

**Case: Sabrina**  
James H. Bell  
University of Northern British Columbia

Final exams were finished but many marks were not yet posted when Sabrina dropped into the Learning Assistance Center (LAC) to see Paul Kelly, the half-time professional tutor who had worked with her almost weekly during the winter semester. Paul was glad to see her but surprised at her request. She wanted him to custom-design for her a reading and writing “course” for Spring semester. She explained that if she passed the English course she had taken in Winter semester, she would be finished the required preparatory courses, yet she did not feel her writing and reading skills were adequate if she became a full-time student and took first-year Psychology, English, and Computing Science in the fall. She had time for school work in May and June because she did not change from part-time to full-time at the nursing home until July. The college offered no appropriate courses in Spring session.

Sabrina hesitated when Paul asked her what she wanted to work on. She decided she wanted to improve her writing above all else. She wished to learn how to get started, how to take all the ideas swirling in her head and put them down on paper. She wanted to know "how to develop it" once she got started, and how to write correct sentences with proper punctuation. As a secondary focus, she said they might work "a little bit on poems because when I read them I get kind of a shock." Paul hinted that maybe she meant reading comprehension in general, and she allowed that this could be a third objective: "I need to know what I am looking for in the story or whatever." Sabrina was eager to start working with Paul the next week. Paul had worked with her all semester and knew that an effective individualized educational plan would be difficult to design and implement. Maybe such a plan wasn't even what Sabrina needed.

### **Sabrina: An Introduction**

In her 30's, Sabrina is a single parent of a precocious 10-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son who has attention deficit disorder. Her struggle to raise her children fuels her interest in entering the Social Work program. Sabrina was born in the Caribbean, spoke French as a first language, and learned English in the Caribbean community in Montreal. She almost completed her Grade 12 in Montreal. Moving to Median City, she took English as a Second Language classes, and then she completed some high school level courses such as Grade 11 Psychology.

Sabrina is devoted to her children, but they drive her crazy. She has to discipline her rambunctious daughter, and then feels that her daughter hates her. She is more distraught about her son who is a big, handsome boy with severe social and learning problems. Specialists diagnosed attention deficit disorder. Ritalin put her son to sleep, so Sabrina put him on a special diet of natural foods. Although this helped, Sabrina said, "He's now getting big, and I can't control what he eats." If Sabrina wants to do course work after supper, she tells her children that she will take them out for their favorite ice cream treats if they do not bother her for half an hour. She has never yet had to buy them ice cream.

From reading an article on learning styles in a popular magazine, Sabrina knows she prefers to learn things step by step by step. Also, she learns best when she can see and do and discuss, not just read or listen.

When Sabrina rushes into the LAC—inevitably late—she is dressed in colorful red, white, and black outfits, and encumbered with satchels and bags. She speaks in a steady, melodic flow. Sometimes she enunciates quite clearly; at others she drifts into almost a

mumble, almost talking to herself, as if the sound sustains her, and then the accent grows so thick that she becomes a bit difficult to understand.

### **Starting at Median College**

Because Sabrina enrolled at Median College as a part-time student, she wrote no entrance or placement tests, and received no academic advising. In Winter semester, she decided to take a Grade 12 English course which emphasized reading, critiquing, and writing about literature. Her instructor, Dr. Samuels, specialized in Eighteenth Century literature. In the first part of the Grade 12 course, she covered traditional grammar. She also had the students memorize a list of 10 difficult words each week. Students were tested weekly on grammatically incorrect sentences that contained the esoteric vocabulary. Students read the assigned poetry, short stories, or plays, and then attended lecture/discussion classes. Testing was by essays requiring literacy analysis and by short answer questions asking students to match quotations and literacy selections.

Two weeks into the semester, Sabrina felt that she was going to have trouble with the course. For one thing, she had received the in-class essay that she and nearly every other English student wrote on the first or second day of class as a gauge of whether they were in the appropriate level of English.

### **The In-Class Placement Essay**

In one hour, on a topic of her choice, Sabrina wrote the following essay.

#### **Reading For Leisure**

I particularly like reading books who that are instructive, for example Parenting kook, Psychological and sociological. These help me to cope withmy daily life. I also like to read magazines wich contain good quality imformation that deal with real facts of life. For instance I Prefer to read chatelaine, Parents, and Phychology today. I choose thes type of magazines over al others, because I found them much more interesting then the other- chatelaine contain informations on many different sort of subjects such as heal beauty, children, entertenment and so on. I often read it as soon as it get in, I read it as leisure reading. When I have certain difficulties I try to find book that related to that problem to help me get over it as soon as I could. I like to know what is going around me; this is why I read the newspaper daily, just for the most important parts wich are the weather report, the economy and sometime the horoscope, one is a wile I look into the ad section if I am looking for a care or flight that are on sale or people want to sale their tickets because the can't use their tickets for some specific reason. I love reading books in all sort of variety, but the only Problem with my reading is whenever I pick up a book I usually fall a sleep Therefore it takes me longer to finish a book or reading Proget assignment. I think this something I have to work on in order to benefit from the class. I have not written a paper for a wile; I feel I am running out of thought. I know my paper is not very clear; it is because I try to write as the come to my mind. I hope It is not a problem. During my last class of English I have read few books that were extremely touchy, particularly the one by "Albert Camus called The outsider". I like the book, but it made me quite upset at the end. I didn't like the way the society treated Meurseault. I think every human being are free to choose their live, they want it. And also People are react different in different circumstances.

Another one was The grape of wrap by John Steinbeck, This book and the movie realy wreck my heart, I could not understand why people that has the power

could be so cruel to other which are powerless. I realized by reading this books, one have to struggle to achieve what he or she wants in life. One of the main character wich is her name was Ma showed us it is only by Perceverence one can succeed in this society of injustice and unfairness. The dilemma that the families of the farmer went was the most tragical I ever seen in my life. However reading is a wonderful habit to develop ether for instruction or for leisure.

Dr. Samuels wrote seven comments about grammar and mechanical errors, and corrected or indicated many other errors. She concluded as follows:

You have many spelling errors (but a dictionary will help), and some serious problems with using idiomatic expressions. You need practice. But clearly you have read some very large and impressive books!

I would suggest that you prepare your papers in a draft form, and then we will talk over your problems before you hand in the final paper. OK?

In the 495-word essay, Paul found approximately 100 errors.

#### Verbs

1. Verb Tense	7
2. Subject/Verb Agreement	7
3. Active/Passive	0

#### Words

4. Singular/Plural	11
5. Word Form	4
6. Word Choice/Idiomatic Expressions	6
7+ Add a Word	5
7- Omit a Word	3

#### Sentence Structure

8. Word Order/Combining Ideas	6
9. Incomplete Sentence	0
10. Run-on Sentence/Comma Splice	3

#### Content

11. Meaning not Clear	0
12. Pronoun Reference	1

#### Mechanics

13. Spelling (no repeats)	24
14. Punctuation	11
15. Capitalization	4
16+ New Paragraph	3
16- No Paragraph	1

#### Also

17. Article	1
18. Preposition	2

The in-class essay exam booklet showed no signs of on-paper invention strategies, no organizing scheme, and no editing or revision.

When Sabrina first went to the LAC for help, Paul immediately sent Sabrina's in-class English essay to the College's learning disabilities specialist who said there was "only mild LD stuff like 'the the' and some dropped or added letters." She did not think that Sabrina was an obvious candidate for special LD assistance. She felt that "the primary problem is ESL." She suggested finding out how good Sabrina's French was in an effort to

determine whether the problem was a language deficit in general or an English language deficit in particular.

Paul then sent the essay to an experienced instructor of Advanced ESL who wrote back that, although there were some signs of ESL difficulties, "the more serious problems are more consistent with what I have seen in non-academic high school L1 [English as a first language] students. Her biggest problem, I think, is that she isn't aware of the requirements and style of formal essays."

### **Visiting the Learning Assistance Centre**

On Sabrina's first visit to the LAC, she said that she wanted help with three things: reading literature; writing, especially grammar/mechanics and writing anxiety; and finding a good dictionary.

On Sabrina's next visit, Paul used the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity with her on a short story of her choosing, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." It is the story of a nondescript, hen-pecked little man who, at the slightest suggestion, slips into a fantasy world where he is brave and heroic. At the end of each of the five switches between reality and fantasy, Paul asked Sabrina what was happening, what the possible connections were, and why there was a sudden change. She did not know. The story made no sense to her, even with a guided reading. Throughout the story, Paul also asked Sabrina about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Mitty. In the opening of the story, Sabrina focused on Mrs. Mitty and misinterpreted her as caring. By the end of the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, however, Sabrina thought that Mrs. Mitty treated her husband "like a child."

Paul asked Sabrina if she would write a standardized reading test at home. Although vocabulary and spelling were roughly at the high school level, Sabrina finished only three-quarters of the comprehension questions on a test that most students finish well within the time allotted. Paul also got permission to obtain Sabrina's scores on the College Board Reading Comprehension Test and the College Board Sentence Structure Test which Sabrina had written the previous semester. They were 8th percentile of incoming freshmen, and 5th percentile, respectively.

On most subsequent visits, Sabrina wanted to work on vocabulary because she felt the pressure of the weekly grammar/vocabulary tests. She did not understand why she was doing poorly on the tests. (They mixed abstruse vocabulary in artificial, decontextualized sentences full of grammatical errors. Sabrina had understood little of the traditional grammar instruction at the first of the semester.) She did not realize that memorizing isolated word lists of obscure words was a poor way for her to learn vocabulary. Each week, Paul clarified the definitions if he knew the words, Sabrina and Paul discussed several examples of how each word might be used, they created a sample sentence to clarify the major meaning of each word, and Paul encouraged Sabrina to sketch pictures beside the definitions in order to remember them better. She did not use the picture suggestion voluntarily. Although she had two good dictionaries and a French/English dictionary, she felt that finding a better dictionary was crucial. Her marks on the tests did not improve substantially. Paul pointed out that if the grammar and the vocabulary questions were separated, she was making only a couple of vocabulary errors on each test.

Paul and Sabrina did not work on writing until the second half of the semester. Dr. Samuels told Sabrina not to get help from the LAC on rough drafts. Yet Sabrina would not ask Dr. Samuels for help. "She's so sophisticated that I'm not comfortable talking with her. So I never found out what I wanted to know," Sabrina said on one occasion. On

another, Sabrina said, "She expects you to be there before you have time to get there." Sabrina perceived high expectations and a lack of help, and she was intimidated.

### **The Mid-term Exam**

Sabrina received an F on her take-home mid-term exam. She was asked to rewrite passages such as the following one, correcting grammar and style errors. (Her corrections on first pass are noted in brackets.)

And so I says to her, she is gets lots less As then you and she says that dont never mind because shes just lyed [lied] about it. She says that[,] he says [declares] that she never got no As at all! Excellent I says because I never has liked her no how.

Sabrina's rewrite was as follows:

She gets lots less the you, moreover, she says that never mind. And so I say, because she is just lied about it. She at no time got a no for answer at all. Excellent I replays since, I never have like her not ever.

The instructor's comment: "None of this makes sense, I'm afraid. The original is about getting the best grades (A) in classes."

On Sabrina's mid-term exam essay relating Plato's "The Cave" to other literature studied, Dr. Samuels made 25 corrections on the first page of the four-page essay, and then wrote "I'm sorry to say that your essay is clearly an F. You may try to rewrite it and I will do what I can to give you a pass." Paul advised Sabrina to reorganize the essay because with clearer thinking might come clearer sentences. However, Dr. Samuels advised Sabrina to correct only the grammar and mechanical errors. Sabrina chose to do this. She received a D. Failing her mid-term was traumatic. Sabrina, crying, said that it was one of the—if not the—most upsetting experiences of her life. "I never failed anything not even when I was just starting to learn English." She said that she had driven home in tears, thrown out her English books, and quit. However, a friend phoned and said that it was only a course, not the most important thing in life. And besides, said the friend, "If the teacher doesn't correct your work, she's not doing her job." Sabrina agreed and returned.

### **Writing the Research Paper**

When Sabrina came to the LSC for help with her final project, a research paper, she said that Dr. Samuels had given no handout detailing the requirements but had explained that the students should choose any topic, develop "three things," and have five references. Sabrina and Paul spent four one-hour sessions on the project. After an hour of questioning and exploring, she choose to do a feminist analysis of three poems, "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, "Sonnet 29" by William Shakespeare, and "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning. During the discussion, Paul felt that she had little concept of what constituted an academically appropriate topic. In the second session, Paul and Sabrina interpreted the three poems, and Sabrina wrote sentences capturing the critical ideas about each poem. She said that she understood poetry better when she talked about it; Paul felt that she comprehended almost nothing until he had explicated the poem. She also seemed to have difficulty capturing in clauses both the abstract and the detailed ideas they generated. They prepared a traditional outline in the third meeting. Sabrina seemed to have difficulty seeing any pattern among the three commentaries, so Paul suggested most sexist to least sexist. When he explained and demonstrated a formal outline, she gave no signs of it being an important revelation. She wrote the paper according to the outline but without consulting it. The final session Sabrina and Paul spent revising because the background section on the feminist movement was jumbled. Sabrina spell checked her

composition, creating draft number eight. Then she mistakenly printed draft seven and submitted it full of typing and spelling errors.

The following paragraph critiquing "To His Coy Mistress" is one of the strongest paragraphs in the essay.

In the third stanza, the "birds of prey" simile is violent and not really appropriate for love. Animals and human are not comparable here. Also the "tearing" metaphor is a very ferocious comparison which shows the aggression in his mind. Therefore, it is clear that the narrator is not an affectionate person. Because of the narrator's thought and language, this poem is sexist.

Sabrina received a C+ and two angry phone calls on her answering machine accusing her of plagiarism and demanding a meeting. According to Sabrina, Dr. Samuels asked over and over, "Where'd you get those words?" and Sabrina said, "The dictionary." Finally, the professor said, "Don't cry: you'll probably pass—if you do OK on the final exam."

### **Conclusion**

Sabrina did not know how she was supposed to find out her course grade, so Paul walked next door with her to where the grades were posted by student number on Dr. Samuels' door. The most common mark for the course was F. When Sabrina saw her C, she jumped with glee, grabbed Paul by the arm, and said, "Thank you." Then she crossed herself.

As she left, delighted, Paul said that he would meet with her the following week about the individualized educational plan she wanted.

### **Questions**

1. What would you advise Paul Kelly to do? Why?
2. What are the problems? What are the most important problems? What is your rationale?
3. What solutions are promising? What solution(s) would you try first? What would you look for in order to learn from the attempt(s)? What is your rationale?
4. If an individualized learning plan is one of your solutions, how would you proceed in designing it? What objectives, work, and evaluation criteria would you include? What is your rationale?

Case prepared by Jim Bell.