The email was addressed to the National Writing Project in Berkeley: “Did the Art Peterson your Web site lists as an NWP staff member teach English at Lowell High School in the 1980s?”

Alas, in the virtual world there is no place to hide. Luckily, in this case, I was not trying to disappear. Rather I had a chance to reconnect with a former student, Alina Sivorinovsky, and to learn that she had moved from the Bay Area to New York City. She was now a wife and mother who had written for television and published several romance novels and a nonfiction book on ice skating. She learned that I had retired from teaching and was now happily ensconced as a publications editor at NWP.

In the course of our electronic conversations, she happened to mention “Peterson’s Credo.” Peterson’s what? I had no idea the little stabs and jabs of writing advice I had foisted on my students would be translated into anything as weighty as a credo. As it turns out, this so-called credo was a little helpful hint I had tailored for Alina. Looking back, I realize I may have been a rich font of credos: one for every student. For those who might think this particular credo is a little — well — banal, understand that an aging teacher’s banality may sometimes, for a 17-year-old, approach wisdom.

—Art Peterson

Once upon a time, I rambled. I rambled when I talked, I rambled when I thought, and, most unfortunately, I rambled when I wrote. Which meant that I had a tendency to begin writing a sentence without any idea of how I intended for it to end, or even what I intended to convey. The sensual and cerebral thrill was in the starting, not the finishing. And it made for some very . . . original sentences. Ones that featured a minimum of six clauses and ran the length of a double-spaced sheet of binder paper.

That’s the writer I was in Art Peterson’s AP English class at Lowell High School in 1986. (I was also cocky and full of myself, but that, I think, Mr. Peterson could handle. After all, I was seventeen years old, and I suspect I wasn’t the only senior class member who thought I knew it all.) He left the cocky alone. But the tendency to ramble while writing, Mr. Peterson tried to fix.

He lobbed a lot of wisdom our way over the course of two semesters. One pearl that stuck with me was his attempt to focus my long-winded rambling: “Just think about what you want to say, and say it.”

So concise. So pithy. So clear. And, after twelve years of obscure grammar and composition lessons, so easy to follow.

I dubbed the advice, “Peterson’s Credo,” and have followed it ever since. For thirteen years, it’s served me well.

The first book I ever got published, The Fictitious Marquis, a Regency Romance novel, was written under deadline, in three weeks of ten-hour days. Why the rush? Suffice it to say that, when an Avon editor called to say, “I loved your sample chapters, can I see the full manuscript on my desk Monday?” I told her, “But . . . it’s — I . . . it’s not . . . polished yet,” rather than the truth, which would have been, “It’s not written yet.”

Needing to compose 180 pages in three weeks meant I had no time to ramble, and I had no time to start sentences whose point I hoped would be revealed to me by the time I stumbled to their end. That was why, before starting any scene, I took a moment to ask myself what the one-sentence point of it should be. I thought about what I wanted to say. And then I said it. (Sometimes, when I needed to pad, I said it several times).

“Peterson’s Credo” also came in handy during the writing of my subsequent three novels and one nonfiction book. But it proved downright indispensable when I started writing for television. Because, while a novel or a nonfiction tome can forgive a digression or a brief off-topic ramble, television is brutal in its time constraints. Make your point, and make it quickly, because we’re off the air in seventy seconds.

In other words: Think about what you want to say. And say it.

Clearly, concisely, and directly.

Then stop.

Alina Sivorinovsky’s most recent novel, When a Man Loves a Woman, (under the pen name Alina Adams) was an April 2000 release from Dell/Bantam.