I Am Professor McGonagall

Harry Potter wanders into my classroom every now and then. He has a little something to offer everyone: animals and magic; action; a little romance; a connection for kids with unsupportive homes; and lessons about loyalty, friendship, good, and evil. When I see Harry, he reminds me about education, especially language arts. When Harry buys a wand, I think of late-August school shopping for the right kind of pencils. When he encounters the Pensieve, a magical device that stores memories, I think of how writing pieces, too, store memories. And, often, when I see Harry, he reminds me about transfiguration.

"I do hope they stay right away, there's so much to learn. I'm particularly interested in transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it's supposed to be very difficult..." says Harry Potter's schoolmate, Hermione, in chapter seven of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.

An older student replies "You'll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing..."

Professor McGonagall teaches transfiguration at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I wonder if she ever gets bored. To her, teaching students how to turn a match into a needle must be like my teaching commas, capitals, and end-of-sentence punctuation. And for her students, it must be just as frustrating. They are willing, yes, but do they really see the point of turning matches into needles any more than my students see value in doing daily oral language practice on the board with commas, apostrophes, and periods missing? I suppose not.

On the first day of class, Professor McGonagall turns her desk into a pig and back again. This wows everyone. I have been known, once in a while, to turn graphite on yellow legal paper into something else. Something magical. I have seen it change into smiles, tears, thoughts. And I have heard, at times, "I wish I could write like you." Well, sure, it isn't turning a desk into a pig, but it's something.

The thing is that, at some point, I learned those little picky things, such as where the commas go or what gets capitalized. I learned not how to spell well but how to recognize what didn't seem to be spelled right and what kind of dictionary works best for me. I learned, as it were, how to turn a match into a needle.

As the pendulum swung from putting all the emphasis on these conventions of writing to putting all the emphasis on getting ideas onto paper, we in the language arts departments of schools near and far have created a big problem.

Some of our students can change a desk into a pig. They can do magic with their words, but in the words there are so many errors that the pig is quite clearly deformed. Its body parts are askew due to lack of organization. So, although the ideas are good and some of the phrasing is just right, it is clearly not a pig because no one bothered to carefully turn a match into a needle in the beginning.

I had a deformed pig in my classroom just recently. In response to a prompt about someone it would be hard to forget, Timothy wrote about his grandfather. The organization of his paper was good, leading from when, at four, Timothy learned that his grandfather had cancer to when, years later, his grandfather died. The paper had rich details. Timothy drove the golf cart while his grandfather golfed, and then the two of them would go home and eat sugar cubes. In later years, they mostly watched television together. But sometimes, Timothy's grandfather would tell Timothy stories about when he was a baby, about his father, and about his own youth. Near the end, Timothy couldn't understand what his grandfather said. And then Timothy's grandfather died.

Timothy came to my desk for our conference about his paper. He said, "I'm not reading it to you." So I read it to myself. My eyes skimmed over the errors because the ideas carried me over them. At the end, I put my head down on my desk. When I sat up to talk to him, I knew that tears were sliding down my cheeks. I scored it for him, and we put it in his folder.

I was drawn back to the paper on our next work day. I decided to type it up and give it to the principal as an example of a good thing that had happened in our classroom. As I typed it, without editing, the computer underlined the misspellings in red and the grammatical errors in green. It was a colorful paper. The Oregon State Writing Assessment gives a separate score for ideas and content, organization, sentence fluency, voice, word choice, and conventions. I assessed the paper by these standards. Out of a possible score of six, Timothy received fives in four out of the six categories, but numerous errors kept him from passing in sentence fluency and conventions.

So, what to do? Back to the drawing board in some ways. I'm so glad that I have students who at least have faith that they can do big things, can communicate their experiences, and can change graphite to tears or laughter. But those steps of learning the basics have been missed, and without them, the pig will never be a good pig. The paper will never be credible. The writers will never be taken seriously.

Here, then, is the new plan. We will begin by turning matches into needles. Magic. We'll be practicing magic in Room 72. Come and get some. When you come, watch out for the pigs. They are sometimes a bit strange looking, and they may be a little awkward, but each of them has a working heart and a voice of its own. They long for attention, they need it, and they deserve it. There are lots and lots of pigs, they keep coming... and they are getting better.

Karen Brown is a teacher-consultant with the Oregon Writing Project at Eastern Oregon University. She currently teaches the magic of language arts in Irrigon, Oregon, at Columbia Middle School.