

Part 1: Backgrounds and Assumptions

Good Writing: A Complex Concept

It's fairly common to long for good old days when college writers were deft, precise, and correct. Alas, there has never been a time when faculty didn't express dismay about student writing:

- Everyone who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges has known men who could not write a letter describing their own commencements without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old. --Adams S. Hill, Harvard 1878
- It is obviously absurd that the college—the institution of higher education—should be called upon to turn aside from its proper functions and devote its means and the time of its instructors to the task of importing elementary instruction. --Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, to the Harvard College Board of Overseers, 1892
- One way to handle them is to force them to take “remedial” courses (often they cannot read intelligently and dislike any reading), a slow process of remedying the ills of a slothful public school life. Another is to fail them and send them home--rather heartless, but perhaps less so than to encourage the morons to go on. A third, too often done, is to accept them and work with their mediocrities; the inevitable result is the lowering of standards. --Phillip March, *How to Teach English*, 1956.
- Students at Yale. . . are less competent to write an effective composition than were the students of ten years ago. There is a grave weakness in their powers of analysis and organization; even the brightest students sometimes show that they lack basic training in the ways of beginning, developing, and concluding an argument of exposition. This is a much more troubling weakness than any small errors in usage, for it shows a lack of mental discipline in the basic principles of human thought. --Joseph Mersand, *Attitudes Toward English Teaching*, 1961

I point this out not to belittle the hope for better writing and writers, but to put things in context. The general state of student writing has been bemoaned for 150 years.

A traditional view has been to imagine that "well-prepared" students should come to upper level classes--or even to college itself--with writing skills fully developed. "Content" is something they learn in their general education or majors courses, certainly not skills. "Bad writers" need remediation and the inculcation of skills they ought to have learned earlier. However, most current theories and empirical research in the field conclude that learning how to communicate in a particular discipline (learning how to wield its symbol systems) is coextensive with learning the discipline. Content and formal/skills knowledge are intertwined. Thus, rather than assuming that writing skills ought fully to be developed prior to college or in specific, upper level courses, current theory and research illustrates that writing skills, even for “strong” writers, naturally continue to develop throughout the college years and beyond.