Well, the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated* is out (so I’ve heard!), and once again, I’ve resisted the urge to run out and buy it. Of course, I still argue that what makes the midwinter issue of *SI* the biggest seller of the year is the wonderful sports coverage, not the bountiful swimsuit photos. It’s the same logic we men “used to” use when buying Hugh Hefner’s monthly tribute to literacy. It was the cerebral titillation of the famous people interviews that drove us to *Playboy*’s presses, the body ink not yet dry on the glossy intellectual covers! Literacy, after all, has always found sex to be a worthy companion (see Shakespeare, Pasternak, Hawthorne, Allende, and a million others.)

In the classroom, however, the enticement to read or write is often less alluring. Many of us bend over backwards telling our students how important it is to read and write. We beg, cajole, and promise them rich rewards if they will read and write. A few take us at our word or succumb to outside pressure to give reading a fair shake. But many students demand a more compelling reason than vague promises for a distant future.

I would like to suggest another approach to motivating indifferent students. Instead of telling them about the value of literacy, show them. And what better context to demonstrate the power of reading and writing than our own lives?

What happens in a lot of our classrooms is that we often fail to model the very literacy we are trying to convince our students to value. As we think back to our own English teachers over the years, we remember that most of them tried to teach us to value reading and writing — and yet how many times did we see our teachers exhibiting the same behavior they were expecting of us? How many of our teachers talked to us about what they were reading and writing? How many of them brought in books that they were reading and talked about them? How often did they show us their writing or write with us in class?

Think of other professions. All license practitioners who can show that they can do whatever the profession does. Doctors have to perform successful operations; electricians have to wire buildings; computer analysts have to diagnose and fix programs and computers. But education is quick to license people who have “served their seat time” or passed the courses. Yes, I know, we’ve gotten better in the last decade. We’ve “upped the ante” with more exams, better student teaching programs, and more content demands. But are we asked to perform like our professional counterparts before we are licensed?

How many of us teachers would still have jobs if we were required to be master readers, writers, speakers, listeners before we could teach others?

It seems to me that the least we should do is model for our students what we want them to value. For example, I’ve recently finished reading Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Wait Till Next Year*. I couldn’t wait to share it with my education.
students, to tell them how it brought back such vivid memories of learning to love the Brooklyn Dodgers, of growing up in the Eisenhower era, of learning about the opposite sex, and struggling to become a teenager. I couldn’t wait to tell my students how I connected with Goodwin’s book. Not because I want them to read it, but because I want them to see that reading is important to me, that it enriches my life and gives me knowledge and pleasure. How could I stand in front of them and preach about adult literacy if I did not value it myself?

And the same is true with writing. How can I stand in front of students and try to convince them of the power of writing for their lives if I never let them see the power of writing in my own life? I cringe when I think back to the times that I gave my students a writing assignment in class and then retreated behind my desk to grade papers or fill out administrative forms. What message was I sending to them? But I’ll also never forget the first time I wrote something and shared it with my students. It was a response to Kristi Walker who was upset that I wanted her to change the ending of her Macbeth paper. She had told me in no uncertain terms that she liked the ending and that she really didn’t understand my suggestion. So I responded to her in writing, and as I wrote I came to understand the importance of Kristi’s point of view and the unfairness of my suggestion. I read my response out loud and the class followed-up with the best discussion we had had to that point. Everyone suddenly connected because Kristi and I had connected. Macbeth was no longer a required reading we were plowing through; it became a literacy vehicle for our thinking, our talking, and our writing. And I found that as I continued to write and share with my students, they connected and invested in their own literacy.

So, practically speaking, what do we need to do? First, we need to expand our own reading — to read lots of different stuff from trashy novels to philosophy to good nonfiction. We need to enter into the dialogue about how a book affects us, not focus on literary acclaim or our graduate school notes. Second, we need to write more — to write for ourselves, to sort out stuff, to discover what we think, to preserve memories, to play with language. We need to write with and for our students. If they see us working through a piece of writing, struggling to write an interesting introduction and fighting to produce coherency, they’ll realize that writing isn’t easy, that we don’t always get it right the first time, and that revision usually improves our writing. And third, we need to share with our students why we write and read, and how it makes a difference in our lives.

In short, we have to be literacy role models. Literacy, like teaching, is not a destination; it’s a journey, and along the way our students need good models. The National Writing Project knew this 20 years ago when it first gathered together a group of teachers to write and talk about teaching writing. That model continues to be the best we can offer our students — and ourselves — today.

This essay originally appeared in Twenty Years, a publication of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, and is reprinted with permission.