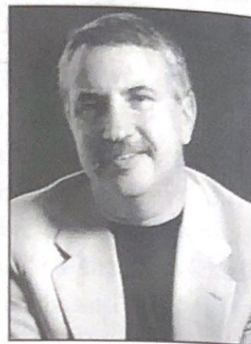


## My Favorite Teacher

### ■ Thomas L. Friedman

New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1953. He graduated from Brandeis University in 1975 and received a Marshall Scholarship to study modern Middle East studies at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, where he earned a master's degree. He has worked for the New York Times since 1981, first in Lebanon, then in Israel, and since 1989 in Washington, D.C. He has won three Pulitzer Prizes. His 1989 best seller, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, received the National Book Award for nonfiction. Friedman's most recent books include *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005); *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America* (2008); and *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (2011), co-written with Michael Mandelbaum.



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In the following essay, which first appeared in the New York Times on January 9, 2001, Friedman pays tribute to his tenth-grade journalism teacher. As you read Friedman's profile of Hattie M. Steinberg, note the descriptive detail he selects to create a unified, dominant impression of "a woman of clarity in an age of uncertainty."

### Reflecting on What You Know

If you had to name your three favorite teachers to date, who would be on your list? Why do you consider each of the teachers a favorite? Which one, if any, are you likely to remember twenty-five years from now? Why?

Last Sunday's *New York Times Magazine* published its annual review of people who died last year who left a particular mark on the world. I am sure all readers have their own such list. I certainly do.

Indeed, someone who made the most important difference in my life died last year—my high school journalism teacher, Hattie M. Steinberg.

I grew up in a small suburb of Minneapolis, and Hattie was the legendary journalism teacher at St. Louis Park High School, Room 313. I took her intro to journalism course in 10th grade, back in 1969, and have never needed, or taken, another course in journalism since. She was that good.

Hattie was a woman who believed that the secret for success in life was getting the fundamentals right. And boy, she pounded the fundamentals of journalism into her students—not simply how to write a lead or accurately transcribe a quote, but, more important, how to comport yourself in a professional way and to always do quality work. To this day, when I forget to wear a tie on assignment, I think of Hattie scolding me. I once interviewed an ad exec for our high school paper who used a four-letter word. We debated whether to run it. Hattie ruled yes. That ad man almost lost his job when it appeared. She wanted to teach us about consequences.

Hattie was the toughest teacher I ever had. After you took her journalism course in 10th grade, you tried out for the paper, *The Echo*, which she supervised. Competition was fierce. In 11th grade, I didn't quite come up to her writing standards, so she made me business manager, selling ads to the local pizza parlors. That year, though, she let me write one story. It was about an Israeli general who had been a hero in the Six-Day War,<sup>1</sup> who was giving a lecture at the University of Minnesota. I covered his lecture and interviewed him briefly. His name was Ariel Sharon.<sup>2</sup> First story I ever got published.

Those of us on the paper, and the yearbook that she also supervised, lived in Hattie's classroom. We hung out there before and after school. Now, you have to understand, Hattie was a single woman, nearing 60 at the time, and this was the 1960s. She was the polar opposite of "cool," but we hung around her classroom like it was a malt shop and she was Wolfman Jack.<sup>3</sup> None of us could have articulated it then, but it was because we enjoyed being harangued<sup>4</sup> by her,

<sup>1</sup>*Six-Day War*: the short but pivotal war in June 1967 between Israel and the allied countries of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

<sup>2</sup>*Ariel Sharon* (1928–2014): Israeli general and politician, elected prime minister of Israel in 2001.

<sup>3</sup>*Wolfman Jack*: pseudonym of Robert Weston Smith (1938–1995), a famous American rock-and-roll radio disc jockey.

<sup>4</sup>*harangued*: given a long, scolding lecture.

disciplined by her, and taught by her. She was a woman of clarity in an age of uncertainty.

We remained friends for 30 years, and she followed, bragged about, and critiqued every twist in my career. After she died, her friends sent me a pile of my stories that she had saved over the years. Indeed, her students were her family—only closer. Judy Harrington, one of Hattie’s former students, remarked about other friends who were on Hattie’s newspapers and yearbooks: “We all graduated 41 years ago; and yet nearly each day in our lives something comes up—some mental image, some admonition<sup>5</sup> that makes us think of Hattie.”

Judy also told the story of one of Hattie’s last birthday parties, when one man said he had to leave early to take his daughter somewhere. “Sit down,” said Hattie. “You’re not leaving yet. She can just be a little late.”

That was my teacher! I sit up straight just thinkin’ about her.

Among the fundamentals Hattie introduced me to was *The New York Times*. Every morning it was delivered to Room 313. I had never seen it before then. Real journalists, she taught us, start their day by reading the *Times* and columnists like Anthony Lewis and James Reston.

I have been thinking about Hattie a lot this year, not just because she died on July 31, but because the lessons she imparted seem so relevant now. We’ve just gone through this huge dot-com-Internet-globalization bubble—during which a lot of smart people got carried away and forgot the fundamentals of how you build a profitable company, a lasting portfolio, a nation state, or a thriving student. It turns out that the real secret of success in the information age is what it always was: fundamentals—reading, writing, and arithmetic; church, synagogue, and mosque; the rule of law; and good governance.

The Internet can make you smarter, but it can’t make you smart. It can extend your reach, but it will never tell you what to say at a P.T.A. meeting. These fundamentals cannot be downloaded. You can only upload them, the old-fashioned way, one by one, in places like Room 313 at St. Louis Park High. I only regret that I didn’t write this column when the woman who taught me all that was still alive.

### Thinking Critically about This Reading

What do you think Friedman means when he states, “The Internet can make you smarter, but it can’t make you smart” (paragraph 11)?

<sup>5</sup>*admonition*: a cautionary advice or warning.