

Many years ago I had a student in a class I was teaching on art of doctoring. He seemed like a good guy, but we ran into a difficulty. There was a required writing assignment and this guy wouldn't do it. He did other assignments, but not this one. First I just ignored the problem, assuming he'd do it "naturally." Then I sent him email reminders, and talked to him in class. He always had an excuse, or promised me he'd do it next week. I got more and more annoyed, sent him more emails, reminded him he couldn't pass the class without completing the assignment. I remembered that he'd joined the class late, that I sometimes saw him whispering and smirking with other students, and I decided he was a bad apple. He was my difficult student, and every time I saw him, a part of me just thought what a problem he was. Finally, one day in class when I reminded him yet again I needed his assignment he told me he didn't think it was a fair assignment, and wasn't going to do it. I got even more upset, because I thought it was a great assignment, I'd used it in lots of previous classes with good feedback, and this is what I told him. Then for some reason I paused and really looked at him. He looked angry and unhappy. I realized, what's going on here? What's my goal? Do I want to get an assignment, or do I want this student to learn something about himself? So instead of sending him emails, or telling him in class to turn in the work, I said, let's talk. Help me understand why you don't like the assignment. The assignment was to write about loss and grief. The student's mother had died two years before, and every time he thought of the assignment he thought of her, and he didn't want to write about her, his grief was too personal, but it seemed phony to write about something else. He talked, I listened, and eventually we collaborated on a different assignment, which was to write about why he didn't want to do this assignment. He wrote a great essay with a lot of insight. He'd stopped being difficult. Or maybe I'd stopped being difficult.