

## To Better a Thin Slice of Wood

Franchesca leered across the classroom at the portly young woman who had the audacity to call herself a professor. The woman, Ms. Abernathy, was an adjunct. Barely more than a student teacher. No one respectable would be saddled with a freshman level English class. A *core* class. A class that Franchesca, despite earning a Four out of Five on the A.P. English Literature and Composition exam in high school, had not been able to argue her way out of.

Franchesca did not want to be here. As evidenced by her cultivated wardrobe of trousers, blouse and respectably worn cardigan, she was a *serious* student. The thought of wasting the hour of nine to ten twice a week for an entire semester was almost physically painful. Sullenly, she raked her eyes over the other students around her. They were a half-awake mob of ignorant drones, so unprepared for academia that they might actually learn something from this class. Francesca allowed herself a moment to indulge in the admittedly base feeling of self-superiority before returning her focus to the issue at hand.

“Your first assignment is a three-page essay on why writing is important, due the day after tomorrow,” said Ms. Abernathy.

Franchesca stared at the woman in abject horror. This was worse than she had ever imagined. *Why writing is important*. Could there be a more boring, basic, asinine attempt at a thought-provoking essay subject than *why writing is important*? Of course writing was important. That should be as obvious as the sun in the sky. As obvious as the nose in the center of your face. As obvious as the superiority of burgundy to all other colors. Franchesca was grateful for her decision to sit at the back of this mockery of a classroom. The distance gave her the anonymity to process her shock in relative peace. Only the mousy-haired boy to her left bore witness to her emotional turmoil, but much to her annoyance, he was too busy playing with his phone to pay it proper attention.

The essay prompt haunted Franchesca through the rest of the day. She felt like an Olympic swimmer being asked to step across a puddle. Despite her mortification, she was big enough to admit that Ms. Abernathy wasn't entirely at fault. Perhaps this was an appropriate opening

prompt for the rest of the class, but for her? It was insulting. Demeaning. Beneath her to even consider taking the time to turn her hand to such a pointless question. Briefly, she contemplated addressing the issue with an email. She could explain the situation to Ms. Abernathy, employ her talents to create a persuasive masterwork that would leave the woman incapable of denying that Franchesca did not belong. Indeed, the next day she had two whole paragraphs of the email drafted before another option, a better option, drifted down from the heavens onto Franchesca's waiting keyboard.

Why not use the essay itself as a vessel for this message? As the bard so wisely stated in... she hadn't bothered to note the play after googling inspirational Shakespeare quotes, "Let me embrace thee, sour adversity, for wise men say it is the wisest course." Instead of avoiding the obstacle, she, like the heroes of old, would overcome it.

Franchesca felt a veritable fever of inspiration light around her. She would not address the prompt head on. No, that was too predictable. Instead, she would find a clever work around. An answer that met the spirit of the assignment while simultaneously flipping it on its head. An answer that would have Ms. Abernathy shaking her head with grudging admiration, forcing her to acknowledge that amongst the run-of-the-mill freshman in her class shone a brighter star. A star too brilliant to be ignored.

*Why writing is important.*

Why indeed? For generations, writing had been used to tell stories, to pass along knowledge that otherwise would have crumbled to dust with time and failing memory. It preserved the words of prophets, poets, lovers and tyrants alike, but what did all writing have in common? What one thing remained constant regardless of person, era, or location?

Paper.

Franchesca stayed up through the night, a woman possessed. Without writing, paper would be blank. Boring. Dull to the point of having no perceivable function. It was only with the addition of words that paper gained purpose. She spent hours researching everything from Egyptian papyrus to modern, bespoke stationery made from organic cotton and recycled cellulose. A millennia of technique and innovation was deftly summarized into a single page of double-spaced prose, providing the foundation on which she would craft her argument.

A thought pestered Franchesca through the haze of her inspiration. A small, nagging feeling that she might be putting the cart before the horse. Paper was, after all, invented to be written upon. But that was inconsequential. She would not allow such a small fallacy to impede her otherwise clever and original take.

And so, Franchesca wrote on. She slowly sculpted her argument with the precision of an ancient Greek master, artistically articulating how much paper crafting knowledge would be lost, would never have been, had no one ever thought to place quill to paper. And as the sun rose above the horizon, welcoming the new day, she penned her title.

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Franchesca could not bring herself to place her words on common printer paper. Instead, she took a trip across campus and spent twenty dollars on a pack of beautiful, watermarked stationery. A fitting chariot for what was, after all, a declaration of her skill. She turned in her thesis, her masterwork, nay, her *Magnum opus* to Ms. Abernathy, who accepted it without preamble, unaware of the surprise she had in store.

The days passed with agonizing slowness. Franchesca could not focus on her other classwork, consumed as she was by her fantasies of the pending climax. In her mind, she saw Ms. Abernathy passing out the graded papers. Across the room their eyes would meet, a fleeting but meaningful glance. She would return Franchesca's essay in silence, the pages now stained with an occasional mark. Franchesca was not vain enough to claim perfection. There would be an errant typo or two that she, in her fervor, had failed to catch. Perhaps enthusiastic underlines would emphasize sections of particular brilliance. And at the top, next to the 100%, would be a short handwritten note instructing her to hang back after class.

Ms. Abernathy would, of course, feign annoyance at first. She would act mildly peeved at the display of irreverent brilliance, but would be unable to fully contain her admiration for a game well played. Before long they would be conversing as equals, and then Ms. Abernathy would reveal that she had a rich aunt or cousin or some such relative who ran a publishing house. Or perhaps, a prestigious literary journal, who would be interested in reading such a promising work from a young, up-and-coming scholar. Even if Ms. Abernathy failed to have any worthwhile

connections, she would of course excuse Franchesca from all remaining assignments, insisting that she focus her time and considerable skill on other, more worthwhile pursuits.

The day finally arrived. The clock struck nine, and Franchesca paraded into the class to claim her rightful place at the center of the front row. Ms. Abernathy played coy, waiting until the rest of the students filed in and took their seats before beginning to distribute the graded papers. Finally, Franchesca and her essay were reunited. She looked down, vibrating with barely concealed anticipation that faded slowly into confusion. There were no marks. No highlights. No comments. The paper was as pristine as the day she had handed it in, lacking even a crease next to the staple that held the thick sheets together. Only a small, red “P” adorned the top of the page. The same P, Franchesca realized as her soul began to fracture inside her shriveling body, that sat at the top of every paper Ms. Abernathy had returned. P for pass.