

SUCCESSFUL  
COLLEGE  
TEACHING  
BEGINS  
WITH  
AWAY  
THROWING  
YOUR  
LECTURE  
NOTES

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*For Esther Wrightman,  
Tina Graziano,  
Joni Riggle,  
Anne Britton,  
and Sarah Laurie,  
for boundless courage*



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## Preface

**Professors are trained to be scholars,  
not teachers. This is loony.**

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## Chapter 1

**You stride into an utterly  
silent classroom full of strangers.  
It's like walking into a nightmare.**

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## Chapter 2

**Idealism. Passion, compassion,  
inspiration. It's wired into them.  
This is a gift to you.**

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Chapter 3

**Day one. Ground zero.**

**Empty your bladder.**

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Chapter 4

**Think of your students as Steinways  
with most of the keys grown silent.**

**Your task is to unstick as many of those  
keys as you can in sixteen weeks.**

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Chapter 5

**We flew. We looped the loop, barrel-rolled,  
buzzed grazing cows and hopped fences,  
then stalled the engine and flipped over  
and got going again, and finally brought  
her down in one piece when the bell rang.**

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Chapter 6

How many faculty had their knowledge  
of their field enriched by the brilliant  
Steve Jobs? Did they have any mechanism  
for benefitting from his extraordinary mind?  
Did the thought even occur to them?

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Epilogue

Suddenly one of the steel doors of the  
fortress flings open and scores of children  
pour out, running lickety-split for freedom.  
Freedom on the shiny equipment that  
oh-so-enticingly calls their names.

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## P r e f a c e

**Professors are trained to be scholars,  
not teachers. This is loony.**



**M**Y LITTLE BROTHER just got his PhD and his first college teaching job. He's an expert in political science and knows almost nothing about teaching—and that, I tell you cheerfully, is typical of professors beginning their teaching careers.

If you're not a college professor this probably sounds crazy.

It is crazy, of course. But it's one of those charming traditions of our profession, along with tenure, academic freedom, and bizarre costumes at graduation ceremonies. What can one do about it? Some graduate programs now insist that their PhD students take a course in something they call "effective teaching," but this requirement seems

to be rare and not taken seriously. Plus, I have my doubts about some of the faculty teaching these courses. How well do they themselves teach? Faculty tend to be monumentally deluded about their classroom skills. Their students are the ones to ask, and many will tell you flat out that the professor is abysmal. Professors gripe about this, but the students are generally right.

I learned this when I became a student once again in one department while I was a tenured professor in another. Sitting in that multitude of anxious note-takers, and taking the course (biochemistry) for a grade, I was floored by the lousy teaching. I swore I would do something about it.

I overhauled my own teaching, and this book is the result. The impetus to write it actually came from my brother, who in a matter of weeks is going to march into his first classroom as Professor Martin — the Charge of the Light Brigade in slow motion. I'm afraid for him. Not that he's any less prepared than any other beginning assistant professor. I'm fearful for all of them. What these bright-eyed new PhDs know of their discipline (and they know plenty) is only half the story. Maybe only a quarter or even a tenth or less. The remainder, the huge part, is: How are they going to teach it to eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds? By "teach it" I don't mean so much what one writes on the syllabus,



or the books one chooses, or even the course content. I mean the conversation we casually call “teaching.”

Indeed, how does one teach at all? There are endless ways of teaching, of course, and just as many contexts. In this book, I’m addressing just one context, a common yet desperately neglected one: the realities of today’s college classroom. Not some long-dead image of my grandfather’s era at Princeton or Oxford or the state university, nor some equally irrelevant Hollywood fantasy about what it’s like to stand before a classroom, but the genuine thing from someone who lived by doing it and learned to love it. Although I started out hating it.

I write this book for my brother. As a primer. Something he might read in an evening or two. Something to save him, I hope, from the anguish I suffered and blunders I committed along the way.

I think of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* which many writers keep handy by their desk.<sup>1</sup> I would like to see this slim book take its place by Strunk and White. When you sign your first college teaching contract you will discover that you are expected to publish as well as grade

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1. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

student papers. Strunk and White comes in mighty handy. You will also discover, or maybe I should say you will be vividly reminded, that you are actually going to have to teach these students. Think carefully about this last bit of news.

The contract you are holding is calling you a teacher. But do you honestly know how to teach college students? Read this book before you walk through that door and discover you don't.