

# CLOSING ARGUMENT

## Warden Turner: The Final Boss of Middle Management

By Elia Kazan

October 10, 2026

This speech is promotional material for my latest book,  
*The Farce of Higher Ed*, available now at  
<https://mixam.com/print-on-demand/6ac3243af18829025863af1e>

## **Introduction.**

I am presenting my official closing statement for the defense.

The defendant, me, Professor Kazan, is an artistic intellectual *stifled* by the bureaucratic absurdity seen in higher education.

Enter, Warden Turner.

Warden Turner is the Director of Expository Writing at State University; the Supreme Chancellor of the Canvas Module; the woman who apparently looked at the American university system and thought, “You know what this place needs? More paperwork.”

I have so much material here, I don’t even know where to begin. Let’s start with the big picture absurdity

Here I am—a professor with a JD, an MA, a publishing operation, and a couple dozen books to my name. A scholar whose professional life revolves around language, law, literature, and the written word. Somehow, this institution has managed to transform my working life into an extended disciplinary proceeding over whether I adequately demonstrated the pedagogical relevance of the word naïveté.

NAÏVETÉ.

You cannot make this shit up.

Somewhere in Queenstown, Ohio, there is a woman with a Ph.D. who has presumably spent years studying the English language, and she’s using her administrative authority to ensure that a grown man can justify putting fiancé, with an accent, on a whiteboard.

This isn’t higher education. This is a hostage negotiation conducted by the Oxford English Dictionary.

## **Section One. Warden Turner and the Ministry of Curricular Alignment**

Let's talk about Warden Turner's apparent obsession with the phrase "connection to the curriculum."

According to my termination warning letter, I taught my students about linguistic precision, diacritical marks, word distinction, and the historical development of English vocabulary. The objection, as described, was that my material did not adequately connect to the specific unit objectives.

Now, there is a legitimate argument for keeping lessons aligned with course objectives. But the comedy emerges when curricular alignment becomes so rigid that I have to defend the intellectual legitimacy of teaching college students the difference between eminent and imminent.

Imagine being the administrator who looks at a whiteboard full of French loanwords and thinks: "This is a crisis."

Somewhere, a student has just learned that *résumé* and *resume* are two different things, and Warden Turner is assembling a documentary record.

The woman doesn't want a lesson plan, she wants an affidavit. "Please explain how the distinction between *elicit* and *illicit* advances the objectives of Unit 2."

Ma'am, one of those words describes drawing out a response, and the other describes something prohibited by law. Given that you work at a university, I would have thought the distinction between the two might occasionally prove useful. Especially in administration.

## **Section Two. The Four-Round File Review: The Academic Hunger Games**

Four rounds of file reviews.

FOUR.

What exactly is happening here? Are you submitting student essays, or are you applying for clearance to operate a nuclear reactor?

Round One: Your marginal comments are insufficiently calibrated?

Round Two: Your feedback demonstrates inadequate conformity with the approved feedback architecture?

Round Three: Your feedback has improved, but the improvement must be sustained.

Round Four: Warden Turner has discovered a semicolon in the wrong emotional register.

At this point, my teaching portfolio has received more scrutiny than some federal appointments.

And for what? College freshman composition.

Not a Supreme Court nomination. Not a classified intelligence briefing. Not a merger between two multinational pharmaceutical companies.

College. Freshman. Composition. Where I get paid \$3,000 for four months of work.

Warden Turner has somehow turned grading a college essay into the appellate process.

I submit the comments. She reviews the comments.

I revise the comments. She reviews the revisions.

I explain the revisions. She reviews my explanation of the revisions.

Eventually, the comments themselves become the curriculum.

I am learning how to write feedback that demonstrates my ability to write feedback that demonstrates my ability to teach writing. It's an ouroboros of performative teaching.

This isn't pedagogy. It's bureaucratic recursion.

It's like the movie Inception, except Leonardo DiCaprio is trapped inside a Canvas rubric and nobody gets paid enough to wake him up.

### **Section Three. The Sweatpants Incident: Watergate, but With Elastic Waistbands**

And then we arrive at the incident that deserves its own chapter in *The Farce of Higher Education*.

The sweatpants.

I walked across campus in extreme heat. I was wearing athletic shorts underneath my sweatpants, and I discreetly removed the outer layer behind the podium and a structural beam. I was wearing the athletic shorts the entire time.

The warning letter then formally documented the matter and reiterated that there was a bathroom down the hall.

Now, obviously, a classroom is not a changing room, and an administrator can reasonably insist on professional boundaries. But the sheer bureaucratic weight of the episode is what makes the story so darkly comic.

Somewhere in the administrative machinery of a public university, somebody had to turn a man taking off a layer of clothing into formal written documentation.

Picture the meeting.

“Warden Turner, we have a developing situation.”

“What is it?”

“His sweatpants.”

(Silence.)

“His... sweatpants?”

“Yes.”

“Get me the handbook.”

The handbook is retrieved. The relevant section is consulted. A formal warning is drafted. The language is calibrated. The meeting is scheduled. The documentation is preserved.

And somewhere in a different classroom, a student is struggling to construct a thesis statement.

My sweatpants have entered the permanent record.

Richard Nixon had Watergate. Bill Clinton had the blue dress. My time at this university has the athletic shorts.

History will judge us all.

## **Section Four. The Surveillance State of Freshman English**

The professor is under a microscope.

Student complaints, classroom observations, file reviews, and administrative meetings have become part of an endless, nitpicking monitoring process.

The result is a hyper-critical environment in which I am not merely teaching a class. I am teaching a class while anticipating how every spontaneous decision might look when described by somebody who wasn't inside my head.

Ask an unexpected question? Potential curricular deviation.  
Introduce an interesting linguistic distinction? Potential misalignment.

Try a creative writing exercise? Potential failure to maintain uniformity across sections.

Take a moment to organize my materials? Potential preparedness issue.

At some point, I stop asking, "What would help my students learn?"  
And I start asking, "What could this look like in an email to Warden Turner?"

THAT is the punchline.

Warden Turner doesn't even need to be standing in the room. The possibility of her next observation has already moved into my head and rented office space.

It's like the book *1984*, except Big Brother doesn't watch you through a telescreen; he watches you through a standardized course shell and asks whether your learning outcomes are sufficiently visible.

Orwell imagined the Thought Police. Higher education gave them a Canvas Shell.

## **Section Five. The Ultimate Irony: A Director of Writing Who Has Made Writing Miserable**

This is my favorite angle because it's the most devastating intellectually.

Warden Turner directs a program devoted to helping people become better writers.

Writing, at its best, involves curiosity, experimentation, revision, risk, discovery, and the gradual development of an individual voice.

But the administrative culture enforced here seems to reward the opposite qualities: predictability, uniformity, defensibility, documentation, and strict adherence to predetermined procedures.

The institution wants students to develop an authentic writing voice while making sure every instructor follows the same template.

It wants critical thinking, provided the thinking stays within the approved boundaries.

It wants intellectual independence, provided the independent thought can be justified against the appropriate rubric.

It wants creativity with prior authorization.

Imagine, a university advertising itself as a place where students learn to think independently, then treating independent thought from the instructor as a compliance risk.

That's not merely ironic. That's the central contradiction at the heart of *The Farce of Higher Education*.

The system's stated objective is intellectual development. Its administrative incentive is procedural control. And when those two objectives collide, procedural control wins because it's easier to document.

A genuinely transformative lesson is difficult to quantify. A completed checklist, is easy to audit.

So the checklist survives, my lesson gets questioned, and somebody schedules another meeting.

## **Section Six. The Egregious Contradiction: Bait and Switch**

In Unit 1, we taught Donald Murray, Anne Lamott, and Stephen King—writers who embody and exhort writing as a process of discovery, taking risk, and authentic expression. These writers teach you how to find your voice.

What was the students' reward for reading them?

They were handed a giant brick of an essay prompt. A document that began with a boilerplate, terrifying no-AI warning, followed by a rigid, hyper-prescriptive assignment graded against an equally rigid Canvas rubric.

There was zero room for creativity. Zero room for expressivism. It was the ultimate academic bait-and-switch: getting college freshmen excited about writing to discover, only to body-slam them with a compliance checklist.

We tell students to write like Stephen King, but then we grade them like Warden Turner.

I'm not a professor here. I'm been relegated to an ETS grader with a clipboard.

## **Section Seven. Warden Turner: The Final Boss of Middle Management**

Every bureaucratic dystopia has a character who isn't powerful enough to control the entire system but has enough authority to make life miserable for everyone immediately below them.

That's the archetype being satirized here.

The final boss doesn't need to be an evil genius. She needs a calendar, a rubric, an observation form, and the authority to schedule another meeting.

Her superpower is converting a minor disagreement into a multi-stage administrative process.

Her weapon of choice is the phrase "immediate and sustained improvement."

Her natural habitat — a meeting invitation with no agenda.

Her greatest fear — an instructor who can make an independent pedagogical decision without first producing a three-paragraph explanation of its relationship to the course objectives.

Her ultimate achievement? Creating an environment in which a published author with a law degree is spending his intellectual energy trying to establish that teaching vocabulary is a legitimate activity in an English class.

The title stands on sticks. Warden Turner: Ph.D., Associate Professor, Director of Expository Writing, Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Approved Semicolons.

I can see the organizational chart. From top to down:

Dean of Academic Affairs

Associate Dean of Administrative Coordination

Director of Procedural Compliance

Assistant Director of Procedural Compliance

Director of Curricular Alignment

Associate Director of Curricular Alignment

Senior Coordinator of Marginal Comment Calibration

Then Warden Turner

Then, somewhere at the bottom, a student who just wants to know whether the essay is due Friday.

## **Section Eight. The Closing Argument**

This is more than a simple personal grievance; it's a wider systemic issue. Institutional administrative absurdities have crept so far, the profession is nearly dead.

I don't need to establish Warden Turner as a bad person. I don't need to diagnose her personality, or assume that every concern raised in the warning letter was baseless.

But what happens when quality control becomes more important than educational judgment?

What happens when documentation becomes a substitute for trust?

What happens when a university hires educated professionals but builds a supervisory culture that discourages them from exercising professional autonomy?

When happens when the people responsible for teaching independent thought cannot tolerate much independence from the people doing the teaching?

Those are serious questions. They deserve serious treatment.

They also deserve the occasional well-aimed joke.

There is something almost Shakespearean about a university employing a specialist in writing and language, then putting me through an administrative ordeal over whether my instruction on French loan words or Microsoft Word's pilcrow was sufficiently aligned with the tightly prescribed curriculum.

The institution has created a comedy of errors, appointed a director to oversee the comedy, and then required the lead actor to submit a self-assessment explaining how the comedy meets the learning outcomes.

And the director has a Ph.D.?

Your Honor, the defense presents it's Exhibits.

Exhibit A: A whiteboard.

Exhibit B: A pair of sweatpants.

Exhibit C: Four rounds of file reviews.

Exhibit D: The English language itself.

The defense now rests.

## **Section Nine. The Decision.**

The Court has reviewed the record and reached a decision.

The charge: Excessive exposure to bureaucratic absurdity.

The sentence: Immediate release to Los Angeles, where the defendant may resume writing books without requesting permission to use the word naïveté.

And Warden Turner?

Warden Turner may continue administering the rubric.

Court is adjourned.

*The End.*