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## Out of the Mouths of Students

By Janet Spitler

### Rachel's Story

#### *Entering Middle School*

Rachel Averitt was a student of Mrs. Pewthers in grades 7, 8, and 9. She entered those grades largely having already mastered the Oklahoma Academic Standards' end-of-school-year expectations. Because her parents read aloud to her on a regular basis, she had a strong ear for style. Mrs. Pewthers worried that she would not be able to offer anything new to challenge Rachel appropriately

#### *Learning about Herself*

While under Mrs. Pewthers' instruction, Rachel confirmed that she did indeed have a gift for language. The new concepts she learned were the key word outline approach to taking notes and the structural units. She became a self-proclaimed "key word nerd" because she used the skill throughout high school and uses it even today in college. Before using the structures, Rachel just began writing, and her compositions flowed from her naturally—except when they didn't. The structures empowered her to plan her thought process and determine any gaps in her logic, so she no longer felt at the mercy of her immediate ideas.

#### *Using Her Skills*

Throughout her high school years, Rachel practiced her new skills and eventually internalized them. She attributes her successes, such as earning a 36 on the language portion of the ACT in her junior year and being a National Merit Scholar, to the foundational skills she learned in Mrs. Pewthers' classroom. Today she is a student at Oklahoma University and plans to be a lawyer.

### Carly's Story

#### *Entering Middle School*

Carly, like Rachel, had a gift for writing. Creative writing assignments came easily to her. She was confident in her writing skills and rightly so. The feedback she had received on

assignments up to that point was always encouraging. Entering Mrs. Pewthers' grade 6, she looked forward to the writing assignments because this was an area where she felt she didn't have much to learn.

### ***Learning about Herself***

In the middle school grades, the writing assignments shifted from creative story writing to expository writing. Her natural ability did not seem to serve her as well. Under Mrs. Pewthers' instruction, Carly learned that quantity didn't always mean quality. Academic writing required concise, clear expression. Her style grew to include these skills, and she discovered that writing within limits stretched her to hone her thinking and her words. As the questions and structural units reined in her ideas, the stylistic techniques gave her the tools to express more complex thoughts. However, her favorite part of the day was the *Fix It!* exercises. These sentences allowed her to practice editing skills within her favorite context—a story.

### ***Using Her Skills***

Equipped with the right tools to approach every type of assignment, Carly excelled in high school. She was able to flesh out her ideas with disciplined thinking even when she was in a timed situation. “Less is more” continued to show its value. Carly earned a 34 on the language portion of the ACT. She became a National Hispanic Scholar and a National Merit Commended. She is attending Oklahoma University in the pre-nursing program and is considering becoming a doctor.

## **Tori's Story**

### ***Entering Middle School***

Tori was extremely frustrated with the English language by the time she reached the middle school grades. Her language instruction had focused on grammar in the elementary years, and she just couldn't make the connection between grammar and writing. Plus, even after all those years of studying grammar, the rules were still not sticking. Because math and science were her strengths, she planned to get through Mrs. Pewthers' middle school English classes by merely doing the minimum like she had been doing all along.

### ***Learning about Herself***

While the *Fix It!* approach to grammar took a little bit of time to grow on Tori, she began to enjoy the mystery of the ongoing story, and the rules finally began to stick. The logic of the rules became clear when she learned them within the context of a story. As she learned how to keyword outline a text, she began to process information faster. Because the writing was related to the reading of a novel, for example, the assignments were in context and relevant. In her three years with Mrs. Pewthers, her attitude went from dreading English to actually enjoying it.

### ***Using Her Skills***

Equipped with questions, the structural units, and the stylistic techniques, Tori tackled the writing assignments in every subject during high school. The tools were especially helpful in the subjects she loved: the sciences. Tori no longer did the minimum; her compositions' quality greatly improved. Because she had internalized the Structure and Style™ method, she happily wrote essays and won scholarships. Today, Tori attends John Brown University in Arkansas and plans to be a nurse.

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