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2017

Honorable Mention - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest - 2017

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Recommended Citation

Shoaf, Sarah, "Honorable Mention - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest - 2017" (2017). *ENGL 1000 Writing Studies 1 Literacy Autobiography Contest*. 5.

https://opus.govst.edu/literacy_autobiography/5

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Sarah Shoaf
Professor Laura White

When writing this paper, I put myself back in my mindset of my eighth-grade self. It made it a lot easier to accurately describe my thoughts and feelings at that point in my life, so others could get a sense of what I was feeling. When I had some of my peers read the paper they said that the descriptions helped them picture the story better. It was almost like they were there with me, and they could relate to my situation. They also helped me better explain the aspects that were a little harder to understand, especially for those who have not learned another language and don't know the technical terms. It helped make my paper clearer for those who don't share my knowledge. Altogether, they gave me advice on how to make my paper more understandable, yet still keep it interesting.

I will be able to present at the GSU Research Day should I be invited.

En Français

Entering eighth grade was interesting to say the least. I was an awkward thirteen-year-old girl who thought that fitting in meant I had to wear and do what every other girl did.

Despite that, I was beginning my last year of junior high meaning my classmates and I were at the top of the school chain. Being at the top made me feel like I could do anything I set my mind to, so I decided to take a step out of my comfort zone. That step would land me in my first-year French class. I had always been drawn to the beauty of the French language and culture so I thought it would be interesting to be able to speak and learn more about it. For once, I was looking forward to starting school, which never happened before.

Normally the class would span out over two years to teach the basics, you would start in seventh grade and finish in eighth. However, my class only had one year to learn everything meant to be taught in two simply because there wasn't enough people to sign up the year before. I thought nothing of the loss of one year. Surely learning the basics could easily be done in one year? After all, my best friend Noni, who was never shy to speak her mind, complained of her two-year Spanish course moving too slow for her liking. Taking her opinion into account, I felt I had nothing to lose taking French. I ignored the fact that Spanish could be easier to learn. I would soon find out that learning a new language took time which we had little of. It was the first day of class and I was already racing against the clock. Suddenly my decision to try something new didn't seem like such a good idea. I wanted out. My year was supposed to be fun and now I had a teacher set on shoving as much information into my head in as little time possible. All I could hear in my head was, "so much for an amazing year."

I can still picture the first day I walked into my French class. I had goosebumps partly due to the school blasting its air conditioning and partly because I was walking into a room where I didn't recognize a single face. While I made my way to an empty desk in the middle of the room, my teacher continued to stand in the hallway to greet the rest of her new students with a friendly *bonjour*. Once everyone arrived, she made her way to the front of the classroom to introduce herself. She told us her name, Mrs. Yiakos, a little bit about herself and that she was very much aware of the unintentional similarity she had to the female chef, Colette, from the movie *Ratatouille*. Everyone laughed at that, so Mrs. Yiakos had succeeded at breaking the ice to make us feel more at ease. I definitely felt my anxiety slipping away. It also helped that despite resembling the cartoon chef, Mrs. Yiakos was much kinder and more patient.

I distinctly remember the first thing I learned in French, the alphabet. I thought that would be simple enough, no words, just letters. It even sounded similar to the English version. It helped that my teacher taught my class how to say the alphabet to the same rhythm we learned it in English. It was as if she handed our assignment to us on a silver platter. Unfortunately, she wasn't done giving us all the details on our first assignment. She left the worst for last. Each of us would have to stand in front of the entire class and recite the alphabet. It was a nightmare come true. I had to speak in front of the class in a language I wasn't close to being comfortable with. I guess it was her way of taking the training wheels off early because if it were up to me, I wouldn't speak French in front of the class until I felt ready. It would be a long time until I felt truly confident speaking in French, let alone in front of the class.

After the alphabet, came numbers, colors, food, nouns and pronouns. A lot of the French words resembled their English counterparts in sound or spelling so there was little struggle to keep up. I remember learning my favorite color, *violet* or *vee-oh-lay* as it is pronounced. French made purple sound more elegant, which is very fitting of a color of wisdom and royalty. It all seemed too easy, until I began learning verbs. Not only did I have to know what each verb was, but I also had to know how to conjugate it. Every verb had a different form for each noun it followed, so the word would have one form following "I" and another, slightly different form, following "we." For the most part, all verbs had similar forms which allowed me to breathe a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, that relief didn't last long because where there's regular verbs, there's irregular verbs. These new verbs had different conjugations and no two were the same so I constantly mixed up one verb form with another. At this point, I wanted to throw my textbook at the wall in frustration. Of course, learning French couldn't be all sunshine and rainbows. I couldn't help but think, "I don't remember English being this difficult." Then I realized that when I learned English I didn't know anything different, so it came naturally to me. I didn't have a part of my brain telling me to do one thing when I was being told to do another. Now I had a part of my brain that knew English, and for the first time, it didn't agree with the part of my brain learning French.

Once we had a sufficient amount of words under our belts, it was time to learn how to put them into sentences. The sentences had a similar structure to those in English, except for the part where the adjective came after the noun. There were some adjectives that for no particular reason came before the noun, but most came after. That took some getting used to since I had to consciously think about saying or writing the adjective second. In my head I would

tell myself *voiture rouge*, meaning car red, instead of *rouge voiture* before I would form a sentence. Sometimes I even found myself doing the same thing when I was working on an assignment in another class and I had to turn off the French part of my brain. Once that started happening, I knew I had committed the new rule to memory. It also made me realize that French was slowly finding its way into other aspects of my life.

Over the year, my class would learn more and more new words to add to our steadily growing French vocabulary. The more I learned, the more I began to look forward to my French class rather than count down the minutes until it was over. I still had the occasional class presentation that made me question if I actually enjoyed class, but then I reminded myself that the only way to get comfortable speaking French was to speak French. I couldn't just learn the rules of the language and never actually use them. After all, everything we learned was to help prepare us for the end of the year French placement exam that would determine if we were literate enough to move on to second year French. I had grown to love and appreciate French even more as the year went on and I wanted nothing more than to continue my education. It was a complete three-sixty from my attitude at the beginning of the year and would set me off on a path that would hopefully lead me to my desired destination.

Luckily for me, my hard work and countless hours of studying for the exam paid off. I made it into a second-year French class with a nearly perfect exam score, though I wouldn't know this until two and a half months later. I was told by Mrs. Yiakos and my high school French teacher that I only got one question wrong. This would have bothered me for a lot longer than two seconds if I wasn't so full of joy and relief that I could continue to learn French. So, I began my French journey that would last through my junior year of high school.

Throughout those years, I became acquainted with a new phrase, *en Français*, which translates to, “in French,” in English. More often than not, I heard this phrase at least once a day since Mr. Arentz, my new teacher, wanted me to speak in French as much as possible. Mr. Arentz had a slight French-Canadian accent after having lived in Montreal for a couple years, which meant he had lived amongst a mixture of people who spoke both French and English. His first-hand experience added an extra layer to my ever-growing French knowledge. Anyway, it wouldn't be until the middle of my fourth and final year of French class that I would no longer feel dread at the sound of the over-used phrase, *en Français*. Eventually, as French came more easily to me, the phrase would get a sigh of exasperation and the occasional eye-roll. My eye-roll would not go unnoticed by Mr. Arentz, who found amusement at my annoyance. I guess I deserved it after talking his ears off about *mes chats noir* (my black cats) whenever he asked me to spontaneously speak in French.

My three years of high school French would not go by without struggle. Occasionally I had trouble with the new French grammar rules that gave me more reason than ever to want to throw my book at the wall. I refrained from acting on my frustration and my book lived to see another year, despite the plague of tedious French grammar. This only made me want to work harder to conquer the obstacles of French and my determination would drive me through the end of my junior year. At that point, I would say, *à bientôt* or “see ya later,” to Mr. Arentz as I walked away with enough knowledge to carry out a conversation in French. He wouldn't let me forget that during my senior year because anytime I saw Mr. Arentz, he would start a conversation, *en Français*. Of course, he wouldn't let me leave French behind, though at that point it was pretty much impossible to do so, even if I tried.

Ever since I walked into that cold, unfamiliar room in eighth grade, French weaved its way into my life. I'm grateful that despite being unsure of myself in eighth grade, I was sure of my interest in learning French. Now, my brain can think in English and French without one stepping on the toes of the other. Although English has a bigger role in my life, French still has its part to play. Sometimes I find myself randomly thinking of the French translation for an English word or even looking for French labels on products I pass in stores. Learning French has made me appreciate English more than ever and given me the opportunity to see the world in two languages, making it all the more beautiful.