

# The Sub's Subtraction

Matthew hated math.

This is what he wrote one morning in his Writer's Workshop journal:

Matthew

May 15

## *Down with Subtraction*

*I hate math. Most of all I hate subtraction. It's also called minus and take-away, but what's the difference? I hate them all. Who needs subtraction? You're supposed to take the bottom number from the top number. But sometimes you can't. Then you have to do a lot of crossing out. That's called borrowing by some teachers and regrouping by others. But no matter what you call it, with all that crossing out, the problem still ends up a big mess.*

After putting the last period on his paper, Matthew slammed his pencil onto his desktop.

"I *hate* math," he said, as if to make it final.

Following Writer's Workshop came recess. After recess the third-graders waited in their seats for the tall teacher to return to class. The classroom door opened, but instead of a teacher, they received a strong odor of fish.

“Rub-a-dub-dub. Here comes the sub,” a deep voice called from the hallway.

Into the classroom at the end of the hall stepped a man wearing a wet black rain slicker. Bits of seaweed and sea foam ran off his rubber coat onto the floor. From beneath a black sou’wester hat he announced, “I am your sub, and you are my subjects.”

The third-graders watched in silence as the substitute removed his coat and hat. This revealed a gray—once white—sailor’s uniform and a face half-covered by a frothy white beard.

Standing at attention in front of the tall teacher’s desk, the sub said, “Your teacher felt subpar this morning, so I received *the Call*. Subsequently, I sailed my submarine from my subterranean sub base in the subtropics to the closest subway station, and I rode the subway out to this suburb. I’m prepared to teach any subject from subatomic physics to substance abuse.”

Paul raised his hand. “You don’t look or sound much like a substitute, dude,” he said.



“My boy, it’s impolite to call your sub ‘dude,’” the substitute replied. “Please address me by my proper name, Subdude.”

Hannah’s hand went up. “Subdude,” she said, “our teacher always starts the afternoon by reading us a story.”

“We will not be doing things your teacher’s way today, young lady,” said the substitute. “We’ll do things the Sub Way. And we’ll start with math. All hands, prepare to subtract subsets to find subtotals.”

From the second row came a groan. Matthew had his face buried in his hands. His voice filtered through his fingers. “Not more subtraction, Subdude. I hate subtraction.”

“Ahoy, my boy!” Subdude said. “It’s fine to submit an opinion, but in a more substantial voice, please.”

Matthew looked up, almost in tears. “I can’t stand subtraction. Subtraction makes me bored! Bored! Bored!”

“Boy overboard!” the substitute cried.

“I don’t get the borrowing stuff,” Matthew went on. “Why do they call it borrowing anyway when you never give anything back?”

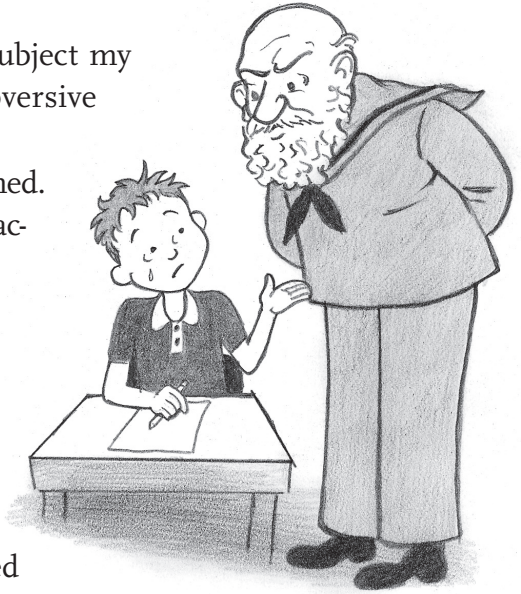
Hands behind his back, Subdude paced up the center aisle of desks. His fish odor followed him. He stopped at Matthew’s desk and looked down with watery gray eyes at the boy.

“A sublime point, my boy,” he said. “And as a sub

commander, I never subject my subjects to any subversive subjects.”

Matthew’s eyes widened. “You mean like subtraction?”

Subdude raised his right hand to his right eyebrow in a sort of salute. “Affirmative,” he said. “I hereby command that all subtraction, also called minus, take-away, and finding the difference, be scrubbed from this classroom.”



The third-graders exchanged glances. No subtraction sounded great. But what did that mean?

The substitute reached into a pocket of his baggy sailor’s pants. He pulled out a bundle of papers and waved it in the air. “Subsequently, here is today’s math.”

With a flick of his wrist, Subdude spun a math sheet onto Matthew’s desktop. Matthew studied it and beamed.

“No subtraction!” he declared. “This paper is minus minus!”

The sub saluted again. “Affirmative, my boy,” he said, spinning a math sheet onto each desk in the row. “In fact, I’ve borrowed all the subtraction in this room.”

“Thanks, Subdude,” said Matthew. “I’ll get to work right away.”

As he always did before beginning a math sheet, Matthew counted the problems. “Thirty addition problems,” he said. “Addition I understand. Plus is easy.”

He began to work. “First add the ones column,” he said in his head. “Carry over to the next column and add that. Done. Cinch.”

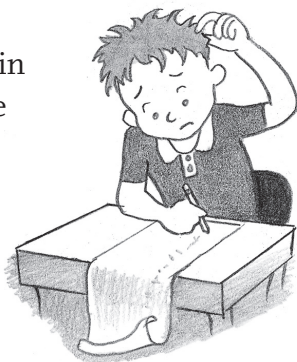
In quick order Matthew worked problem after problem. He was in the middle of the second row before his eyes dropped to the bottom of the page. Something was different. His paper appeared longer. Now it almost reached the edge of his desktop.

“Odd,” Matthew said, counting the remaining problems. “I started with thirty problems. I did ten problems. Now look. There are still thirty unfinished problems!”

He completed another row. Again new problems appeared at the bottom of the paper. He tried doing the equations quickly, but the sheet extended just as fast. Now it hung off his desktop.

“At this rate I will never finish my math,” he said.

On the next problem Matthew’s pencil broke. At the sharpener he stuck his pencil in the proper hole and turned the crank. To his surprise, instead



of getting shorter, the pencil grew longer. Matthew kept turning the handle. The pencil grew longer and longer until it reached the length it was when brand-new.

“Odder still,” he said. “Nothing gets less in this room. Nothing gets shorter.”

Matthew started toward his desk. But when he took a step forward, more strangeness happened. His desk appeared no closer. He took another step, and the desk was still ten feet away. *Step, step, step*, and the distance between Matthew and his desk remained the same.



“And distances in the classroom don’t get smaller either,” he concluded.

Only by walking backward could Matthew return to his seat. On the way, he knocked four counting cubes off Tanya’s desk. He watched in wonder as, halfway to the floor, the cubes reversed direction and returned to the desktop.

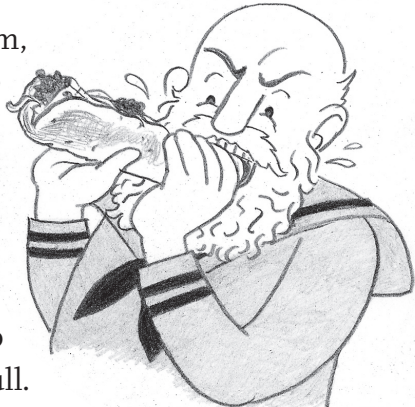
“It all adds up,” Matthew told himself. He looked toward the substitute, who was sitting at the tall teacher’s desk. “When Subdude said he borrowed subtraction from this classroom, that’s what he meant. He took away minus!

Not only do we have no subtraction problems on our math sheet, but nothing in this room is subtracting!”

Back at his seat, Matthew decided to test his theory by trying an experiment. He placed five nickels on his desktop.

“Matthew has twenty-five cents,” he told himself. “If he bought something for ten cents, how much money would he have left?” Matthew picked up two nickels and counted the remaining coins. Under one nickel, he found a dime. “Matthew still has twenty-five cents! Yes, this entire room is minus minus.”

In the front of the room, Subdude was eating a sub sandwich. Each time he took a bite from one end, the sandwich grew at the other.



“A class can’t subsist on schoolwork alone,” the sub called out with his mouth full. “At two o’clock, we’ll take a recess break.”

Matthew checked the clock. It read 1:50.

“No matter how odd this room has become without subtraction,” he told himself, “at least we get a break from it.”

After Matthew completed ten more addition problems, the math sheet lay in his lap. Surely ten minutes had passed by now. But when he checked the clock, it still read 1:50.

Matthew slapped his forehead. “I should have guessed. A length of time won’t decrease in this room either.”

Soon other curious things occurred in the classroom

at the end of the hall. When Matthew felt hot, he fanned himself with a folded spelling test. This only made him hotter. When he tried erasing a mistake on his math paper, the numbers, instead of vanishing, turned darker. The fish in the aquarium seemed to be swimming in place, and Miss Nosewiggle, exercising in her guinea pig wheel, appeared suspended in midair. All this while, the time on the clock stayed the same.

Matthew looked toward his neighbors. Myra was bent over a four-foot-long math sheet, and Peter's paper hung to the floor. They both shot Matthew "you're to blame for this" looks.

Finally, Matthew raised his hand. "Subdude, I surrender," he called out. "Since you borrowed our classroom's subtraction, nothing gets done. Could you return it before we melt from the heat, trip over our math sheets, or faint from exhaustion trying to reach the sink?"

The substitute stood up from the teacher's desk. "Sorry, my boy. Wish I could. But as you said, when you borrow in subtraction you never give it back."

Matthew thought fast. "Except if you don't return our subtraction, the school day will never end," he said.

Subdude took another bite of his sub sandwich.

"And if the school day never ends," Matthew went on, "you'll never leave this suburb on the subway and sail your submarine back to the subterranean sub base in the subtropics."

The sub checked the clock. "A subtle point, my boy.



I do want to be back at my sub base in time for sub grub at the Sub Pub.” He raised his hand to his brow. “Very well, as sub commander, I command that subtraction, also called minus, take-away, and finding the difference, be returned to this classroom.”

Matthew studied his math sheet. The paper was shrinking.

“If there were twenty-five students in a room and thirteen were girls,” he called out, “how many were boys?”

“Twelve,” five students shouted at once.

“Correct!” Matthew cried. “Subtraction is back!”

He checked the clock. The minute hand was gliding forward. When it reached 3:00, the end-of-the-school-day bell rang.

Up front, the substitute put on his black rain slicker and sou’wester hat. “It’s been sublime, class,” he said, marching toward the door. “Rub-a-dub-dub. Good-bye from the sub.”

With a final salute, Subdude strode from the room, taking the fish stench with him.



Matthew rose from his seat. He had no problem reaching the coat closet.

“I still hate subtraction,” he said as he left the classroom. “But I guess it has its place. Subtraction! You can’t get very far without it.”