, and Sabrina wrote sentences capturing the critical ideas about each poem. She said that she understood poetry better when she talked about it; Paul felt that she comprehended almost nothing until he had explicated the poem. She also seemed to have difficulty capturing in clauses both the abstract and the detailed ideas they generated. They prepared a traditional outline in the third meeting. Sabrina seemed to have difficulty seeing any pattern among the three commentaries, so Paul suggested most sexist to least sexist. When he explained and demonstrated a formal outline, she gave no signs of it being an important revelation. She wrote the paper according to the outline but without consulting it. The final session Sabrina and Paul spent revising because the background section on the feminist movement was jumbled. Sabrina spell checked her

composition, creating draft number eight. Then she mistakenly printed draft seven and submitted it full of typing and spelling errors.

The following paragraph critiquing "To His Coy Mistress" is one of the strongest paragraphs in the essay.

In the third stanza, the "birds of prey" simile is violent and not really appropriate for love. Animals and human are not comparable here. Also the "tearing" metaphor is a very ferocious comparison which shows the aggression in his mind. Therefore, it is clear that the narrator is not an affectionate person. Because of the narrator's thought and language, this poem is sexist.

Sabrina received a C+ and two angry phone calls on her answering machine accusing her of plagiarism and demanding a meeting. According to Sabrina, Dr. Samuels asked over and over, "Where'd you get those words?" and Sabrina said, "The dictionary." Finally, the professor said, "Don't cry: you'll probably pass—if you do OK on the final exam."

Conclusion

Sabrina did not know how she was supposed to find out her course grade, so Paul walked next door with her to where the grades were posted by student number on Dr. Samuels' door. The most common mark for the course was F. When Sabrina saw her C, she jumped with glee, grabbed Paul by the arm, and said, "Thank you." Then she crossed herself.

As she left, delighted, Paul said that he would meet with her the following week about the individualized educational plan she wanted.

Questions

1. What would you advise Paul Kelly to do? Why?
2. What are the problems? What are the most important problems? What is your rationale?
3. What solutions are promising? What solution(s) would you try first? What would you look for in order to learn from the attempt(s)? What is your rationale?
4. If an individualized learning plan is one of your solutions, how would you proceed in designing it? What objectives, work, and evaluation criteria would you include? What is your rationale?

Case prepared by Jim Bell.