

# Chapter One An Outstanding Zero

It was Monday morning. The entire kindergarten through fifth-grade classes at Franklin Elementary had just sat down after reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

I, Big Hig, was fielding through my backpack, pretending to search for the written assignment I knew I didn't have.

"The word of the day is *outstanding*," my ex-best friend, Ana Newburg, announced over the loudspeaker. Why is Ana my ex-best friend? That's a whole other story I'll get to later.

"O-u-t-s-t-a-n-d-i-n-g." Ana spelled the word slowly. "It is an adjective meaning exceptional or terrific. For lunch we will be having *outstanding* macaroni and cheese with *outstanding* fresh fruit and your choice of *outstanding* juice or milk. Thank you. Have an *outstanding* day."

Ana held her mouth too close to the microphone and made the loudspeaker screech. “AHHHHH!” Robby Zao fell against his desk and covered his ears. Josh Mendez closed his eyes and made a sour face. I was grateful for any distraction. It was only a matter of time before my teacher, Miss Fromme, began to collect Monday morning’s assignment—the first draft—better known to her class as *the sloppy copy*.

After we hand in our sloppy copy it comes back with a mess of corrections and suggestions from Miss Fromme. Like: *Brian, more description for this opening sentence, please. Or: Brian, please remember to use your five senses when you write. Uh! The next rewrite checks for grammar and spelling. Brian, you do not need all these commas, thank you.* Which finally brings us to the final copy, if we end up living that long.

I personally do not mind writing. The problem is that I never have anything exciting to write about. Thinking up an idea is the hardest part for me. Anything I ever think about writing is either too long, too short, or too boring.

For example, why do the kids call me Big Hig? Simple. I am the biggest kid in our class and my name is Brian Higman. End of story.



And how about my family? Well, let's see. I have a mother named Florence. My pop's name is George. My older brother is Denny. My younger brother is Stevie. And I have a dog named Patches.

I guess I could try to write something about them. But that's where the long and boring part comes in.

Once I tried to write about a fishing trip we all went on. It was the day my pop decided we needed to spend some family time together. The sun was shining like pizza. My mother got

two fishing poles from the basement and sponged off the cobwebs. Denny and I wrapped five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in tin-foil. Stevie was in charge of packing the snacks. Pop piled everything, including us, into our Subaru station wagon and off we went. Mom turned up the radio while Denny played an air guitar in the backseat. Stevie counted and recounted the number of cookies he had in his bag. “One plus two is three. Three plus one is four.” I was relieved to know that my little brother did not have any ideas to supply us with any of his so-called entertainment.

When we got to the lake, we unpacked our stuff into the little boat we rented. Well no sooner did Pop finally ripple our canoe to what promised to be a good spot for fishing, when Stevie began to feel sorry for the minnows we were about to use for live bait. He patted his life jacket. “Don’t worry, fishies,” Stevie said in his superhero voice, “I’ll save you.” Then he picked up the pail of minnows and emptied the entire bucket into the water, yelling, “Free the fishies! Free the fishies!” You can believe me or not, but this really happened. Who wants to hear a story like that? I didn’t think it was very good.



So instead of handing it in to Miss Fromme, I gave her a blank piece of paper. That was the first time I got a red zero.

Miss Fromme says that it is good practice to be aware of the ordinary things that happen in your life and learn to write them down.

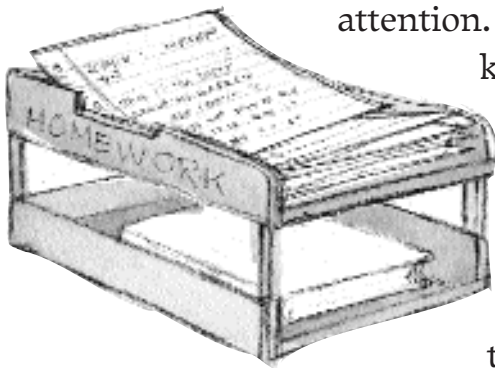
Dear Writer's Journal,

Today I do not have my homework again and I am about to get another zero.

Yours truly,  
guess who?

I was busy thinking of unexciting and ordinary things like journal writing and family fishing trips, when Miss Fromme motioned for the first table to stand. She pressed her lips together in a line. My stomach did a quick flip.

"First table," Miss Fromme said. "Ladies and Gentlemen! Less talk and more attention. This way, please." The



kids at the first table made one messy line toward the front of the room. I watched as a pile of written assignments began to stack up on Miss

Fromme's desk.

I could tell right away that Miss Fromme was not in a good mood. She did not even say thank you whenever another paper was added

to the bunch. "Next table, please," said Miss Fromme.

I swallowed too much air at once and let out a little burp. It was all over for me. One more table and I'd be up there, too.

Ana Newburg walked into the classroom. She was all whoop-de-do from her loudspeaker announcement. She shook her bangs and rushed to her seat where she pulled out her sloppy copy. Ana held it up as if Miss Fromme had already given her an A+.

"Big deal," Robby Zao whispered to her from table three. He chomped on his pencil like a rabbit.

I opened my journal and wrote:

Ana is the kind of person who can make a big deal out of anything. Last week in art class, when Martin Pajaji put a tomato in his fruit painting, Ana made one of her big deals about whether a tomato was a fruit or a vegetable. I was glad when Mrs. Chila said that a tomato could be considered as both. It was a fruit that was used as a vegetable. In the plant group it was actually considered to be a berry.

I put my pencil down.

Right now, the last thing I needed was for Ana Newburg to make some kind of big deal about me. After all, I had a very good reason for not having my written assignment. In fact, I had planned to do it all weekend. Only my weekend did not work out as I had planned. Now all I had to do was convince Miss Fromme to give me another chance.

