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“A verb is a doing or stating word.”

I know this because the late Gordon Blackman burned it into my brain 50 years ago this academic year in Grade 10 English, in Room 213 of John Rennie High School.

I have made my living as a writer for nearly a half-century because in 1973, Mr. Blackman took my casual enjoyment of language and writing and poured it into my soul.

If all of us have had one teacher, just one, who has had the personal influence and impact that Mr. Blackman has had on me, then we are blessed.

I know that a verb is a doing or stating word because in the spring of 1973, I stood on Mr. Blackman’s desk in Room 213 and unfurled the paper on which that sentence was printed 1,000 times.

My definition of a verb in class that morning had not met Mr. Blackman’s expectations and he had requested the pleasure of my company – and that of a half-dozen classmates – at the end of the day.

But while the others were contemplating a lost afternoon and chalk-bleached fingers, I had a plan. At noon, I had a friend in data processing set up a program – this was before computers – and an hour later my ticket to freedom was in hand.

As my classmates assembled before the blackboard at 3 o'clock and picked up their chalk, I made my presentation, dropping a metre-long scroll of data paper to the floor.

Mr. Blackman tried to hide his amusement, then laughed despite himself and dismissed me, along with everyone else.

My work ethic may have been sadly lacking, but to this day, I can define a verb.

I took a love of writing that Mr. Blackman had stirred in me to a journalism career that began in 1976, my work in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, digital media and since 2016 with the NHL having taken me around the world. But even thousands of miles from John Rennie, a part of me has always been in Room 213.

When Mr. Blackman died in the fall of 2017, I was profoundly honoured to be asked by his family to eulogize him at his funeral. I wrote thousands of words for his 1973 class, but the 1,400 I assembled to salute a teaching giant made this the most important composition of my life.

I attended Grade 1 through 11 in three Lester B. Pearson School Board (then Lakeshore School Board) buildings, my education having set me on a path of rich life experience. There is not a day goes by that I don't give quiet thanks to Mr. Blackman, the legend to whom I owe my career.

When I stood to deliver my eulogy, I wore a silk bowtie on which was designed the cursive alphabet as it once appeared over a school's blackboard. It was my salute to an old-school icon, the most important influence in my writing life.

To this day, with every verb, noun and adjective that I type, I still try to live up to the lofty expectations of Mr. Blackman, a teacher and a friend who believed in me and, word by word, made me a better writer.