I was watching a news show in early September where a reporter had gathered four or five little kids to ask them to describe their first day in Kindergarten. The kids were of course preternaturally adorable—squirming and jostling each other in front of bright lights and a stranger. One kept mugging for the camera. When pressed for an account of the day, a couple of them squeezed out some version of "It was fun." It was predictably cute, watching and listening to small children struggle to describe what we think of as one of life's momentous days. But one kid just scowled and refused to say anything. No eye contact. The reporter, pushing his luck, finally said "Oh come on now, tell us about your first day in school. How was it?" The kid looked down for a while, then to the side, and then looked straight at the reporter and said, "About average."

The news clip of course reminded me of my own comment to my mother—now part of family legend—when she picked me up after my first day in kindergarten. When I mumbled that the day hadn't been terrible, she said "Great, Johnny, that means tomorrow will be even better." I felt sick. I said "What do you mean, tomorrow? I got to go airy day and airy day?" I'd spent the summer steeling myself for a one and done situation, and to realize I was at beginning of something, not the end of it, was horrible. (What I couldn't have realized, of course, was that I'd end up going airy day and airy day for most of the rest of my life, as a teacher, then Principal, then Superintendent.)

During my entire career, one of the things I did almost reflexively was to keep track of things that kids said or did that, in addition to being very funny, were somehow arresting, or unintentionally brilliant. I must have recognized early on that the observations of students, in their unguarded authenticity, were often far more illuminating than those of adults. "Above average," for instance, seems at first like just a charmingly naive answer to a question about what adults view as milestone event. But the kid's only been in Kindergarten for one day. By definition, average.

In my first year of teaching, desperate to escape the daily grind of class planning, I gave a three week assignment to ninth graders to write a research paper. I provided very little instruction, as I didn't really know how to write a research paper myself. I think I had the class start by making an outline, which quite honestly has never worked for me in anything I've ever

written. As they worked, I'd wander around the room trying to offer helpful guidance. "Wow, 'Should Abortion Be Banned?' is an interesting topic. Maybe we could think of a better way to research it than finding women who've had abortions and asking their opinion."

The papers were unbelievably terrible ("Are Dogs the Best Pets?" "What's the fastest car?") except for one, which was really remarkable: well organized, readable, informative. It was on volcanoes. Handwritten, single spaced, fourteen pages. The first sentence read "A volcano is a vent in the surface of the earth or another planet from which issue eruptions of molten rock, hot rock fragments, and hot gases from a magma chamber beneath the planet's crust." It was not in quotation marks. The paper went on from there, just like that. I cracked the case in about five minutes. Collier's Encyclopedia

It had been written by Sarkis K, a student whom I'd always found to be quiet and sincere. But this was the most brazen example of cheating I'd ever seen (and I hadn't seen much at that point), and I was actually quite insulted. What does this wiseass kid take me for? When I returned the papers, I told Sarkis to see me after school, where I planned to put him on the spot and make him squirm.

When he came to see me at the end of the day, I gave it to him right between the eyes, no room to wiggle out. "Sarkis, I know your paper was copied from the encyclopedia What do you have to say for yourself?"

He didn't look ashamed. Or abashed. Or guilty in the least. He looked kind of proud. He shrugged his shoulders in a sort of modest way, looked up, smiled and said "Yeah, it took almost four days to do it. There are no mistakes. My mother read it over."

That same year, driven by the same need to get a break from daily planning, I decided to have each student write a short story. Another terrible idea. I've never written a short story myself, can't imagine ever doing so, and have no clue how to go about teaching other people how to do it. But I was drowning, and really needed some time to catch my breath.

I allotted two weeks of class time for students to work on their own, or meet in groups to share insights—which they never did, since they didn't really have any insights. As with the research papers, my instructional technique was to wander around trying to be helpful and

encouraging. For some reason, I had required that the stories be at least ten pages long. Why ten pages, I now wonder.

The stories were as bad as the research papers. Kindly grandfathers, fantastic sports achievements, crimes, and pets that had died were popular themes. One began with a sentence I'd nominate for one of the greatest literary openings of all time: "One morning I woke up."

But, as with the research papers, one story stood out. It had been written by Bobbie M, who wasn't big on following directions, reading, writing, or paying attention to me. I don't think he had turned in a single assignment all year. Somehow, though, the fiction bug must have bitten him, for he worked furiously on his story in class, crossing out, rewriting, shaping and refining the arc of the narrative. He wouldn't let me, or anyone else, look at his story before it was done, and refused to meet in groups with other students.

Bobbie's story was about a knife-wielding, psychotic killer who caused astonishing mayhem in his community during an extremely long crime spree. It was narrated in prose that was very hard to read (legibility, not squeamishness). It was mostly, but not entirely, written in the first person, though it went back and forth. The unnamed killer (clearly Bobby M) perpetrates a series of increasingly violent and somewhat puzzling crimes for a number of pages in the first person. Then a sudden switch, and Bobbie becomes the hero, and the story ends as abruptly as it had begun: "Then I brought the cops and they arrested him and he got the electric chair. The end."

It was the title page, though, that made the story unforgettable. Literally. On a lined 8 1/2 by 11 piece of notebook paper, Bobby had crudely drawn a large knife, with blood dripping from it. Underneath the knife, in large block letters, was the name of the story:

P H Y S C O

Admit it—incredibly memorable. I guarantee that the next time you see a reference to the Hitchcock classic, you're going to think of PHYSCO. Once that title is in your mind, it's there forever. (I know I have never written a single thing that anyone will remember next week, let alone forever.)

When I became a Principal, the humorous material available to me expanded dramatically, as I was dealing with kids and families in all phases of their lives, not just in the classroom. My memories of these encounters and exchanges are too numerous to recount, but I loved having a job where, each day, something surprising could happen. The ninth grader who dutifully made an appointment with my secretary, and showed up to announce that he had constructed a cold fusion reactor in his basement, and wanted permission to bring it to school. (Permission granted, of course.) The kid who came to complain about his teacher giving him a G on a test, not an F. He'd gotten every question wrong, and admitted that because he was nervous "I might not have spelled my name right." Rory, the fourteen year old who'd inadvertently set off a fire alarm, and insisted on doing community service to pay for his sin. "I'm a musician. I'm going to play music in a nursing home for five afternoons next week. I already set it up." That's great, I told him. What instrument do you play? "Drums."

(Sometimes, of course, it was an adult who uttered some unforgettable line—that's a whole separate essay-but one stands out. I'd called in a problematic teacher to discuss his various failings, and towards the end of the conversation said "Now Joe, I assume, you're going to really work on doing better." He looked at me for a long time, then said, "Well, John, you know that when you assume, you make an ass out of you and I.")

Towards the end of my career in high school, we worked out what seemed like an effective intervention strategy for kids we thought might be drug involved, intended to make them confront their issue, rather than simply catch and punish them. The idea was to bring the student to my office, with parents, and provide feedback on how they appeared to their teachers. Thus it was that, on a spring afternoon, Perry K was brought to see me, mother in tow. Perry was a Senior, a classic stoner. Nice kid, pretty unfocussed, very friendly. His counselor read the reports: "Perry, your English teacher says you look pale, washed out. Your science teacher says 'Perry seems sleepy, has a sallow complexion.' Your history teacher says he's worried because you have an unhealthy pallor."

This went on and on, comment after comment about Perry's pasty complexion, as he sank lower and lower in his chair, his mom looking more and more anxious. Finally, when the list of

descriptions of Perry's appearance was done, I said "Well Perry, what do you say?" He thought for a moment, shook his head, and said "I think I have to work on my tan."

After I'd retired, I took a series of interim positions, one as an assistant principal in an elementary school, where the idea was that, with my wisdom and experience I'd serve as a sort of mentor for the other administrators. Except that I had no wisdom or experience when it came to disciplining little kids, and which ought to be most of my job. I'd gotten to the point where, with teenagers, I felt as though I could control them with just the right kind of glance, elementary students were an entirely different story. They'd get sent to my office for some little infraction, and if I was at all stern, they'd start crying. If I was at all friendly, they'd want to find ways to keep coming back. It took a month to figure out the right combination.

Upon being sent to me, they had to fill out a Reflection Form: what did you do wrong? what will you do differently next time? what should the punishment be? On my the first day on the job, which happened to be Valentine's Day, I got a taste of the challenges ahead. Danny was sent to me because, when his PE teacher announced that in honor of the day they were going to play a game called Cupid Ball, he had loudly said "Well, I call it Stupid Ball." (I won't guess why the teacher felt this was an offense that needed administrative intervention, because you know what happens when you assume.)

Danny dutifully filled out his form (amazingly cute handwriting), admitted calling the game Stupid Ball, and promised that next time "I won't call it Stupid Ball." In the space where he had to say what the consequence should be, he'd written "I should miss 83 recesses." I said "Danny, that's an awful lot of recesses to miss, I think it's too much of a punishment." Danny looked at me and said "Yeah, well, I hate recess."

But my favorite was Saul, whose Reflection Form included a response that I think we should all adhere to, so incisive that I shared it with every administrator I'd worked with as a sort of a guiding principle, and now I'll share it with you. Saul had, on the way back from the cafeteria, punched his friend Louis in the arm because Louis had farted in his face on the way up the stairs. Saul fessed up to his crime, and proposed some minor consequence, but what inspired me was his response to the question "What will you do differently next time?" Saul wrote "Ignore the smell." That's the key to everything. Ignore the smell.