

Please Teach Freshmen Writers to Love the Reader

the problem  
scale

That American students and college graduates write lousy prose is not disputable. The Washington Post published at least three major blog posts on the subject in 2017. The New York Times ran a well-reported 2,000-word story by Dana Goldstein called "Why Kids Can't Write." The Chronicle of Higher Education runs op-eds about bad writing all the time. The headline we'd like to see ("College Grads Writing More Lucidly Than Ever--Business Owners") will appear only in The Onion.

The hand-wringing feature stories about unreadable student writing are correct as far as they go, but they leave out the scale of the problem, which I'd like to address here.

Somewhere around 3.1 million freshmen will enter American colleges this fall, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. All these 3.1 million incoming students will take some kind of first year writing course, even if remedial. Figuring 20 students per section, that means 155,000 courses in writing will be taught this fall by an army of 77,500 instructors, mostly adjuncts. (I am not going to the mat on the number accuracy here—these are roughly true.)

How many is 77,500 instructors? The median NFL football stadium holds about 70,000 fans, so, imagine your favorite stadium packed absolutely full—and every seat is occupied by someone who will teach freshman comp this fall. Let's fantasize that we can get on the PA system and actually address that football stadium full of writing instructors. What would make a difference? What could we say? Maybe: "Stop teaching social-change ethics and politics and start teaching these kids to write!" Wouldn't that be great.

Even if we could pull all the nation's comp teachers into that imaginary stadium, and they listened, we'd still be behind the eight-ball. First, the so-called profession is mostly closed to new ideas about teaching writing, because it's no longer interested in teaching writing.

Phillip Mink, an assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Delaware, wrote me an email last year and said:

"The college writing profession has made a conscious decision not to teach style....If you review the scholarly literature, which I have done, you will find virtually nothing about student prose at all. [To these people] the quality of student prose is nothing more than an afterthought."

And there's a second problem. Many composition professionals are themselves mediocre writers, as you can see from the journals they publish in. Such people are in no position to teach students how to write well. Take a look at this passage:

**Community writing teachers, students, scholars, and activists are in the unique position to study and influence how writing, images, and ideas create impact and circulate to address the issues facing our communities—climate change, population movements related to climate and political instability, systemic misogyny, racially motivated police killings, mass incarceration, expansion of corporate rights, resurgence of anti-immigrant rhetorics, educational injustices, gun violence—from both scholarly and practical perspectives. We believe that we are at a crossroads for higher education, broadly, and for Rhetoric and Writing Studies, specifically, and we must engage deeply, through every facet of our work, with the task at hand, with the ecology in which we live, and with the other members of our ecology, to whom we are profoundly connected.**

A bunch of writing instructors called the Coalition for Community Writing wrote that to announce their national conference. The prose is mindless and clichéd. You can tell they're not interested in anything the real world would call writing. It's hard to know how much of college writing has been infected with social-justice activism, but it's not a small trend, according to George Gopen, emeritus professor at Duke, who wants instructors to "stop teaching social ethics and start teaching writing."

Dr. Gopen, who authored *Expectations: Teaching Writing from the Reader's Perspective* (2004), stands mostly alone in the academy because he insists that writing is about clear communication to the reader.

**It's amazing to have to say it, but the missing factor in college writing instruction is the reader. Somehow academe teaches "writing" that is detached from awareness of the reader, and that has to change. We need to introduce or reintroduce the reader as the focus. Teachers need to be saying *How will the reader understand this? Will this confuse your reader? Can you simplify this so the reader gets it right away?***

We could do worse than return to the original guru of reader service, the late Rudolf Flesch. He invented the concept of readability scoring, and though it's been degraded to a bit of a joke by computerized

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Instead of being community activists.

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