

*Big Problem in Colleges, Universities*

# Writing Coherent English Lost Art?

**(EDITOR'S NOTE:** Are we becoming a nation of illiterates? More people are asking that question in light of the severe difficulties encountered by students at colleges and universities in using the written language to express themselves. This is the first of two articles exploring the problem as it has developed at Grossmont College and what is being done about it.)

**By DEL HOOD**  
**The El Cajon Californian**

"I one put a peas of merowr in a tidpuwl. I then lade qitly on the rooks and wacht the seelife umrg from kraviss and from undr rooks. Small fish drtid by the the merowr than swam arowd the puwl and hvrd in frant of it or wood but it."

This is not an excerpt from a Chaucerian tale written in Old English. Nor is it a dullard's contribution to a sixth grade class in composition.

The paragraph was written by a freshman college student who somehow managed to graduate from high school despite the handicap of being unable to write a coherent passage in English.

Fred Stollenwerk, who teaches English at Grossmont college, concedes this is the worst example of language deficiency in his files.

But there are other samples which are only slightly less awful, the work of students who arrive at college unequipped to handle the difficult reading and writing tasks they are assigned.

The problem is not confined to community colleges and high schools. It reaches into the four-year colleges and universities which traditionally get the cream of the high school graduates since they can impose stricter admission standards.

The number of new students enrolling at University of California campuses who need remedial instruction in basic English composition varies from 40 to 65 per cent. Even UC Berkeley, which supposedly attracts the best and the brightest, reports that 48 per cent of its new students need help to improve writing skills.

UC campuses enroll the top 12½ per cent of the state's high school graduating classes.

San Diego State University recently announced that it will require a passing mark in a college-level writing test for a student to say in school. Such a test has actually been required since 1960, but most students postpone taking it until their final year.

The new examination will be given when students arrive on campus.

One English instructor at Grossmont College thinks 75 per cent of the students who enroll there could benefit from remedial instruction of some type.

"I think this is probably conservative if you compare the estimates of Berkeley," said Frank Vittor, who lists the principal deficiencies as slow reading, inability to extract meaning from what is read and problems with mechanics such as spelling, sentence structure and punctuation.

Since community colleges accept anyone 18 or older who has a high school diploma, or who can profit from education, the problems naturally are magnified at those institutions.

What teachers find distressing is that many students who have trouble putting words together actually are extremely bright and imaginative.

They have good ideas and often can express themselves well verbally, but they fall apart on writing assignments.

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# Writing English Lost Art?

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Frequently the students who come out of school in applied arts programs are better writers than those who come out of the college prep program," say Stollenwerk.

He attributes this failing to an apparent assumption is then used to excuse college-bound students from concentrating on the fundamentals, allowing them instead to drift off into the study of language symbolism or other esoteric subjects.

In remedial English classes, says, Stollenwerk, "we do find a pathetic number of students who say 'I've always gotten A's in English.'"

How did we arrive at the unhappy state in which vast numbers of college students can neither read nor write well enough to cope with the modern curriculum?

A variety of reasons has been suggested. Social critic Vance Packard listed seven factors in a Reader's Digest article: Loss of status for writing courses, growing use of multiple-choice tests because of the large number of students, overloading English classes, automatic promotions and open admissions to college, a revolt against rules and established ways and the effects of the telecommunications revolution.

The influence of television, a medium in which words are heard but not seen, is high on the list of some educators.

"Students of an older generation read pulp magazines, western stories and detective yarns for recreation," said Everett Jones, director of bonehead English at UCLA.

"They were in one sense trash. But whether or not they realized it they were improving their reading speed and their knowledge of English.

"Now, they sit in front of Gunsmoke, Mannix or Cannon and absorb the same kind of pulpy plot quite effortlessly. But there's no payoff in vocabulary or reading skill."

Not everybody agrees with that analysis.

Vittor emphasizes social values as a more important factor than television. There has been, he says, a shift away from fundamentals at all levels of education, a departure that has been sanctified in a sense by the trend-setters and used as "justification for doing the fun thing."

Learning the fundamentals of writing is difficult, tedious work — both for students and teachers. It requires concentration, repetition, learning fixed rules of good grammar, and practice and more practice.

This regimen is not so appealing as delving into the eerie realms of science fiction or studying the literature of the absurd.

"Discipline in the classical sense has been rather frequently condemned in the last several years," says Stollenwerk. "If I'm going to do my own thing on paper, it means I write whatever I darn please."

The proliferation of substitute courses, he says, often becomes an escape route to avoid grappling with the nitty-gritty of learning how to use words properly.

Homer Lusk, who served as chairman of the college's English department last year, sees part of the problem as a general decline in emphasis on writing in classes other than English.

"A student can go through some courses without writing a word," he says.

Lusk is astounded by the fact that many students in the remedial programs do not know even the rudimentary rules of grammar or where to look for help.

"Most don't know that there is a pronunciation key in the dictionary. Tell them that and it opens up a whole new world to them."

Overloading high school English classes can be extremely damaging, according to some college professors. Writing is a personal skill, they maintain, and cannot be taught adequately without close attention to a student's work.

Stollenwerk contends that some English teachers are part of the problem, especially if they entered the field recently and adhere to the philosophy that a student should be allowed to express himself without too much criticism of the manner in which he does it.

"There are," he says, "more English teachers than there are teachers of English."

**(NEXT: What Grossmont College is doing to help students learn to read, write and spell.)**