

3 Reasons Why Laura Ingalls Wilder Was a Good Writer

Recently, an interesting but telling scene from [These Happy Golden Years](#) by Laura Ingalls Wilder has been running through my mind.

As the book explains, teenage Laura had just completed her first teaching stint in another school and was happily settling back into life as a student in her home school. On her first day back, she was horrified to find that she was expected to write a short essay on the subject of ambition within a few minutes:

“Laura had no idea how to begin. She knew nothing about ambition. The only thought in her head was that she was going to fail in a class that she had always led. She must not fail, she couldn’t. She would not. But how did one write a composition? ...

She found herself staring at the yellow leather cover of the dictionary on its stand by Mr. Owen’s desk. Perhaps, she thought, she might get an idea from reading the definition of ambition. ... Back at her desk, she wrote as fast as she could, and kept on writing desperately while the school was called to order. Miserably she felt that her composition was not good, but there was no time to write it over nor to add anything more.”

Laura’s finished product was only two paragraphs long. But in those short paragraphs Laura managed to explain the meaning of ambition and how it applied to individuals, while also quoting Shakespeare’s thoughts on the subject. The result was as follows:

“Laura stood miserably waiting for Mr. Owen’s comment. He

looked at her sharply and said, 'You have written compositions before?'

'No, sir,' Laura said. 'This is my first.'

'Well, you should write more of them, I would not have believed that anyone could do so well the first time,' Mr. Owen told her.

Laura stammered in astonishment. 'It is s...so short... It is mostly from the dictionary...'

'It is not much like the dictionary,' Mr. Owen said. 'There are no corrections. It grades one hundred. Class is dismissed.'"

It might be easy to look at this instance and excuse it as a prime example of innate talent in action. After all, Laura did grow up to become a celebrated children's author.

But three elements of Laura's education suggest that her first composition was the product of a good educational foundation rather than lucky talent.

1. She was proficient in grammar.

Laura knew the ins and outs of good sentence structure like the back of her hand. When push came to shove, she was able to plug these foundational elements of writing into her composition effortlessly.

By contrast, today's students have had [little instruction in grammar](#) because schools are more interested in promoting group collaboration through self-esteem oriented writing assignments.

2. She was well-read.

As previous Little House books explain, the Ingalls family loved reading and made it a family priority, savoring and often memorizing the books and stories they got their hands

on. Because she had carefully internalized good literature, Laura was able to make connections and expand the depth of her assignment. Furthermore, she likely became a natural imitator of the high-quality writing which she read, and was thus able to form her own writing style from its example.

Today's students, however, are exposed to a minimal amount of literature which often consists of a [lower reading quality](#) than that which schools assigned in the past.

3. She went with facts, not feelings.

When Laura didn't know how to frame her essay, she went to the dictionary and learned the meaning of the topic. Once she knew her facts, she had a solid foundation upon which she could lay her own opinions and ideas.

Such a tactic is the exact opposite from that taught in today's schools. As mentioned above, many writing assignments are largely framed by [personal opinion and self-esteem](#), a fact which may explain why many college students today can no longer discern between [fact and opinion](#).

The old adage says that "the pen is mightier than the sword." This being the case, then it would seem that Americans are not well-armed, for barely [one in four](#) high school students are proficient in writing.

Is it time American schools take a hint and focus more on teaching the elements which made Laura a stellar writer?