

Writing—An Essential Skill

Good Writing Is More Important Than Ever, But Fewer and Fewer Students Are Able To Do So



Writing is a fundamental skill. Possessing it is necessary for success both in school and in the workaday world. As an Adjunct English Instructor at Allan Hancock College I deal on a daily basis with the fact that students coming into the classes I teach are startlingly deficient in this elemental ability. They frequently lack such basic knowledge as knowing how to write a complete sentence, construct a paragraph, or write a thesis statement.

But they are eager and able to learn, and with education experts, teachers, and employers virtually unanimous in agreeing that in today's world the ability to effectively communicate via the written word is more important than ever, this is vital. A well-written application essay can be the determining factor when a student applies for admission to a four-year institution. A resume that makes it clear why a job applicant will make a good employee can be the key to getting an interview. Good writing is an asset in nearly every profession one can think of.

But at the same time demand for the skill of writing is increasing, the ability of students to perform it is decreasing, and the problem is not confined to Allan Hancock College.

In a nationwide test administered in 2011 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress only one-fourth of U.S. high school seniors received a score of "adequate" in terms of their writing ability, and only 3% received a score of "advanced." These results are virtually the same as those obtained in tests given in 1998, 2002, and 2007.

Why are American students struggling with writing? According to a report written in 2003 by The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, writing is the neglected "R," (as in the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic) in public schools today. Simply put, it is not given its rightful place in today's curriculum, and as a result, students arrive in college (and later in the work force) needing remedial instruction in order to learn to write at an acceptable level. This report calls for a "writing revolution" that will put language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. "Both the teaching and practice of writing," the report states, "are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years."

And yet the ability to write is essential to academic success. “Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge.” In every field of study, writing about what you have learned and the knowledge you acquire as a result is as basic as keeping your eye on the ball is in baseball.

The need to write effectively does not end when a student enters the workforce. Good writing is an asset in virtually every profession. Law enforcement professionals investigating a crime scene must write reports. Nurses record their daily actions and observations on patient’s charts. Lawyers write legal briefs. Politicians rely on speechwriters. A person wanting to start a business must write a business plan in order to attract investors or get a loan from a bank. Supervisors must write evaluations of their employees. Corporations publish annual reports each year. The list goes on.

In my experience, students respond well once they understand the importance of writing. But, it would be better for everyone concerned if they knew the basics before they enter a college classroom. If that happens, hopefully in the not too distant future, the students coming into my classes will know the difference between a dependent clause and a prepositional phrase, a fragment from a complete sentence, and they will know how to write a thesis statement. Mark James Miller is an Adjunct English Instructor at Allan Hancock College and President of the Part-Time Faculty Association. He can be reached at sunrune@charter.net.