

Writing, Thinking: A Critical Connection For Success



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At the start of each semester, I ask students in my writing classes at Allan Hancock College, working together in groups of four or five, to make a list of the 10 best ways they can think of to improve their writing skills.

The answers are often insightful, frequently original and never boring. They cite the need to proofread, to use a dictionary, and to find their own voice as a writer. They mention the importance of reading to improve writing.

But what they often miss is the critical connection that exists between writing and thinking.

That connection is vital.

“I think, therefore I am,” proclaimed French philosopher Rene Descartes in 1637. If you want to improve your writing skills, you must improve your thinking skills. The relationship is symbiotic, one exists alongside the other.

To be able to express what you are thinking by way of the written word is to be able to effectively and lastingly communicate your thoughts and ideas for others to appreciate, to learn from, and perhaps even act on.

Good writing is the reflection of a mind well-equipped for thinking, decision making and problem solving.

Both writing skills and thinking skills have declined in recent years. The academic world has long been aware of this. The corporate world is becoming aware of it too.

In one recent study, 63 percent of employers said new employees lack the ability

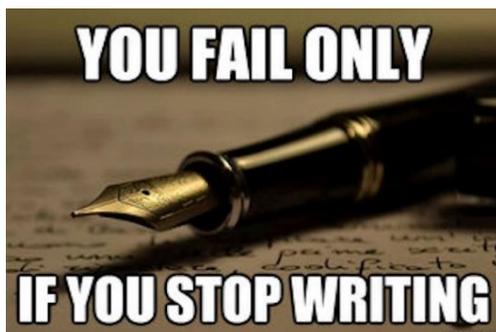
to think critically and solve problems. In another, employers complained that new, bachelor-degree-holding employees lacked “the ability to solve complex problems.” A management

consulting firm

describes new

for the working

skills, but of



working with high-tech companies applicants as “woefully unprepared” world. “It’s not a matter of technical knowing how to think.”

“The number one weakness Corporate America said they faced with incoming talent was the “inability to effectively communicate” on a professional level,” says one expert on the subject, who spent 12 years as a corporate recruiter. He goes on to say, “...the ability to convey an idea and generate a response that leads to profitability is not an outcome measured on the college campus. It is however the key to corporate advancement and a prosperous career.”

With critical thinking skills, writing skills, and communication skills in general in serious decline, corporate America realizes there are problems ahead. “One of the next greatest challenges

that corporate America is struggling with is training our future workforce to critically analyze a problem and arrive at a viable solution.”

Another recent survey of 63,924 managers asked what “hard skills” and which “soft skills” new college graduates needed to succeed. When it came to hard skills “managers said new grads were most lacking in writing proficiency...44% of managers surveyed said as much. Also, 39% of managers found their recently matriculated hires to be lacking in public speaking skills.

“Among soft skills,” the survey continues, “managers were even more united in their opinions of where they see a dearth...60% of managers claim the new graduates they see taking jobs within their organizations do not have the critical thinking and problem solving skills they feel are necessary for the job.”

The decline in critical thinking ability is a reflection of the de-emphasis on writing that has taken place in education over the past generation, and the over-emphasis on standardized testing that has become so prevalent in our public school system.

In a groundbreaking 1978 study, researchers found that because writing and thinking are so closely connected, challenging writing assignments are an ideal way for students to explore deep, serious thought in whatever subject they are studying. But this same study found that even good students’ writing is often superficial, because they are not being encouraged to delve deeply into their subject matter.

Recently, Forbes.com did extensive research into the top-10 job skills employers are searching for. No. 1 is critical thinking, i.e., “using logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and

weaknesses of alternative solutions.” No. 2 is complex problem solving, defined as “identifying complex problems and reviewing related information to develop and evaluate options and implement solutions.”

These skills that employers find lacking are part of the price tag that has come with the over-reliance on testing that has become such an important part of our nation’s school curriculum. Standardized tests have an important role to play in the educational process. But critical thinking and writing do not fit in well with multiple choice answers. Writing as a subject takes time, both in class and out, to teach and to grade.

When my students answer the question, “What are the 10 best ways to improve writing?” some common responses are, “ask the teacher for extra help”; “practice writing as often as you can”; “read, and think about what you have read.”

I encourage them to practice whenever possible, and as part of the extra help I give them, I say think, and write your thoughts down on paper. If you want to improve your writing, improve your thinking, and vice-versa.



"Cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am," said Descartes so many centuries ago. Thinking makes us realize who we are; it validates our existence, and we express that when we write. Or, as Isaac Azimov observed, "Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers."