

1 / Looking Inside Yourself

RESPECTING YOURSELF

This book is chiefly about the learning skills you need in order to do well in school. But your *attitude* about yourself and about school is even more crucial than any learning skill. Without a good attitude, you might as well take this book and throw it in the trash.

Consider this basic truth about human nature: **we all want to respect ourselves.** We all want to live our lives in such a way that we think well of our behavior and others think well of us. We do not want to be disrespected or thought of as bad people. An equally basic truth is that the only way we can get respect is to earn it. At a certain point in growing up we realize that life doesn't give us something for nothing. What is important and meaningful is what we earn through trying hard and working hard.

Take a moment to think about the following question: Imagine two people. One person has drifted unhappily through life, putting in a minimal effort at a series of jobs and maybe even at times living off others. One morning the telephone rings and someone says to this person, "Congratulations. You have just won a million dollars in the state lottery." The other person works hard and eventually earns a million dollars; that person is well-regarded by others and has a strong sense of accomplishment and self-worth. Which person would you rather be—the one who *won* a million dollars or the one who *earned* a million dollars?

Hopefully you would choose to be the person who takes pride and satisfaction in having earned a good living. If you relate to that person, your attitude would be something like this: "I want to respect myself and have others respect me. To get this respect, I'm going to work hard to succeed. At this stage in my life, that means doing well in school because education is clearly a key to success." And if you've made mistakes in the past (and many of us have), your attitude should be: "I can change my behavior. I'm going to learn to work hard so I can get somewhere and be someone."

On the next page are two people who once had a bad attitude. Joe Davis (on the left) was a high-school dropout and a drug addict. Today he's married, working as a rehabilitation counselor, and also studying for a master's degree, with the hope of starting a new career as a teacher. Rod Sutton (on the right) was an angry, fatherless kid and a bully who was kicked out of more than one school. Today he and his wife have two children, he is teaching at an inner-city school, and he has recently earned a master's degree in education. You will learn more about their stories as well as some of their thoughts about learning in other parts of this book.



Joe Davis is a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania.
Rod Sutton has a master's degree from Eastern College.

Joe and Rod: "For a long time we just didn't get it."

DOING THE WORK

You need to believe in the saying, "No pain, no gain." The only way to get self-respect and success is to work for them. When I was teaching, I found that among the two hundred or so students I met each year, there was no way of telling at first which students had this attitude and which did not. Some time must pass for people to reveal their attitude by what they do or do not do. What happens is that, as the semester unfolds and classes must be attended and work must be done, some people take on the work and persist even if they hit all kinds of snags and problems. Others don't take on the work or don't persist when things get rough. It becomes clear which students have decided, "I will do the work" and which have not.

The heart of the matter is not the *speed* at which a person learns; the heart of the matter is his or her determination—"I *will* learn." I have seen people who had this quality of determination or persistence do poorly in a course, come back and repeat it, and finally succeed.

For example, I've seen the young woman who wrote the following journal entry as her first assignment in a writing class eventually earn her GED and later a junior college degree:

Well it's 10:48 and my kid is in bed. I don't know yet what Im going to write about but I hope I think of something before this ten minutes are up. boy I don't even like to write that much. I never send my letters or cards because I dislike writing, may be because I never took the time to sit down and really write, I've always wishes I could, put thing on paper that were in my mind. but my spelling isn't at all good, so when I had to take the time to look up a word, I said to heck with it, but, I can't do that with this any way I don't believ I can write for ten minutes straght, but Im trying to refus to stop until Ive made it. Ive always given my self credit for not being a quitter, so I guess I have to keep fighting at this and every thing else in the future, If I wish to reach my gols wich is to pass my GED and go in to nursing. I know it will take me a little longer then some one who hasn't dropped out of school but no matter how long it takes I'm shure I will be well worth It and I'll be glad that I keep fighting. And Im shur my son will be very proud of his mother some day.

Through knowing people as determined as this young woman, I've come to feel that the single most important factor for school survival and success is *an inner commitment to doing the work*. When the crunch comes—and the crunch is the plain hard work that school requires—the person with the commitment meets it head-on; the person without the commitment avoids it in a hundred different ways.

DISCOVERING THE NEED TO DO THE WORK

I have seen too many students over the years who have acted more like zombies in class than like live people. Such students are their own worst enemies. It's clear they regard themselves as unlikely to succeed in school. They walk into the classroom carrying defeat on their shoulders the way other students carry textbooks under their arms.

I'd look at them slouching in their seats and staring into space and think, "What terrible things have gone on in their lives that they've quit already? They have so little faith in their ability to learn that they're not even trying." These students may suddenly disappear one day, and often no one pays much notice because they have already disappeared in spirit long before.

When I have seen such students with resignation in their eyes, I have wanted to shake them by the shoulders and say, "You are not dead. Be proud and pleased that you have brought yourself this far. Yes, life has probably been very hard, but you can still be someone. Breathe. Hope. Act." Such people should refuse to use self-doubt as an excuse for not trying. They should roll up their sleeves and get to work. They should start taking notes in class and trying to learn. I want to say to them, "Get off the bench. Come onto the playing field. Give it a shot. You'll never learn to succeed if you don't try."

Thankfully, not every such student succumbs to the poison of self-doubt. What I have seen happen is that a spark will ignite. Some students discover possibilities within themselves or realize the meaning that school can have in their lives. As a result, they make the inner commitment to do the work that is essential to academic success.

Here is one student's account of a such a discovery in her first semester in college:

My present feeling about college is that it will improve my life. My first attitude was that I didn't need it. I had been bored by high school where it seemed we spent grades 9 to 12 just reviewing everything we had learned up through grade 8.

When I entered college in January I thought it was fun but that's all. I met a lot of people and walked around with college textbooks in my hand playing the game of being a college student. Some weeks I went to class and other weeks I didn't go at all and went off on trips instead. I didn't do much studying. I really wasn't into it but was just going along with the ball game. Sometimes kids would be going to an early class and I would be walking back into the dorm from an all-night party.

Then two things happened. My sociology class was taught by a really cool person who asked us questions constantly, and they began getting to me. I started asking *myself* questions and looking at myself and thinking, "What's going on with me? What do I want and what am I doing?" Also, I discovered that I could write. I wrote a paragraph about my messy brother that was read in class, and everyone roared. Now I'm really putting time into my writing and my other courses as well.

Just the other day my writing teacher asked me, "What is the point at which you changed? Was there a moment of truth when the switch turned to 'on' in your head?" I don't know the exact moment, but it was just there, and now it seems so

real I can almost touch it. I know this is my life and I want to be somebody and college is going to help me do it. I'm here to improve myself, and I'm going to give it my best shot.



Among the present and past students interviewed for this book is Dr. Ben Carson, professor and director of pediatric neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center, the author of several best-selling books, and president of a nonprofit organization, the Carson Scholars Fund.

(The story of how Ben Carson turned his life around from a path that was leading to failure appears on pages 49–54. Dr. Carson is also quoted on pages 48, 79, 115, 141, 204, and 205.)

Dr. Carson talks about his moment of truth in his first semester at Yale:

“Going off to Yale from an inner-city high school in Detroit was an incredible culture shock. I barely had to study in high school. I found myself trying to do that at Yale, and it wasn't working, and I almost had to leave after the first semester. It was that experience, combined with my desire to succeed, that basically made me grab myself by the throat. I said, ‘You're going into the stacks in the library where nobody can bother you, and you're going to study every free moment you have.’ And that's what turned it around for me, just constantly banging it in, over and over again. Study became crucial for me, like breathing.”

➤ **Activity: Evaluating Your Attitude toward School**

Take a moment to think about your own attitude toward learning. Check off each item that applies to you. (If you agree with some sentences in an item but not others, cross out the ones you do not agree with.)

_____ School has never really turned me on. I feel I can start to study if I need to, but I don't want to. What's wrong with being a bit lazy if life is supposed to be about enjoying yourself and having some fun? I want to take it easy and have as much of a good time as I can for now.

_____ I suppose I am passive about studying, but it's not all my fault. I'm tired of just being told what to do. I'm tired of being force-fed what other people think I need to learn. I can't wait to get out of school and be on my own so I can start living my life.

_____ I'm not ready to take responsibility for learning a lot of stuff that is not going to be of any value to me as far as I can see. Why should I study stuff that has no interest for me?

_____ If I start studying, I'll miss out on the good times that school has to offer. I won't have time to go to games or parties. And I don't want to be alone. If I start studying, some of my friends are going to think twice about hanging out with me.

_____ I want to do more in school, but I'm afraid of really giving it a good effort. What if I try my best and I still get lousy grades? My pals will see this, and they'll just laugh at me. I don't want to look foolish, so I'm probably just going to drift along and not call any attention to myself.

_____ Maybe there is no "take charge of my life" switch inside me. Or if there is, maybe there is no way of turning it on. My feeling is that I just want to cruise along and hope I get lucky. Maybe I will win a lot of money in a lottery. I wish I could work hard, but I want to be honest about that. I just don't think I'm going to do it. I'm just going to keep hanging out with my friends and not doing anything.

_____ I guess I've just been out of it for a long time. There are probably lots of reasons why. I got little encouragement along the way. I pretty much just let things happen to me. I feel like a piece of driftwood tossed about on a stormy sea. I do want to do something and to become someone. I've felt like this for a while, and at times I really want to get serious. But so far I just haven't done so.

_____ I'm not an active student, and I don't do my best all the time. But I'm not a zombie either. I do some studying, just not as much as other people would like me to. I should probably do more, and I'm going to work on that and try to do a better job of taking charge of my studies.

_____ I'm ready to move. I want to be active. I believe that a spark has finally begun to burn inside me. I was dead to learning, and now I'm coming alive. I want to get somewhere, and I'm ready to be a serious student. It's true that some of the stuff I have to study is boring, and some teachers do not care. But I feel now that these are just hurdles that will not stop me. I'm going to do my best to get where I want to go.

_____ I'm on the move, and I have taken charge of my life. There is something inside me that is strong and determined to succeed. I feel in my heart of hearts that nothing is going to stop me. It's my life, and I'm going to work hard, respect myself, and gain success and happiness.

If you have a chance, share your answers with other students. Spend some time talking with each other about what your attitude is and, if necessary, how you can improve it.

RUNNING FROM THE WORK

As a school semester unfolds and the crunch of work begins, students are put up against the wall. Like it or not, they must define their role in school. There are only two roads to take. One road is to do the work: to leave the game table, click off the stereo or television, turn down the invitation to go out, get off the phone, stop anything and everything else, and go off by oneself to do the essentially lonely work that studying is. The other road is to escape the work.

Escape Habits

Here are some of the habits that people practice to avoid doing the hard work that school requires. If you see yourself in any of these situations, you need to do some serious thinking about your behavior. Self-knowledge is power! Once you are aware of a problem, you can begin to deal with it.

"I Can't Do It."

Some people will let themselves be discouraged by bad grades. They'll think, "There's no use trying. I'm just not any good at this." But the only way people will really know that they cannot do something is by first trying—giving it their best shot. They must not let a defeatist attitude keep them from making a real effort.

Do not hesitate to take advantage of a tutoring program or a writing, reading, or math lab. You can often go to your teacher as well. If you think you "can't do it," the reason may be that you have given up far too soon.

"I'm Too Busy."

Some people *make* themselves too busy, perhaps working more hours at a part-time job than they need to. Others get overly involved in social activities. Others allow personal or family problems to become so distracting that they cannot concentrate on their work. There are situations in which people are so busy or so troubled that they cannot do their work. But there are also situations in which people exaggerate conflicts or stress. They create an excuse for not doing what they know they should do.

"I'm Too Tired."

People with this excuse usually become tired as soon as it's time to write a paper or study a book or go to class. Their weariness clears up when the work period ends. The "sleepiness syndrome" also expresses itself as an imagined need for naps during the day and then ten hours or more of sleep at night. Students with this attitude are, often literally, closing their eyes to the hard work that school demands.

"I'll Do It Later."

Everyone tends at times to procrastinate—to put things off. Some students, however, constantly postpone doing assignments and setting aside regular study hours. Time and

time again they put off what needs to be done so they can watch TV, talk to a friend, go to the movies, play cards, or do any one of a hundred other things. These students typically wind up cramming for tests and writing last-minute papers, yet they often seem surprised and angry at their low grades.

“I’m Bored with the Subject.”

Students sometimes explain that they are doing poorly in a course because the instructor or the subject matter is boring. These students want education to be entertainment—an unrealistic expectation. On the whole, courses and instructors balance out: Some are boring, some are exciting, many are in between. If a course is not interesting, students should be all the more motivated to do the work so that they can leave the course behind once and for all.

“I’m Here, and That’s What Counts.”

Some students spend their first weeks in college lost in a dangerous fantasy. They feel, “All will be well, for here I am in college. I have a student ID in my pocket, a sweatshirt with the college name on it, and textbooks under my arm. All this proves I am a college student. I have made it.” Such students have succumbed to a fantasy we all at times succumb to: the belief that we will get something for nothing. But everyone knows from experience that this hope is a false one. Life seldom gives us something for nothing—and school won’t either.



Kenyon Whittington is a student at Hampton College.

Kenyon on “I Can’t Do It”:

“I had to deal with my own skepticism and self-doubt. Low esteem was a problem for me, and I saw it was a problem for other students. I eventually developed the attitude, ‘Just do it. If you don’t finish or you don’t get a good grade, at least you tried.’”

Tynara on “I’m Too Busy”:

“I felt I had to get involved with homecoming, I felt I had to become part of student government, and I just got all involved with extracurricular activities. I also felt I had to run home to be with my boyfriend, who was going through hard times. My grades really began to fall, and I just made myself quit all my activities. I made study the name of the game. Then my grades picked up.”



Tynara Chappelle is a graduate of West Chester University.

Kenyon on “I’m Too Tired”:

“One can fall into the ridiculous habit of sleeping all the time. Each day can become one big drowsy day. You must take charge!”

Tynara on “I’ll Do It Later”:

“I reached a point where I was cramming for everything. I became socially involved and just kept thinking I’d be able to handle my studies later. I remember once coming back from a party at five in the morning, and then I had to cram for a test that I was going to have at 8 a.m.! I beat myself up cramming and cramming until I finally realized it just would not work.”

Tynara on “I’m Bored with the Subject”:

“In any course that was not part of my major, I just did the minimum. My grades suffered until I got the message. I had to be well-rounded and pay attention to those courses. You can’t skip studying for a subject just because you don’t like it.”

Kenyon on “I’m Here, and That’s What Counts”:

“This is a trap, especially in the first year. You can enjoy yourself, but you also have to take control. Some students think ‘I’m here and I’m in college,’ but that’s not the end reward. The end reward is walking down the aisle to get your college degree. You don’t want to be one of those students who can only say, ‘I went to such-and-such a school.’ You want to be able to say, ‘I graduated from that school.’”

➤ Activity: Evaluating Yourself for Escape Habits

Evaluate your own use of the escape habits described above. Check the answers that apply.

“I Can’t Do It.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

“I’m Too Busy.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

“I’m Too Tired.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

“I’ll Do It Later.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

“I’m Bored with the Subject.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

“I’m Here, and That’s What Counts.”

___ Never

___ Sometimes

___ Often

One Student’s Escape Story

Here is one student’s moving account of the escape pattern in his life and his discovery of it. Gerald (not his real name) had the courage to look at his behavior, to see it for what it was, and to share it with others.

Gerald’s Story

Somewhere, a little piece of me is lost and crying. Someplace, deep in the shadows of my subconscious, a piece of my soul has sat down and anchored itself in defeat and is trying to pull me down into the darkness with it. This might sound strange to someone who is not familiar with the inner conflicts that can tear and pull at a person’s soul until he begins to stop and sink in his own deep-hollow depths. But sinking doesn’t take much. It takes only one little flaw which, left unattended, will grow and grow . . . until, like cancer, it consumes the soul.

I know now, and I have always known, that help comes first from within. I know that if one doesn’t come to one’s own rescue, then all is lost. I know it is time for me to look at myself, which I would rather avoid. But in order to break free of my own chains, I must look at myself.

I could relate the incidents of youth. I could tell of the many past failures and what I think caused them. But I won’t, for one example will show where I’m at. At the beginning of this summer I set my goals. These goals consisted of the college courses I wanted to complete and where I wanted to be physically and mentally when the summer was over. Listed among the goals to be accomplished were courses I needed in writing and accounting. But

now here, at the end of July, I am so far behind in both courses it looks as if I will fail them both. I ask myself, “Why?” I know that if I work enough, I can handle the courses. So why have I been so lazy? Why is it that the things I seem to want most I either give up or in some way do not strive for? These are the questions I must try to answer.

I think I’ve spent too much of my life just waiting for good things to come. I’ve waited for a magic rainbow to appear in the sky and to drop a pot of gold into my lap. I’ve been hurt so much in life and now I just want it handed to me.

But it’s time for me to stop chasing rainbows. It’s time to stop looking into the sky waiting for help to arrive. It’s time for me to start scraping the rot out of my mind, to stop dreaming and not acting, before I have nothing left to hope for. I can see now that I’ve never given it the total effort, that I’ve always been afraid I would fail or not measure up. So I’ve quit early. Instead of acting on my dreams, I’ve laid back and just floated along. I’ve lived too much time in this world unfulfilled. I’ve got to make my dreams work. I’ve suffered enough in this world. I must do this now, and what it takes is the doing. Somehow I must learn to succeed at success rather than at failure, and the time to start is now.

➤ Activity: Gerald's Story

Place a check beside the items you feel seem true about Gerald.

- He has been badly hurt in life.
- He feels too sorry for himself.
- He has moments when he sees himself clearly.
- He is completely lacking in self-knowledge.
- He fools himself some of the time but not all the time.
- He has good intentions but little follow-through.
- He is haunted by his failures.
- He is very close to taking charge of his life.
- He probably escaped by saying, "I'm too tired."
- He probably escaped by saying, "I'm bored with the subject."
- He probably escaped by saying, "I'll do it later."
- He has no regrets.
- He probably dropped out of school at some point after writing this essay.
- He probably went on to pass his courses and to get a degree.

If you have a chance, discuss your answers with other students. Also, take time to think about the questions below.

1. What do you think Gerald means by saying he "just floated along"?
2. What do you think he means by saying he has "waited for a magic rainbow"?
3. What does Gerald mean when he says that it's time for him to "break free of . . . chains" and "to stop chasing rainbows"?
4. Have you any answers for these questions that Gerald asks himself: "So why have I been so lazy? Why is it that the things I seem to want most I either give up or in some way do not strive for?"
5. Have you or has anyone you know ever resembled Gerald? In what ways?

We have probably all known students like Gerald. They are students who never really determine to try their best. They know what they should do but never do it. They make excuses; they escape. They fool themselves, time and time again. They try to have as much fun as they can, and they keep saying, "Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will get serious. Tomorrow I will start working hard." There is often a terrible hurt deep inside them. And for some reason deep inside them a switch never turns on, a spark of determination never ignites. They are individuals who are unable to take charge of their own lives, unable to work hard, and, as Gerald puts it, unable "to succeed at success."

TWO SUCCESS STORIES

Here are the accounts of two students determined to meet the challenges of learning:

Zamil's Story



Zamil Ortiz is a student at Haverford College.

Zamil Ortiz is a small person with a shy smile and a soft, polite voice. But on the topic of education—of being the best person that one can be—she speaks out boldly.

“Whatever obstacles stand between you and school, you can overcome them,” she says. “If you have to go to school without breakfast because there’s no food in the house, then you do that. If you have no money to continue, then work for a semester or a year and earn enough to go back, but go! There’s no excuse for giving up. Don’t just stay home and watch TV.”

Zamil knows the difficulties that she’s talking about. Growing up poor after her father abandoned his family, she often heard her mother say, “You know, when

you make it through college and have a good job, your father will come around and want to be part of your life again.”

“And if that happens, I will be ready,” says Zamil proudly. “I’ll say to him, ‘We did this, Mom and me, all by ourselves.’ My success will be my gift to my mother.”

Zamil talks more about the personal commitment one must make to oneself: “You have to believe in your inner worth. Don’t let anybody stop you. Remember, this is *your* life. Don’t follow somebody else around. Don’t think, ‘Oh, but if I go to college I might lose my girlfriend, might lose my boyfriend.’ Excuse me? Is that person living your life, or are you? Get your head on straight!”

Ginger's Story



Ginger Jackson is a student at Muhlenberg College.

Ginger Jackson, a second-year student at Muhlenberg College, wants to make a difference by becoming a teacher some day. She loves being in college and says, “All I have to do when I get discouraged is remind myself that if I don’t keep making good grades, I’ll have to leave. That’s enough to get me back on track.”

Ginger shrugs off any difficulties about college life. “Yeah, I have to work hard, but that’s why I’m here,” she says. In her opinion, the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful school experience is a student’s attitude and sense of focus. “I see

a huge difference between kids who really want to be in college and kids whose parents have said, ‘You’re going.’ To succeed in school—or anywhere else—you have to really want to be where you are.”

Hanging above the desk in Ginger’s room is a poster announcing in giant letters, “DON’T QUIT.” Every time Ginger glances at it, she remembers the words that guide her, and that she will share with her own students some day: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Your goal may seem very far away at first, but if you keep going a step at a time, you’ll reach it.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

1 If you have not yet taken charge of your life, this chapter is the most important one in the book for you. A statement at the beginning of the chapter bears repeating: If your attitude is not a hopeful and determined one, you might as well take this book and toss it in the trash.

2 Here is another final thought for you to consider:

In your heart of hearts, you know that all the following words are true. The truth is that school, like life, is demanding. The truth is that to become someone and to get somewhere, we must be prepared and able to make a solid effort. We must accept the fact that little can be won or achieved or cherished in life without hard work. The decision that each of us must make is the commitment to do the hard work required for success in school—and ultimately in life. By making such a decision, and acting on it, we assume control of our lives. By not acting, by waiting for good things to drop into our laps, we run the terrible risk of waking up some day and knowing that we have wasted our lives. Please don't let this happen. Wake up to the possibilities and the power within you. Have faith and a brave heart and begin working to succeed in your life.

FINAL ACTIVITIES

1 Check Your Understanding

To check your understanding of the chapter, answer the following questions.

1. The most crucial factor needed for one to do well in school is
 - a. the ability to learn quickly.
 - b. respect for teachers.
 - c. involvement in extracurricular activities.
 - d. a commitment to doing the work.
2. Which of the following is *not* one of the escape habits outlined in the chapter?
 - a. “I’m too disorganized.”
 - b. “I’ll do it later.”
 - c. “I’m bored with the subject.”
 - d. “I’m too tired.”
3. According to the chapter, students who tell themselves “I’m here, and that’s what counts” believe that
 - a. it is up to them to work hard in college.
 - b. they have already proved their worth merely by getting into college.
 - c. God has put them on earth for a special purpose.
 - d. attending class faithfully is the key to success in school.
4. The student named Gerald
 - a. always made the right choices in college.
 - b. succumbed to his feelings of defeat and withdrew from college.
 - c. finally realized that he must actively work to succeed.
 - d. will never find the inspiration to succeed in school.
5. Which of the following is *not* one of the truths we must accept in order to succeed in school?
 - a. School, like life, is demanding.
 - b. Good things come to those who wait for them to happen.
 - c. We must be prepared to make a solid effort in order to achieve our goals.
 - d. Little can be accomplished without hard work.

2 Questions for Writing or Discussion

You may find it helpful to think about and write out your answers to the following questions. Or your instructor may put you in a small group or pair you with another student and have you discuss the questions with each other.

1. An opening statement in the chapter is that “we all want to respect ourselves.” Describe someone you know who you feel respects himself or herself. How can you tell?
 Then describe someone you know who does not respect himself or herself. Again, how can you tell?
 Finally, think about how much you do or do not respect yourself. What steps do you need to take to respect yourself even more than you may now?

2. The author says that “the single most important factor for school survival and success is *an inner commitment to doing the work*.” Do you feel you have this commitment? If not, or if it is not as strong a commitment as you want, what do you think you need to do to create a strong commitment?
3. Do you know any students like the ones described on page 7 who are “more like zombies in class than like live people”? How do they behave? What do you think can be done to help them change?
4. Do you have any of the escape habits described on pages 10–11? Which is your favorite habit? Do you think this habit has been harmful to you as you pursue goals in life? What would be your advice to yourself?
5. In light of the amount of respect you have for yourself, your attitude about school, the choices you make between working hard and having fun, and the escape habits you may practice, how would you rate your chances of success in school? Be as honest as you can in doing this!

___ 100%

___ 75%

___ 50%

___ 25%

What are your reasons for how you rate your chances?

3 Reacting to a Reading

Read the following essay, and then write about or discuss the questions that follow.

The Fist, the Clay, and the Rock

The best teacher I ever had was Mr. Gery, who taught twelfth grade English. He started his class with us by placing on the front desk a large mound of clay and, next to it, a rock about the size of a tennis ball. That got our attention quickly, and the class quieted down and waited for him to talk.

Mr. Gery looked at us and smiled and said, “If there were a pill I could give you that would help you learn, and help you want to learn, I would pass it out right now. But there is no magic pill. Everything is up to you.”

Then Mr. Gery held up his fist and kind of shook it at us. Some of us looked at each other. What’s going on? we all thought. Mr. Gery continued: “I’d like you to imagine something for me. Imagine that my fist is the real world—not the sheltered world of this school but the real world. Imagine that my fist is everything that can happen to you out in the real world.”

Then he reached down and pointed to the ball of clay and also the rock. He said, “Now imagine that you’re either this lump of clay or the rock. Got that?” He smiled at us, and we waited to see what he was going to do.

He went on, “Let’s say you’re this ball of clay, and you’re just sitting around minding your own business and then out of nowhere here’s what happens.” He made a fist again and he smashed his fist into the ball of clay, which quickly turned into a half-flattened lump.

He looked at us, still smiling. “If the real world comes along and takes a swing at you, you’re likely to get squashed. And you know what? The real world will come along and take a swing at you. You’re going to take some heavy hits. Maybe you already have taken some heavy hits. Chances are that there are more down the road. So if you don’t want to get squashed,

you're better off if you're not a piece of clay.

"Now let's say you're the rock and the real world comes along and takes a swing at you. What will happen if I smash my fist into this rock?" The answer was obvious. Nothing would happen to the rock. It would take the blow and not be changed.

He continued, "So what would you like to be, people, the clay or the rock? And what's my point? What am I trying to say to you?"

Someone raised a hand and said, "We should all be rocks. It's bad news to be clay." And some of us laughed, though a bit uneasily.

Mr. Gery went on. "OK, you all want to be rocks, don't you? Now my question is, 'How do you get to be a rock? How do you make yourself strong, like the rock, so that you won't be crushed and beaten up even if you take a lot of hits?'"

We didn't have an answer right away, and he went on, "You know I can't be a fairy godmother. I can't pull out a wand and say, 'Thanks for wanting to be a rock. I hereby wave my wand and make you a rock.' That's not the way life works. The only way to become a rock is to go out and make yourself a rock.

"Imagine you're a fighter getting ready for a match. You go to the gym, and maybe when you start you're flabby. Your whole body is flab and it's soft like the clay. To make your body hard like a rock, you've got to train.

"Now if you want to train and become hard like the rock, I can help you. You need to develop skills, and you need to acquire knowledge. Skills will make you strong, and knowledge is power. It's my job to help you with language skills. I'll help you train to become a better reader.

I'll help you train to be a better writer. But you know, I'm just a trainer. I can't make you be a fighter.

"All I can do is tell you that you need to make yourself a fighter. You need to become a rock. Because you don't want to be flabby when the real world comes along and takes a crack at you. Don't spend the semester just being Mr. Cool Man or Ms. Designer Jeans or Mr. or Ms. Sex Symbol of the class. Be someone. Be someone."

He then smashed that wad of clay one more time, and the thud of his fist broke the silence and then created more silence. He sure had our total attention.

"At the end of the semester, some of you are going to leave here, and you're still going to be clay. You're going to be the kind of person that life can smush around, and that's sad. But some of you, maybe a lot of you, are going to be rocks. I want you to be a rock. Go for it. And when this comes"—and he held up his fist—"you'll be ready."

And then Mr. Gery segued into talking about the course. But his demonstration stayed with most of us. And as the semester unfolded, he would call back his vivid images. When someone would not hand in a paper and make a lame excuse, he would say, "Whatever you say, Mr. Clay" or "Whatever you say, Ms. Clay." Or if someone would forget a book, or not study for a test, or not do a reading assignment, he would say, "Of course, Mr. Clay." Sometimes we would get into it also and call out, "Hey, Clayman."

Mr. Gery worked us very hard, but he was not a mean person. We all knew he was a kind man who wanted us to become strong. It was obvious he wanted us to do well. By the end of the semester, he had to call very few of us Mr. or Ms. Clay.

Questions on the Reading

1. What does Mr. Gery mean by saying that fists will come along in life? Give an example of a time you experienced a fist, or someone you know experienced a fist.
2. What does Mr. Gery mean by “clay”? What is the danger of being clay?
3. What does Mr. Gery mean by “rock”? How does one best become a rock?
4. How would you describe yourself—as clay, or as rock? What steps might you need to take to make yourself a rock?

4 Writing a Paragraph

A *paragraph* is a short paper of 150 to 200 words. It consists of an opening **point** followed by a series of sentences supporting that point. Write a paragraph in which you provide supporting details for one of the points below.

Point: Several experiences have helped me realize that I must start acting responsibly in everyday life.

Point: My attitude about school has begun to change.

Point: At times I fall into some of the escape habits described on pages 10–11 of this chapter.

After you have chosen your point, provide **supporting details or examples** to back up your point. For instance, if you have decided to support the first point above, you might say in part:

When my parents got divorced, I became aware that my father could not do everything to take care of me. I had to stop acting like a child and start behaving more like an adult. For example, I started pulling together the dirty clothes and sheets and doing the laundry.

Or if you decided to support the second point above, you might say in part:

I didn't really study much for my first test in biology this semester. When I got the test back, it was full of red X's and at the bottom was an “F” written so big that it took up half the page. I was embarrassed by the grade and quickly hid the paper so others would not see it. But I was also angry at myself for doing so poorly.

Or if you decided to support the third point above, you might say in part:

For one thing, I tell myself “I'm too busy.” But often all I mean by this is that I would rather talk on the phone and hang out with friends or watch TV than do any real studying.

When writing your paragraph, use examples and details that are based on your actual experience.

5 Speaking about Motivation and Commitment

Imagine that you have been asked to give a speech about self-respect, motivation, and commitment to a class of students who will be entering college in the fall. Prepare a talk full of practical advice that really communicates with them. Imagine that the students have been told beforehand that you will be as stiff and dry as a board and that your talk will have little relevance or value. You have two goals, then: 1) to use language and images that really connect with students, and 2) to pack your talk with lots of truly helpful information. Your speech should be five to ten minutes long.