

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

You Write Like a Teen

Seohyun Ryu · Friday, July 12th, 2024

Have you ever heard of the burger structure?

The burger structure your teacher in elementary school would tell you about in English class. You start with the bun, the intro; then the lettuce, your first point; the patty, your second point; the tomato (or any other burger condiments of your choice), your last point; and lastly the bottom bun, your conclusion. I was always told to cook the perfect, juiciest burger when writing since first grade. The burger structure was engraved into my head, and I'd never gone off of the structure until last summer.

Around this time last summer, I screamed to my mom that I wasn't a writer.

I fell in love with reading poetry collections in middle school, especially collections filled with short yet poignant poems. Getting my tiny brain blown away by reading only a couple of lines was refreshing after having to read chapters from bulky textbooks for schoolwork. But my relationship with poetry got a little confusing after I started writing instead of reading in high school. Like all artists drawing their first sketches and making their first strokes, I struggled to describe the abstract thoughts and feelings in my head in words. I was a stubborn artist because despite knowing the lack of experience I had, I was eager to create something "perfect." And the only "perfect" I knew was the burger structure. Before even placing the tip of my fingers onto the keyboard, I would lay out the whats and the hows of the poem in my head. 'Okay, start with the intro, opening scene; then a couple of details in the middle; and end with the moral of the story, the conclusion.' Whether the poems I wrote were good or not, one thing was for sure—I was not writing in my voice. My voice was chained by the rules of the burger structure, and being chained was tiring. So I went totally bonkers one night and burst into frustration after realizing how much power I didn't have over my own works. I was sick of being "perfect." At the moment, the only thing my mom could have thought of telling me was to get back up and try looking forward to the writing program I was going to in a week.

The writing program I went to last summer is called CSSSA (California State Summer School for the Arts).

I applied to CSSSA through my theatre teacher's recommendation but ended up applying for the writing program instead of theatre as writing was closer to my passion. If I could, I would write a fat 10-page journal/essay about my time at CSSSA, but I'll only share one specific memory for this essay to make things short. It was a couple of days into the program when Chiwan Choi, my poetry instructor at CSSSA, assigned the class to write letters to ourselves. This simple prompt may seem

trivial. It's something your high school teachers might have told you to do at the end of every school year. But this prompt changed the entirety of how I write. Instead of focusing on the "perfectness" (whatever that is) of the poem, I was forced to focus on my voice, a voice I thought I had lost, and the authenticity of myself. If I were to really write a letter to myself, I knew I would write it in my mother's tongue, so I didn't hesitate to change the language to Korean on my keyboard and start typing whatever came up in my head at the time. I didn't need any structure or prior brainstorming because it was just a simple letter to no audience nor reader but only myself. By not following the burger structure, I had unraveled the problems in how I writing that I was maybe trying to hide all this time. I was, first, never "perfect." I was, second, never writing for my own pleasure, but for the pleasure or recognition of someone else. I think I finished writing the letter in less than twenty minutes. It was very short, like the poems I would read in middle school. Once everyone was done writing, Chiwan gave everyone a chance to read what they'd written to the class. My head went blank right before it was time for me to read because I was scared of the reactions everyone would give. No one in the room could speak Korean, and my entire letter was written in Korean. When I told Chiwan that there was no point in me reading as no one could understand what I wrote, he didn't waver a single bit to tell me that I should still read. I think my heart was beating at least 200 beats per minute. Shoved on the computer screen, my face was heating up, and I couldn't hear anything else but the words I was reading every second. While reading, I started crying. Even to this day, I have no idea why I cried. I wasn't necessarily sad. I wasn't crying tears of joy. Maybe it was the adrenaline. Or maybe the relief, the relief that I hadn't lost my voice. But the real confusion was when I held my head up after reading the last word of my letter. I saw the people around me crying. It was weird because I knew no one understood what I was saying. But I guess the words and language we use to write are more abstract than thoughts or feelings because words go beyond what's on paper. I don't think I could ever forget what Chiwan told me that day. "You are a writer."

I was only a writer.

One thing I love about CSSSA is that I wasn't a high school student, a daughter, or a sister during my time in the program. I was only a writer. Having the opportunity to let go of responsibilities and be a writer who gets to focus solely on everything that is going on inside one's self instead of the surroundings was what made CSSSA meaningful. In hopes of offering the opportunities needed to become a writer and make art education more accessible, [The 309 Collective](#), a collective established by alumni of CSSSA, has created its first literary festival for the youth called You Write Like a Teen in collaboration with [The Imperfect Poets](#), a group of amazing teen poets from Riverside County.



Come write like a teen with us!

When teenagers hear someone say that they write like a teen, we don't want them to feel discouraged but empowered. We, teenagers, are often pressured and expected to write "eloquently" with academic language. But we want you to recognize the beauty in writing like your age, writing like yourself. We want you to recognize that you have full control over how you write. You make the rules. Though it wasn't for me, maybe the burger structure works perfectly for you? Maybe writing with your flow of consciousness is your cup of tea? Or maybe you don't know where to even start and are scared of making rules? Wherever you are standing in your journey as a writer, we want to help you along the way because writing is much more than just sitting on a desk in the corner of your room and jotting down words. Writing is reading your work, hearing others' works, making connections, and building a voice. Just like how I used to write to be someone I'm not, but now, thanks to the communities around me, I write to find someone I could be.

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***You Write Like a Teen: a Teen Lit Festival — Saturday 7/27, 11am–5pm.
Art Share LA, 801 E 4th Pl, Los Angeles, CA 90013, (213) 687-4278***

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