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Literacy: How I Fell In, Out, and Back In Love With it

Over the course of a lifetime, we learn hundreds if not thousands of different skills. These vary widely in context, value, complexity, and longevity. For example, learning all of the best strategies to beat the Pokémon games as a kid was once a great use of my time, but doesn't impact my life much these days. On the other hand, there are some skills that we learn early on that continue to be relevant for the rest of our lives. A prime example of this is literacy. In essence, literacy is the ability to interpret the thoughts, ideas, lessons, and emotions of authors through various mediums. Our literacy continually evolves, developing through both positive and negative experiences, which I will demonstrate through the accomplishments and challenges that I've faced along my literacy journey.

My literacy began by reading with my parents and grandparents. Over time, I gradually transitioned from being read to, to taking turns reading aloud, and eventually to reading aloud by myself to family. In fact, some of my fondest memories as a child involved reading, particularly with books like *Go, Dog. Go!* And *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

This early exposure and incremental progression helped to establish both literacy skills and a positive emotional association with reading. When I got to kindergarten, we built on these reading skills and began learning to write, starting with daily journaling. I can still remember the

distinct red spiral bound journals we used, that included both lines for writing and a space to add an accompanying drawing on every page, establishing how words and images can come together to convey ideas.

A couple months into the year, I began to be pulled out to write with a smaller group of “advanced readers and writers” (whatever that means). These sessions certainly helped me reach further towards my literacy potential, but likely planted the seeds of high expectations for myself, a problem that would become relevant as I faced setbacks down the road.

A couple years went by, and by second grade, I was beginning to read on my own. It was during this time that I discovered the *A to Z Mysteries* series, which completely changed my relationship with reading. I cannot understate how much I loved these books; The mystery aspect was not only engaging, but also taught me how to follow a central conflict and make deductions from clues. Additionally there were a whopping 26 books in the series (plus the holiday specials), allowing me to read new and exciting books without having to adjust to new settings and characters every time. These books not only sparked my love of independent reading, but also taught me new skills as a reader, leading to significant progression of my literacy development.

This progress was both a blessing and a curse. The very fact that I was improving meant that I was inevitably going to have to begin reading more difficult books as my skills improved. This brings me to third grade, where things began to take a turn for the worse. My teacher that year, Mrs. Mills, was absolutely amazing. In fact, her and my mom still interact on facebook from time to time.

Mrs. Mills always wanted what was best for me, which meant pushing me to reach my full potential. However, there was one instance where this didn't work out for the better. That

winter, she suggested that I read a book called *Hatchet*. The book describes how a boy who goes on a single-person flight has to crash the plane after the pilot has a heart attack, and then has to survive on his own in the wild. I'm sure that I missed out on a great story and insightful themes and symbolism, but I just wasn't emotionally mature enough to appreciate what the book had to offer. The plot moved at an incredibly slow pace compared to what I had been reading up to that point, which made it painfully hard to focus and enjoy the book. I began to dread the thought of picking it up to read, as what was once a pastime had become a chore. This was the beginning of a love-hate relationship with reading that would last for about eight years.

In reality, I really did enjoy a vast majority of the reading I did during this period. Yet, there was still a level of ambiguity in regards to how I felt about reading. For example, there was a great deal of friction involved in picking up a book to read, especially if it was a specific book and chapter that was assigned for school. These feelings applied to writing as well; At that point, most of my assignments were to be typed using Google Docs, which was much less tedious than writing out an essay by hand. However, this didn't make up for the mental strain induced by the thought of writing.

Usually, once I started, the negative feelings diminished, but this wasn't always the case. I can remember at least one instance per year throughout middle and early high school where some English reading or assignment brought out so much frustration and anxiety that I broke down and told my parents that I didn't want to take honors English the following year. Despite feeling extremely overwhelmed, I never actually followed through on these desires. Deep down, I enjoyed reading; I just didn't realize it due to the immense pressure that I felt while reading and writing for English class.

This all changed in 11th grade. My English 11 Honors teacher, Mr. Schulze, was like no other English teacher I've ever had, and his unique teaching style transformed my relationship with reading and writing. For instance, one morning, he began in a rather serious tone, "class, I've got some unfortunate news." My classmates and I looked around at each other, concerned that something was seriously wrong. "I went to the doctor this weekend," he continued, "and they said I'm a terminal case." A collective shock began to spread across the room, only for Mr. Schulze to add, "They said I've only got about 40 years to live." I noticed the subtle smile he was trying to conceal as he brought his fist to his mouth, and I too began to smile as I realized what was going on. However, Mr. Schulze wasn't finished. "You know, things like this make you realize how precious life really is. This is a difficult time for me, so all I'm asking of you is to really think about the impact of your writing; Please, don't waste what little time I have left with anything boring or formulaic." The morning announcements began over the intercom as I sat there in awe, thinking about how I'd been simultaneously pranked and taught an invaluable lesson about writing.

In all seriousness, Mr. Schulze was truly a great teacher. He emphasized the impact that our writing had over simply meeting rubric criteria, and strongly opposed the traditional five paragraph essay that we had come to know throughout our early writing experiences. With these new perspectives, I no longer felt the restrictions on writing that I'd come to know. I began allowing my words to flow freely and guide the structure of the essay, rather than trying to fit my ideas to a prescribed formula. It wasn't always pretty at first, but learning to simply get my thoughts down drastically improved my writing (Lamott, 2). [Boost two - synthesis]

Another key aspect of Mr. Schulze's classes were choice books. The ability to do my English assignments in regard to a book of my own choosing was surprisingly liberating, and

began to rekindle my love of reading. Of course, we would eventually be assigned specific books later on in the year, but even these did not feel intimidating because of the casual conversations Mr. Schulze would have with us in class to help us understand the deeper meaning of what we were reading.

My experiences in English 11 Honors not only furthered the development of my literary skills, but more importantly, helped me reach a point of emotional maturity in which I once again actively seek out independent reading. I even invested in a kindle e-reader, expanding my access to books exponentially. While paperbacks aren't going anywhere anytime soon, I see digital mediums as a catalyst for including more books and articles in my life.

Yet, my literacy journey is far from over. I still have much to learn about how authors convey complex themes through the stories they tell, and that's perfectly okay. Literacy development is a lifelong process, and there's so much literature out there left for me to learn from and enjoy. My next challenge, you might ask, is to revisit *Hatchet*. This time, I'm ready for it, and I can't wait to show myself how far I've come.

[Boost one: figure]

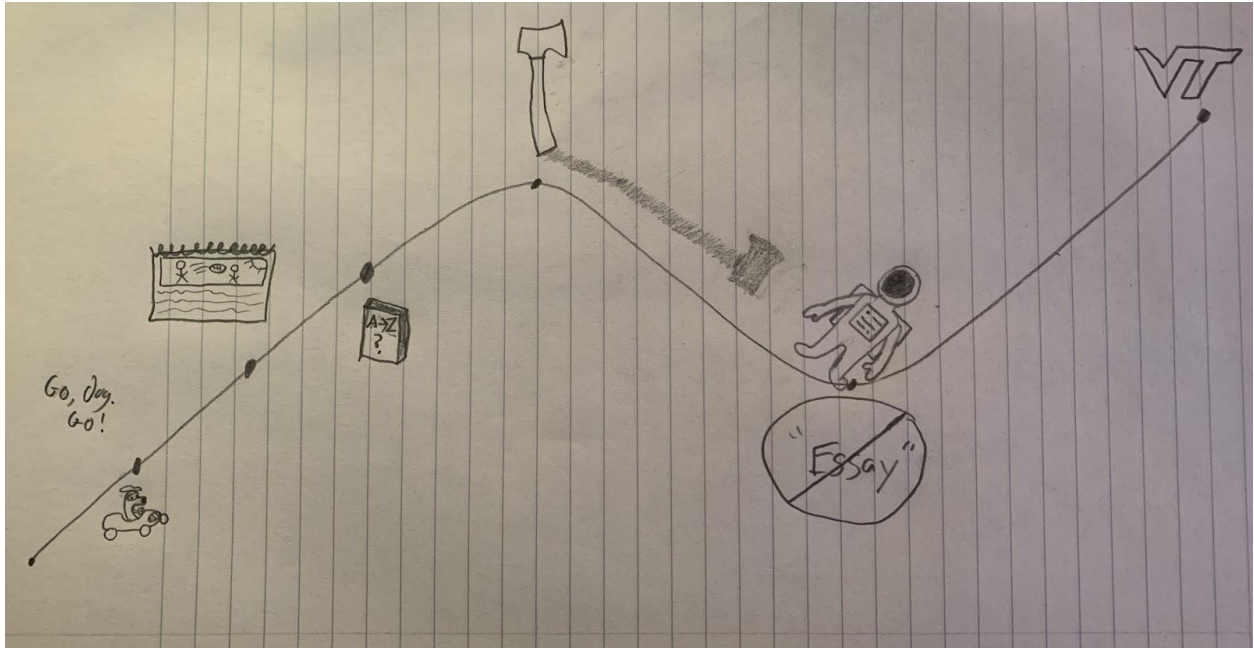


Figure One - This is a visual representation of my literacy journey. It starts with an initial upward journey, highlighted by my journaling and the *A to Z Mysteries* books. However, a negative period begins when I struggle with *Hatchet*, whose metaphorical remains with me until my love for literacy is rekindled in 11th grade, featuring Mr. Schulze's protest of traditional essays, as well as *The Martian*, a choice book I read that year.

Work Cited

Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*, edited by Paul Eschholz et al., 9th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005, pp. 93-96