

Why can't college graduates write coherent prose?

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A few months ago I was having breakfast in downtown Washington. I couldn't help but overhear a casual job interview happening at the table next to me. The interviewer owned a government contracting business and was looking to hire a person to help write proposals to federal agencies.

Near the end of the conversation, the interviewer complained about how difficult it is to find good writers these days. The two men talked about their college experiences and how they learned to write.

"I was a math major," the interviewer said, "but the biggest differentiator in business now is good writing."

He's not alone in his opinion. According to [national surveys](#), employers want to hire college graduates who can write coherently, think creatively and analyze quantitative data. But the Conference Board has found in its surveys of corporate hiring leaders that writing skill is one of the biggest gaps in workplace readiness.

That's why so many employers now explicitly ask for writing and communications skills in their job advertisements. An analysis by Burning Glass Technologies, which studies job trends in real time by mining data from employment ads, found that writing and communications are the most requested job requirements across nearly every industry, even fields such as information technology and engineering.

“My students can't write a clear sentence to save their lives, and I've had it,” Joseph R. Teller, an English professor at College of the Sequoias, wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education in the fall. “In 10 years of teaching writing, I have experimented with different assignments, activities, readings, approaches to commenting on student work — you name it — all to help students write coherent prose that someone would actually want to read. And as anyone who keeps up with trends in higher education knows, such efforts largely fail.

Extensive writing is rarely assigned in many college courses because it's labor-intensive, raising the workload for students and professors. Students don't understand why they need to write five-page papers, let alone 20 pages, given that many of them won't write much more than PowerPoint slides, emails, or one-page memos once in the workplace.

But training for any activity in life requires a level of practice that usually exceeds the tasks we will need to handle later on. This time spent on a task is sometimes called the 10,000 hours theory — that it takes roughly that amount of practice to achieve mastery in any field. Not every college graduate needs to be a novelist, but if college students become competent writers who draft clear prose, then they'll also be able to compose anything on the job, from PowerPoint slides to reports.

Recently, I asked a few of the best writers I know, including high school teachers and college professors who taught me how to write, what can be done to improve the communications skills of college graduates. They offered plenty of good advice for how students can develop their writing and approaches teachers and professors can use in the classroom. Among my favorites:

Writing takes time, in preparation and in actually writing. The journalist Don Fry divides writers into two types: planners and plungers. Plungers are those who start writing before they know what they write. Planners start writing only when they know what to write. Fry maintains the world used to be ruled by planners, but teachers today say too many students are plungers and shortchange the research and organizing necessary to be good writers.

“Too often students let their brain spill onto a page, and then they submit their masterpiece,” said Leslie Nicholas, my high school journalism teacher and a former teacher of the year in Pennsylvania. “They need to learn that the writing process is not linear” and includes pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and sharing, with components of that process repeated often.

While there is nothing wrong with plungers — I for one despise outlines — too much writing instruction in schools encourages writing on the fly by requiring students to compose essays during class time or to submit only final papers rather than drafts along the way.

Editing is part of the writing process. One problem with a single deadline for writing projects is that it doesn’t introduce students to the idea that self-editing is a critical part of good writing. Art Markman, a prominent author and psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said he shares the “awful drafts” of his own papers with students to show them that good writing doesn’t just happen, but rather is the result of multiple iterations.

As an undergraduate, I worked as a coach in my college’s writing center. The center was run by Barbara Adams, now an associate professor of writing at Ithaca College. She told me that after each draft, students should print out what they’ve written, wait a while — maybe an hour or a day — to view it with fresh eyes and edit it on the printed page.

“Read everything you write aloud to see how it sounds,” she said. “Then cut out the fat, redundancies, repetitions. Let it flow. Don’t worry about sounding elegant or smart or literary. Just be clear, direct, purposeful.” But pay attention to punctuation, she added. “Lack of or incorrect punctuation is a far greater issue than weak grammar.”

Writing is not a solitary experience. The best writers learn from others.

Without sharing multiple drafts of their writing with anyone else, students never get the chance to apply feedback to improve their work. But feedback also needs to happen quickly. Too often students hand in a paper only to get it back weeks later, by which time they don't care or have moved on to something else.

Feedback shouldn't just come from teachers, but also from peers. Many of the best writing teachers use the "workshop method" in their classes where students exchange drafts to critique. During a panel at the annual SXSWedu conference, Markman said that with a student's permission, he distributes and discusses the best essays in a class. Adams said when "a student simply knocks it out of the park in a finished paper, I may ask them to read it aloud, then have the rest of class discuss why it works, or what aspects don't."

Sharing the final product with an audience outside a classroom is important in engaging students in the writing process, Nicholas said. "It is frustrating for students to put a great deal of effort into a writing assignment and then share it with just one reader, the teacher," he said. "How many actors would perform for an audience of one?"

Technology has allowed students to distribute their writing more widely through blogs and wikis, and even podcasts, Nicholas added. "Because podcasting is audio only, students are forced to convey their message clearly," he said.

Now back to my breakfast neighbors. As they departed, the one interviewing for the job asked his companion if he wanted a free copy of the newspaper that was stacked at the entrance. “I don’t have time to read,” the interviewer replied.

Perhaps the best way to improve writing is to read good writing, and not just 140-character tweets or Facebook shares. We develop an ear for language, sentence structure and pacing by reading others and trying out something we learn from them.