

Pruning
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Jeri waited anxiously for her essay to be returned. She felt pretty good about this one. She had understood the passage by George Bernard Shaw and thought she had a handle on what devices he had used and the effect he was hoping for in his readers.

She watched the faces of her fellow students as they accepted their papers, tightened their mouths as they surveyed the red ink gushing all over their papers, and then through squinted eyes turned to the last page to take a peek at their grades.

Jeri knew from experience that the amount of red bleeding all over a paper had nothing to do with a person's overall grade. That red could be positive or negative comments. She could hear a few groans along with some squeals of delight, and one, "Yeah!" coming from Robert.

She waited anxiously. She knew she had nailed it.

Mrs. Granger walked her way. She felt her heart pound in her chest. The paper was handed to her. She could see the river of red but chose not to read the comments just yet. She held her breath and lifted the corners of the pages till she revealed the last page. Then she let out a deflated sigh and felt a wave of disappointment flow over her.

A lousy C. This was totally unfair. She thought it was the best essay she had ever written.

"I'd like you to take a few minutes to read over my comments, and then I'd like to talk about the essays and the passage," Mrs. Granger instructed.

Yeah, right, Jeri thought. I really don't want to read what you have to say. This is totally unfair. You expect too much. We're only juniors, and you want us to write like sophomores in college. Lighten up, lady. Give us a break.

She was still carrying on her inner monologue when Mrs. Granger was ready to discuss.

"Overall, this is the best a lot of you have written, and yet you may be looking at grades that seem subpar for you," she began.

You're telling me, complained Jeri silently. Some motivation you're giving us here, Teach!

"But the point is, you still have a long way to go before the Advanced Placement test, and I think it's fairer to give you an assessment based on where you would score on that level than to mislead you and give you an A now. I don't want to lull you into a false sense of security."

Oh, lull me, lull me, begged Jeri. Forget about being fair. Just give me my A.

"Most of you have a tendency to be wordy. I want you to tighten your work. If what you said in four words can be said in two, do it. If it can be said in one, do it!"

Jeri glanced over her paper. Various sections were highlighted and, "Tighten," was written in the margin. Then how are we going to get enough pages to make an essay? she wondered.

Mrs. Granger seemed to be reading her mind.

"Most of you developed your wordiness when you had elementary or junior high teachers asking for a four page paper or a five hundred word theme, and you only had two hundred words worth of stuff to say. So what did you do? You said your two hundred words worth of stuff in five hundred words.

Sheepish faces grinned at each other across the room.

"Get rid of that habit," Mrs. Granger said. "Readers don't want to have to muddle through six words to get one word's worth of meaning. Secondly, you need to have strong verbs.

They're the motor of your sentence. Without them, you're dead in the water. In your first paragraph, I want you to circle all your verbs."

Jeri picked up her pen and started circling.

"What's a verb?" Candace whispered behind her. Someone tried to explain.

"If you have 'get,' 'have,' or any form of 'to be' like 'is,' then you are working with some pretty weak verbs. Make that one word do double time for you. Make it express the action and convey some connotative meaning as well. If you want to say, 'Bill walked arrogantly across the quad,' say, 'Bill strutted' instead."

Despite her bad mood, Jeri found herself listening as Mrs. Granger continued to explain what constituted good, strong writing and thinking and then showed various examples. When the bell rang, Jeri was exhausted.

"Whadya get on your paper?" Sandy asked as the two left class.

"The ubiquitous C," Jeri answered. "But please note of the use of the strong adjective 'ubiquitous.'"

Sandy giggled. "You're just upset because you didn't get your usual A," Sandy noted.

"It was and A paper," Jeri countered. "It was probably better than half of the class, definitely better than Sarah's, and I know she garnered a C too. And please note that I did not utilize 'got' in that sentence."

Sandy sobered. "You shouldn't be upset with Mrs. Granger," she said.

"And why not?" Jeri asked. "I don't think it's fair. I did good work, maybe not up to her perfect standards but better than most people, and I should be rewarded, not chopped off at the knees. Think what that will do to my vulnerable self-esteem."

Sandy giggled. "Hopefully bring it back down to the level of the rest of us," she said.

Jeri threw her a withering smirk. "It was a good essay."

"But not great. And I think Mrs. Granger believes you can be great."

"Maybe I don't want to be great."

Sandy laughed. "Oh, yes you do. You just don't want the pain that comes with it."

Jeri grimaced. That was too close to home.

"She's pruning us, Jeri. She's stripping away all the dead stuff so we can grow stronger and write even better."

Jeri gave her a wry look. "You almost make her out to be the good guy."

Sandy threw her a "now think about it" look. "And you're determined to think she's the bad guy."

Jeri thought about that for a minute.

"Are you going to rewrite it?" Sandy asked.

Another withering look from Jeri. "Now what do you think?" she said. "I can't very well take a C."

"Sure you can," Sandy replied. "Lots of people are satisfied with a C."

Jeri released a snort of contempt.

"Well, not me," she replied.

Sandy grinned. "Do you think Mrs. Granger knew that?"

"Let's not give the little lady too much credit here. Anyway, what are you driving at?"

Sandy smiled mischievously.

"Would you have rewritten your paper if you had received an A?"

This time Jeri threw her the "get real" look.

“How did you ever wind up in the Advanced Placement class with stupid questions like that?” Jeri asked. “Of course, I wouldn’t have. What would be the point?”

“Exactly,” Sandy explained, pointing her finger in Jeri’s face. “And then you wouldn’t have gotten any better. Your writing would still have been wordy, and your verbs weak, and—.”

“I would have tightened and done all that on test day,” Jeri interrupted.

“You wouldn’t have, or rather couldn’t have, and you know it,” Sandy argued. “You can’t perform in a stressful situation what you’ve never practiced. Face it, Jeri. Your ego’s hurt and you don’t like it. You don’t like someone telling you you’re not perfect.”

Jeri stared at her at a loss for words. She hated being wrong. That always meant someone else was right. And Sandy was right. She didn’t like being criticized. It hurt. She didn’t like her weaknesses being pointed out. It was embarrassing and humiliating. She didn’t like others doing better than she did. It seemed to indicate some deficiency in her. And she definitely didn’t like rewriting papers. It was a tough and grueling process compared to the effortless flow of the original.

She caught herself grinning. But she did like getting better, and she knew, though she would never admit it to a soul, that what Mrs. Granger had written on her paper and discussed in class would make her a stronger writer. If she learned the lesson now, she wouldn’t have to experience this again. But that didn’t mean it wouldn’t be something else next time.

She turned to her friend.

“See what happens when the ol’ pruning shears are put to work? People have a chance to see into the heart of a person. See her true nature.”

“But only till spring,” Sandy reminded her. “Then you’re covered in beautiful blossoms.”