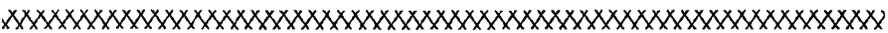


ALICE STEINBACH

THE MISS DENNIS SCHOOL OF WRITING

Alice Steinbach (b. 1933) is a freelance writer whose essays and travel sketches often deal with what she calls "lessons from a woman's life." As a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, where she won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1985, Steinbach wrote a column about her ninth-grade creative writing teacher. Revised as an essay—essays are "much more complete" than columns, says Steinbach—it became the title piece in a collection of personal essays, *The Miss Dennis School of Writing* (1996). Here the "lesson" is both a writing lesson and a life lesson. Miss Dennis taught that good descriptive writing (her specialty) makes the reader see what the writer sees. She also taught her students to find their unique personal voices. Steinbach's distinctive voice can be heard in her vivid descriptions of her old teacher. It is a voice, she says, that "tends to look at people with a child's eye."



“What kind of writing do you do?” asked the novelist sitting to my left at a writer’s luncheon. 1
“I work for a newspaper in Baltimore,” he was told. 2
“Oh, did you go to journalism school?” 3
“Well, yes.” 4
“Columbia?” he asked, invoking the name of the most prestigious journalism school in the country. 5
“Actually, no,” I heard myself telling him. “I’m one of the lucky ones. I am a graduate of the Miss Dennis School of Writing.” 6
Unimpressed, the novelist turned away. Clearly it was a credential that did not measure up to his standards. But why should it? He was not one of the lucky ones. He had never met Miss Dennis, my ninth- 7

grade creative writing teacher, or had the good fortune to be her student. Which meant he had never experienced the sight of Miss Dennis chasing Dorothy Singer around the classroom, threatening her with a yardstick because Dorothy hadn’t paid attention and her writing showed it.

“You want to be a writer?” Miss Dennis would yell, out of breath from all the running and yardstick-brandishing. “Then pay attention to what’s going on around you. Connect! You are not Switzerland—neutral, aloof, uninvolved. Think Italy!”

Miss Dennis said things like this. If you had any sense, you wrote them down.

“I can’t teach you how to write, but I can tell you how to look at things, how to pay attention,” she would bark out at us, like a drill sergeant confronting a group of undisciplined, wet-behind-the-ears Marine recruits. To drive home her point, she had us take turns writing a description of what we saw on the way to school in the morning. Of course, you never knew which morning would be your turn so—just to be on the safe side—you got into the habit of looking things over carefully every morning and making notes: “Saw a pot of red geraniums sitting in the sunlight on a white stucco porch; an orange-striped cat curled like a comma beneath a black van; a dark gray cloud scudding across a silver morning sky.”

It’s a lesson that I have returned to again and again throughout my writing career. To this day, I think of Miss Dennis whenever I write a certain kind of sentence. Or to be more precise, whenever I write a sentence that actually creates in words the picture I want readers to see.

Take, for instance, this sentence: Miss Dennis was a small, compact woman, about albatross height—or so it seemed to her students—with short, straight hair the color of apricots and huge eyeglasses that were always slipping down her nose.

Or this one: Miss Dennis always wore a variation of one outfit—a dark-colored, flared woolen skirt, a tailored white blouse and a cardigan sweater, usually black, thrown over her shoulders and held together by a little pearl chain.

Can you see her? I can. And the image of her makes me smile. Still.

But it was not Miss Dennis’s appearance or her unusual teaching method—which had a lot in common with an out-of-control terrier—

that made her so special. What set her apart was her deep commitment to liberating the individual writer in each student.

“What lies at the heart of good writing,” she told us over and over again, “is the writer’s ability to find his own unique voice. And then to use it to tell an interesting story.” Somehow she made it clear that we were interesting people with interesting stories to tell. Most of us, of course, had never even known we had a story to tell, much less an interesting one. But soon the stories just started bubbling up from some inner wellspring.

Finding the material, however, was one thing; finding the individual voice was another.

Take me, for instance. I arrived in Miss Dennis’s class trailing all sorts of literary baggage. My usual routine was to write like Colette on Monday, one of the Bronte sisters on Wednesday, and Mark Twain on Friday.

Right away, Miss Dennis knocked me off my high horse.

“Why are you telling other people’s stories?” she challenged me, peering up into my face. (At fourteen I was already four inches taller than Miss Dennis.) “You have your own stories to tell.”

I was tremendously relieved to hear this and immediately proceeded to write like my idol, E. B. White. Miss Dennis, however, wasn’t buying.

“How will you ever find out what you have to say if you keep trying to say what other people have already said?” was the way she dispensed with my E. B. White impersonation. By the third week of class, Miss Dennis knew my secret. She knew I was afraid—afraid to pay attention to my own inner voice for fear that when I finally heard it, it would have nothing to say.

What Miss Dennis told me—and I have carefully preserved these words because they were then, and are now, so very important to me—was this: “Don’t be afraid to discover what you’re saying in the act of saying it.” Then, in her inimitably breezy and endearing way, she added: “Trust me on this one.”

From the beginning, she made it clear to us that it was not “right” or “wrong” answers she was after. It was thinking.

“Don’t be afraid to go out on a limb,” she’d tell some poor kid struggling to reason his way through an essay on friendship or courage.

And eventually—once we stopped being afraid that we’d be chopped off out there on that limb—we needed no encouragement to say what we thought. In fact, after the first month, I can’t remember ever feeling afraid of failing in her class. Passing or failing didn’t seem to be the point of what she was teaching.

Miss Dennis spent as much time, maybe more, pointing out what was right with your work as she did pointing out what was wrong. I can still hear her critiquing my best friend’s incredibly florid essay on nature. “You are a very good observer of nature,” she told the budding writer. “And if you just write what you see without thinking so much about adjectives and comparisons, we will see it through your attentive eyes.”

By Thanksgiving vacation I think we were all a little infatuated with Miss Dennis. And beyond that, infatuated with the way she made us feel about ourselves—that we were interesting people worth listening to.

I, of course, fancied I had a special relationship with her. It was certainly special to me. And, to tell the truth, I knew she felt the same way.

The first time we acknowledged this was one day after class when I stayed behind to talk to her. I often did that and it seemed we talked about everything—from the latest films to the last issue of the *New Yorker*. The one thing we did not talk about was the sadness I felt about my father’s death. He had died a few years before and, although I did not know it then, I was still grieving his absence. Without knowing the details, Miss Dennis somehow picked up on my sadness. Maybe it was there in my writing. Looking back I see now that, without my writing about it directly, my father’s death hovered at the edges of all my stories.

But on this particular day I found myself talking not about the movies or about writing but instead pouring out my feelings about the loss of my father. I shall never forget that late fall afternoon: the sound of the vanilla-colored blinds flap, flap, flapping in the still classroom; sun falling in shafts through the windows, each ray illuminating tiny galaxies of chalk dust in the air; the smell of wet blackboards; the teacher, small with apricot-colored hair, listening intently to a young girl blurting out her grief. These memories are stored like vintage photographs.

The words that passed between the young girl and the attentive teacher are harder to recall. With this exception. “One day,” Miss Dennis

told me, "you will write about this. Maybe not directly. But you will write about it. And you will find that all this has made you a better writer and a stronger person."

After that day, it was as if Miss Dennis and I shared something. We never talked again about my father but spent most of our time discussing our mutual interests. We both loved poetry and discovered one afternoon that each of us regarded Emily Dickinson with something approaching idolatry. Right then and there, Miss Dennis gave me a crash course in why Emily Dickinson's poems worked. I can still hear her talking about the "spare, slanted beauty" in Dickinson's unique choice of words. She also told me about the rather cloistered life led by this New England spinster, noting that nonetheless Emily Dickinson knew the world as few others did. "She found her world within the word," is the way I remember Miss Dennis putting it. Of course, I could be making that part up.

That night, propped up in bed reading Emily Dickinson's poetry, I wondered if Miss Dennis, a spinster herself, identified in some way with the woman who wrote:

Wild nights—Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

It seems strange, I know, but I never really knew anything about Miss Dennis' life outside of the classroom. Oh, once she confided in me that the initial "M" in her name stood for Mildred. And I was surprised when I passed by the teachers' lounge one day and saw her smoking a cigarette, one placed in a long, silver cigarette holder. It seemed an exceedingly sophisticated thing to do and it struck me then that she might be more worldly than I had previously thought.

But I didn't know how she spent her time or what she wanted from life or anything like that. And I never really wondered about it. Once I remember talking to some friends about her age. We guessed somewhere around fifty—which seemed really old to us. In reality, Miss Dennis was around forty.

It was Miss Dennis, by the way, who encouraged me to enter some writing contests. To my surprise, I took first place in a couple of them. Of course, taking first place is easy. What's hard is being rejected. But Miss Dennis helped me with that, too, citing all the examples of famous writers who'd been rejected time and time again. "Do you know what they told George Orwell when they rejected *Animal Farm*?" she would ask me. Then without waiting for a reply, she'd answer her own question: "The publisher told him, 'It is impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.A.'"

When I left her class at the end of the year, Miss Dennis gave me a present: a book of poems by Emily Dickinson. I have it still. The spine is cracked and the front cover almost gone, but the inscription remains. On the inside flyleaf, in her perfect Palmer Method handwriting, she had written: "Say what you see. Yours in Emily Dickinson, Miss Dennis."

She had also placed little checks next to two or three poems. I took this to mean she thought they contained a special message for me. One of those checked began this way:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul . . .

I can remember carefully copying out these lines onto a sheet of paper, one which I carried around in my handbag for almost a year. But time passed, the handbag fell apart and who knows what happened to the yellowing piece of paper with the words about hope.

The years went by. Other schools and other teachers came and went. But one thing remained constant: My struggle to pay attention to my own inner life; to hear a voice that I would recognize finally as my own. Not only in my writing but in my life.

Only recently, I learned that Miss Dennis had died at the age of fifty. When I heard this, it occurred to me that her life was close to being over when I met her. Neither of us knew this, of course. Or at least I didn't. But lately I've wondered if she knew something that day we talked about sadness and my father's death. "Write about it," she said. "It will help you."

And now, reading over these few observations, I think of Miss Dennis. But not with sadness. Actually, thinking of Miss Dennis makes me

smile. I think of her and see, with marked clarity, a small, compact woman with apricot-colored hair. She is with a young girl and she is saying something.

She is saying: "Pay attention."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX FOR DISCUSSION XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. When some teachers say "Pay attention," they mean "Pay attention to what I am saying." According to her former pupil, Alice Steinbach, what did Miss Dennis mean when she told students to pay attention?
2. It was not Miss Dennis's appearance nor her teaching methods that made her so special as a teacher of writing, says Steinbach, but "her deep commitment to liberating the individual writer in each student" (15). How did Miss Dennis accomplish this feat in Steinbach's case?
3. Steinbach poses a direct question to the reader in paragraph 14: "Can you see her?" Well, can you? And if so, what exactly do you see—and hear? For example, what color was Miss Dennis's hair?
4. As a professional writer, Steinbach thinks of her old teacher whenever she writes a sentence "that actually creates in words the picture I want readers to see" (11). This is precisely what good DESCRIPTIVE writing does, although it may appeal to other senses as well as sight. How did Miss Dennis teach this kind of writing?
5. Writing about old teachers who die can be an occasion for sentimentality or excessively emotional writing. Do you think Steinbach's tribute to her former teacher is overly emotional, or does she successfully avoid sentimentality? If she avoids it, in your opinion, please explain how you think she does so. If not, please explain why you think she doesn't. Find places in her essay that support your view.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. Point out several DESCRIPTIVE passages in Steinbach's essay that follow her principle of creating in words what she wants the reader to see.
2. Why do you think Steinbach, looking back over her recollections of Miss Dennis, refers to them as "observations" (41)?
3. Like the other MODES OF WRITING, description seldom stands alone. Often it shades into NARRATIVE, as here. Thus Miss Dennis, who greatly valued the

writer's eye, urged the student, once she found her unique way of writing at the world, to use it "to tell an interesting story" (16). Whose story is Steinbach telling besides Miss Dennis's? How interesting do you find this narrative?

4. How would you describe Steinbach's personal "voice" in this essay? EXAMPLES from the essay to demonstrate your description.
5. What DOMINANT IMPRESSION of Miss Dennis do we get from Steinbach's description of her in paragraphs 12 through 14 and 41? Of Steinbach herself?
6. How informative do you find Steinbach's essay as a lesson on how to write good description? Where does Steinbach ANALYZE the process? (PROCESS ANALYSIS is discussed in Chapter 5.)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX WORDS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. Which is more CONCRETE, to say that a woman has "hair the color of apricot" or to say that she is a redhead or blonde (12)? Which is more specific?
2. The orange-striped cat in young Steinbach's DESCRIPTION of her writing school is "curled like a comma" beneath a van (10). Such stated COMPARISONS frequently using *like* or *as*, are called SIMILES. Implied comparisons, without *like* or *as*, are called METAPHORS. What metaphoric comparison does Steinbach use in the same description? What is she comparing to what?
3. Steinbach compares Miss Dennis to an "albatross" and "an out-of-control terrier" (12, 15). A terrier, you are likely familiar with; but just how tall is an albatross? Does it matter that her reader may never have seen one? By describing Miss Dennis, what do these fanciful comparisons tell you about her former writing pupil?
4. Steinbach arrived in Miss Dennis's class "trailing all sorts of literary baggage" (18). To what is she comparing herself here?
5. How would you describe the words that Steinbach uses in paragraph 18 to describe the afternoon? Concrete or ABSTRACT? Specific or general? "Flag" for example, could be both a concrete and a specific term.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX FOR WRITING XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. On your next walk to or around school, pay close attention to your surroundings. Take notes, as young Steinbach does in paragraph 10. DESCRIBE what you see in a paragraph that "creates in words the picture" you want your reader to see.