



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ENGLISH 100  
FINAL EXAM  
FALL 2002-2003

**READING PASSAGE: The Right To Fail**  
by  
**William Zinsser**

1. I like "dropout" as an addition to the American language because it's brief and it's clear. What I don't like is that we use it almost entirely as a dirty word.
2. We only apply it to people under twenty-one. Yet an adult who spends his days and nights watching mindless TV programs is more of a dropout than an eighteen-year-old who quits college, with its frequently mindless courses, to become, say, a VISTA volunteer. For the young, dropping out is often a way of dropping in.
3. To hold this opinion, however, is little short of treason in America. A boy or girl who leaves college is branded a failure—and the right to fail is one of the few freedoms that this country does not grant its citizens. The American dream is a dream of "getting ahead," painted in strokes of gold wherever we look. Our advertisements and TV commercials are a hymn to material success, our magazine articles a toast to people who made it to the top. Smoke the right cigarette or drive the right car—so the ads imply—and girls will be swooning into your deodorized arms or caressing your expensive lapels. Happiness goes to the man who has the sweet smell of achievement. He is our national idol, and everybody else is our national fink.
4. I want to put in a word for the fink, especially the teen-age fink, because if we give him time to get through his finkdom—if we release him from the pressure of attaining certain goals by a certain age—he has a good chance of becoming our national idol, a Jefferson or a Thoreau, a Buckminster Fuller or an Adlai Stevenson, a man with a mind of his own. We need mavericks and dissenters and dreamers far more than we need junior vice-presidents, but we paralyze them by insisting that every step by a step up to the next rung of the ladder. Yet in the fluid years of youth, the only way for boys and girls to find their proper road is often to take a hundred side trips, poking out in different directions, faltering, drawing back, and starting again.
5. "But what if we fail?" they ask, whispering the dreadful word across the Generation Gap to their parents, who are back home at the Establishment, nursing their "middle-class values" and cultivating their "goal-oriented society." The parents whisper back: "Don't!"

6. What they should say is "Don't be afraid to fail!" Failure isn't fatal. Countless people have had a bout with it and come out stronger as a result. Many have even come out famous. History is strewn with eminent dropouts, "loners" who followed their own trail, not worrying about its odd twists and turns because they had faith in their own sense of direction. To read their biographies is always exhilarating, not only because they beat the system, but because their system was better than the one that they beat.
7. Luckily, such rebels still turn up often enough to prove that individualism, though badly threatened, is not extinct. Much has been written, for instance, about the fitful scholastic career of Thomas P.F. Hoving, New York's former Parks Commissioner and now director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Hoving was a dropout's dropout, entering and leaving schools as if they were motels, often at the request of the management. Still, he must have learned something during those unorthodox years, for he dropped in again at the top of his profession.
8. His case reminds me of another boyhood—that of Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the most popular literary hero of the post-war period. There is nothing accidental about the grip that this dropout continues to hold on the affections of an entire American generation. Nobody else, real or invented, has made such an engaging shambles of our "goal-oriented society," so gratified our secret belief that the "phonies" are in power and the good guys up the creek. Whether Holden has also reached the top of his chosen field today is one of those speculations that delight fanciers of good fiction. I speculate that he has. Holden Caulfield, incidentally, is now thirty-six.
9. I'm not urging everyone to go out and fail just for the sheer therapy of it, or to quit college just to coddle some vague discontent. Obviously it's better to succeed than to flop, and in general a long education is more helpful than a short one. (Thanks to my own education, for example, I can tell George Eliot from T.S. Eliot, I can handle the pluperfect tense in French, and I know that Caesar beat the Helviti because he had enough frumentum.) I only mean that failure isn't bad in itself, or success automatically good.
10. Fred Zimmermann, who had directed some of Hollywood's most honored movies, was asked by a reporter, when *A Man for All Seasons* won every prize, about his previous film, *Behold a Pale Horse*, which was a boxoffice disaster. "I don't feel any obligation to be successful," Zimmerman replied. "Success can be dangerous—you feel you know it all. I've learned a great deal from my failures." A similar point was made by Richard Brooks about his ambitious money loser, *Lord Jim*. Recalling the three years of his life that went into it, talking almost with elation about the troubles that befell his unit in Cambodia, Brooks told me that he learned more about his craft from this considerable failure than from his many earlier hits.

11. It's a point, of course, that applies throughout the arts. Writers, playwrights, painters and composers work in the expectation of periodic defeat, but they wouldn't keep going back into the arena if they thought it was the end of the world. It isn't the end of the world. For an artist—and perhaps for anybody—it is the only way to grow.
12. Today's younger generation seems to know that this is true, seems willing to take the risks in life that artists take in art. "Society," needless to say, still has the upper hand—it sets the goals and condemns as a failure everybody who won't play. But the dropouts and the hippies are not as afraid of failure as their parents and grandparents. This could mean, as their elders might say, that they are just plumb lazy, secure in the comforts of an affluent state. It could also mean, however, that they just don't buy the old standards of success and are rapidly writing new ones.
13. Recently it was announced, for instance, that more than two hundred thousand Americans have inquired about service in VISTA (the domestic Peace Corps) and that, according to a Gallup survey, "more than 3 million American college students would serve VISTA in some capacity if given the opportunity." This is hardly the road to riches or to an executive suite. Yet I have met many of these young volunteers, and they are not pining for traditional success. On the contrary, they appear more fulfilled than the average vice-president with a swimming pool.
14. Who is to say, then, if there is any right path to the top, or even to say what the top consists of? Obviously the colleges don't have more than a partial answer—otherwise the young would not be so disaffected with an education that they consider vapid. Obviously business does not have the answer—otherwise the young would not be so scornful of its call to be an organization man.
15. The fact is, nobody has the answer, and the dawning awareness of this fact seems to me one of the best things happening in America today. Success and failure are again becoming individual visions, as they were when the country was younger, not rigid categories. Maybe we are learning again to cherish this right of every person to succeed on his own terms and to fail as often as necessary along the way.

Taken from Read, Write, React

## GLOSSARY

1. **hymn** (parag. 3): song of praise to God, especially used in a religious service.
2. **lapel** (parag. 3): part of the collar of a coat or jacket
3. **maverick** (parag. 4): unorthodox person, person who rebels against the ideas of an organized group
4. **bout** (parag. 6): fit or period of illness



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READING COMPREHENSION

The Right to Fail

by  
William Zinsser

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Allowed: 90 minutes

Section: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** *In your own words, answer each of the following questions. Be sure to use correct sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. Please limit yourself to the space provided.*

1. According to the author, why should teenagers have the right to fail? Briefly explain. (10%)

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2. The author suggests that parents should deal differently with failure.  
A. Where in the passage does he make this suggestion? (4%)

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- B. What advice does he offer? (6%)

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3. Provide synonyms or explain the meanings of the following words or expressions as they appear in the passage. (20%)

A. **Dropping in** (parag. 2)

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B. **Swooning** (parag. 3)

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C. **Dissenters** (parag. 4)

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D. **Strewn** (parag. 6)

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E. **Elation** (parag. 10)

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4. Why does the author mention Thomas P.F. Hoving and Holden Caulfield (paragraphs 7&8)? What do these two have in common? Explain. (10%)

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5. What is the relationship between paragraphs 3 & 4. Explain. (10%)

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6. Why does the author mention the "American Dream" in paragraph 3? (10%)

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7. Explain the following statements: (20%)

A. "Today's younger generation seems to know that this is true, seems willing to take the risks in life that artists take in art." (paragraph 12)

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B. "This is hardly the road to riches or to an executive suite" (paragraph 13)

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8. Briefly explain whether *you* agree/disagree with the author's claim that students have "the right to fail". Support your point of view with *one* logical reason that is based on your personal experiences. (10%)

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Essay Questions

Time Allowed: 90 Minutes

**Directions:** Choose one of the following topics and develop it into an essay of four paragraphs.

1. Every New Year, some people make new resolutions (decisions) in their lives. More often than not, these resolutions are related to their family, studies, habits, career, friends, etc. *What* were your personal resolutions and *why* did you make them.
2. Nowadays, there are many just causes to which people are strongly committed. Indeed, we constantly hear about fund-raising campaigns for social, political or personal causes. Imagine that you are raising money for a cause that you strongly believe in. *What* is the cause that you strongly believe in and *why* do you think it is so important?
3. In light of Zinsser's statements "Don't be afraid to fail. Failure isn't fatal", explain *how* students should cope with failure. Draw on your personal experiences and your knowledge of the world to clarify the *process* through which students can overcome failure.
4. William Zinsser presented a specific point of view regarding the concepts of success and failure amongst the younger generation. *Compare* and/or *contrast* your *personal* views on these concepts with those of William Zinsser.