

LESSON 8

HOW TO TALK ABOUT BRAINS

The next week, the memory of that awful moment at the Cup was still playing on constant repeat. I couldn't believe I'd made such an ass of myself. I was completely sure I would never, ever live it down. I even found myself drifting off in Ms. Lieberman's English class-something I never, ever do. English has always been my favorite subject, and the only one I've always done really well in. And Ms. Lieberman is an awesome teacher. She's really young and hip, and probably the only person on the faculty who actually believes her students have intelligent things to say. But today, even she couldn't keep me focused on *Hamlet*.

We were discussing the question of whether or not Hamlet is a hero. (Or, rather, the rest of the class was discussing that-I was doodling tiny pictures of tube tops all over my notebook.) Walter was, as usual, blabbing on about something. Sometimes it's fun to watch Walter get all worked up; I keep expecting his head to turn into a steam whistle, like in cartoons. But I hate people who argue just for the sake of arguing, which it sounded like Walter was doing now.

"I mean, he's just really lame: Walter was saying, his voice getting higher and louder with each word. "He has no direction and he can't make up his mind about anything. He's so wishy-washy it drives me crazy. Determination-that's what makes a person successful." He said it as if he'd just made the most brilliant observation ever.

The self-righteous tone in Walter's voice was too much for me to take. "Oh, come off it, Walter. Hamlet's not wishy-washy. He's just gone through a 101. I mean, his dad was killed, his mom married his dad's murderer, he's being haunted, and everyone's out to get him. Shakespeare wrote the character as a normal guy with problems- he's not supposed to be Superman."

Walter narrowed his eyes at me. "Just because *you* go in for tortured artist-types doesn't mean all of us do, Lee."

A couple people sniggered. Once again, I wanted to smack Walter into the next time zone. Or, at least, I would have wanted to do that, if I hadn't been so surprised that he'd sussed out my crush.

"Okay, guys, okay, simmer down," Ms. Lieberman said, eyeing the two of us. Just then the bell rang, and everyone cleared out before she could yell out the assignment.

"You didn't need to get all *snippy* with me, you know," said Walter as he put his books away.

"Yeah, well, Walter, I suppose I'm feeling a lot like Hamlet these days," I said as I threw on my backpack. "I mean, You may have it all figured out, Mr. Princeton, but that doesn't mean the rest of us do." And with that I clomped on out of class.

Great. That reminds me. I've got a college interview coming up. This week just keeps getting better and better....

WORDS ABOUT WALTER

Nothing but acrimonious words passes between Walter Chen and me.

acrimonious (*adj*): bitter, hateful

RELATED WORDS

We used to be friendly in the fourth grade, when we were in the same carpool. But now there is only **rancor**, **acerbity**, and **spite** between us. He can't even pass me a pencil without shooting me **inimical** looks and muttering **virulently** under his breath.

rancor (*n*): hatred, bitterness

acerbity (*n*): bitterness in tone or manner

spite (*n*): a small-minded desire to hurt someone

inimical (*adj*): hostile

virulently (*adv*): poisonously, bitterly

Whenever I look at him, I can see all kinds of **nefarious** plots being plotted in his brain.

nefarious (*adj*): wicked

A synonym for *nefarious* is *pernicious* (*ad*): destructive, wicked.

I think the rest of the class was a little taken aback by the **asperity** in our voices.

asperity (*n*): harshness, severity

Janet thinks the way that Walter and I fight is pretty **despicable** -

especially since she suspects Walter is still harboring a crush on me that dates back to middle school.

despicable (*adj*): contemptible

After our encounter in class, I was really tempted to write some really **injurious** things about him on the stalls of the girls' room.

injurious (*adj*): hurtful

A synonym for *injurious* is *deleterious* (*ad*): harmful.

He really is a nasty little **miscreant**.

miscreant (*n*): villain; contemptible person

WORDS ABOUT INTELLECT AND EDUCATION

Our English teacher, Ms. Lieberman, is incredibly **erudite** - she's got more degrees than a thermometer.

erudite (*adj*): highly learned

RELATED WORDS

She's not only book-smart, she's also really **savvy** when it comes to people. She's very **perspicacious** about human behavior, and has an **acute** sense of how to handle teenagers. I wish some of the more **obtuse** teachers at this school would take a clue from her.

savvy (*adj*): shrewd, well-informed

perspicacious (*adj*): perceptive, discerning

acute (*adj*): sharp, smart

obtuse (*adj*): dull, stupid

Acute and *obtuse* are direct antonyms. They're taken from geometry-an *acute* angle is less than 90°, and an *obtuse* angle is greater than 90° (which means an *acute* angle is, literally, sharp).

She's really patient – she once took an entire class period to walk us through a particularly **intricate** poem that we were having trouble understanding.

intricate (*adj*): complicated, with many small parts

I feel bad about a really **execrable** paper I wrote on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* this semester.

execrable (*adj*): very low-quality

She's never **didactic**; she'll tell you what she thinks about the book, but she's always willing to listen to one of our crazy hypotheses.

didactic (*adj*): instructional, especially in a way that's overly preachy

I appreciate the fact that she's open to all *our* suggestions- unlike some teachers, who are total **doctrinaires** when it comes to running his or her classrooms.

doctrinaire (*n*): someone who refuses to consider other theories or approaches besides their own

I way prefer Ms. Lieberman's **pedagogy** over my former English teachers', which seemed to consist of mainly boring vocab quizzes, dry lectures, and patronizing assignments.

pedagogy (*n*): the science of teaching

I imagine Ms. Lieberman spends her free time reading hoity-toity literary journals and sipping tea with other members of the **intelligentsia**.

intelligentsia (*n*): the most educated members of a society

Because I respect her so much, I try to be really **deliberate** in all my work for her class.

deliberate (*adj*): careful, methodical

WORDS ABOUT THE ARGUING

Walter and I get so mad at each other, our arguments sometimes **degenerate** into plain shouting matches.

degenerate (*v*): to become worse

When he gets excited about something, Walter's voice goes all high-pitched and **abrasive**.

abrasive (*adj*): grating, insensitive

Sometimes Janet begs me to just **acquiesce** to Walter and save everyone else the misery of hearing us argue.

acquiesce (*v*): to agree passively

I think, however, that he needs to be exposed as the intellectual **charlatan** he is.

charlatan (*n*): fraud, imposter

Seriously, I've never met anyone more **disputatious** than Walter. If *you* mention that it's a beautiful day outside, he'll find a way to argue that it's actually cloudy.

disputatious (*adj*): argumentative

RELATED WORDS

Contentious (*adj*) and **pugnacious** (*adj*) are synonyms for *disputatious*.

Here are some other words about arguing.

I'll never forget the day Walter **remonstrated** with me for a whole hour about how public school students should all be forced to wear uniforms. Later that day he emailed me a whole **polemic** on the subject.

remonstrate (*v*): to argue forcefully

polemic (*n*): a passionately worded argument

I try not to **disparage** Walter on a regular basis, but it's hard.

disparage (*v*): to put down

Once I managed to **discredit** Walter in class by pointing out that he'd stolen his entire argument about Bush's foreign policy from the *New York Times* editorial that morning. Walter **disdains** unoriginal thinkers, so it was a particularly good hit for me. I wasn't surprised to hear later that he'd been **maligning** me to the rest of the chess team.

discredit (*v*): to cast doubt on something

disdain (*v*): to have contempt for

malign (*v*): to say or write bad things about someone

I even emailed him the editorial later as **incontrovertible** proof.

incontrovertible (*adj*): unable to be denied

Walter should try to be more **obdurate**-he's too easily swayed by teasing.

obdurate (*adj*): not easily moved by pity or emotion

When he gets going, though, he's totally **intractable**. I really get a kick out of fighting with him; you never know what he's going to throw at you.

intractable (*adj*): difficult to manage or deal with

Whenever Walter starts a fight, I find it hard to **demur**.

demur (*v*): to object mildly

I find it kind of honorable how Walter will stick with a line of argumentation, even if it's totally **untenable**.

untenable (*adj*): unsupportable

Walter doesn't say much unless he's fighting, and then he's positively **voluble**.

voluble (*adj*): talkative

Sometimes I want to **concur** with his arguments, but I'd never give him the satisfaction.

concur (*v*): to agree

I often have to **suppress** the urge to punch Walter in the nose when I pass him in the halls.

suppress (*v*): to resist certain thoughts as they arise

Sometimes I find his smugness and self-confidence irritatingly **presumptuous** who does he think he is?

presumptuous (*adj*): overconfident, especially when not

entitled to be doing something

Ms. Lieberman always says that, if Walter and I could ever stop arguing long enough to join our energies and **collaborate**, we'd be an unstoppable team.

collaborate (v): to **work** together to produce something

Walter and I **assented** to keep it down a bit this semester.

assent (v): agree, accept