

6 of 6 DOCUMENTS

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WHY JOHNNY CAN'T WRITE

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If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than ever that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. And if they are attending elementary school, they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them eventually to write comprehensible English. Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates.

Nationwide, the statistics on literacy grow more appalling each year. In March, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare revealed the results of a special study that showed a steady erosion of reading skills among American students since 1965. Last month, the College Entrance Examination Board announced the formation of a panel of top educators who will study the twelve-year-long decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores; the fall-off has been especially sharp in verbal skills. Students' SAT scores this year showed the biggest drop in two decades. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the majority of Americans of all ages tend to use only the simplest sentence structure and the most elementary vocabulary when they write. Among teen-agers, writing performance appears to be deteriorating at the most alarming rate of all. The NAEP's latest studies show that the essays of 13- and 17-year-olds are far more awkward, incoherent and disorganized than the efforts of those tested in 1969.

To Marshall McLuhan, the signs were clear a decade ago: "Literary culture is through," he said, summing up the prospective long-term impact of television. The United States, says poet Karl Shapiro, "is in the midst of a literary breakdown." "We have ceased to think with words," observes historian Jacques Barzun. "We have stopped teaching our children that the truth cannot be told apart from the right words." Ronald Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, thinks that the decline of written English is only one among many symptoms of a massive "regression toward the intellectually invertebrate" among American academics. And philologist Mario Pei warns that already much of academia is controlled by "a school preaching that one form of language is as good as another; that at the age of 5 anyone who is not deaf or idiotic has gained a full mastery of his language; that we must not try to correct or improve language, but must leave it alone; that the only language activity worthy of the name is speech on the colloquial, slangy, even illiterate plane; that writing is a secondary, unimportant activity."

The cries of dismay sound even louder in the halls of commerce, industry and the professions, where writing is the basis for almost all formal business communication. Computer print-outs and the conference call may have altered forever the pace and nature of information exchanged, but transactions for the record—from interoffice memorandums to multinational corporate contracts—all depend on the precision and clarity of the written word.

Increasing, however, officials at graduate schools of law, business and journalism report gloomily that the products of even the best colleges have failed to master the skills of effective written communication so crucial to their fields. At Harvard, one economics instructor has been so disturbed at the inability of his students to write clearly that he now offers his own services to try to teach freshmen how to write. Businessmen seeking secretaries who can spell and punctuate or junior executives who can produce intelligible written reports complain that college graduates no longer fill the bill. "Errors we once found commonly in applications from high-school graduates are now cropping up in forms from people with four-year college degrees," says a personnel official for the Bank of America. Even the Civil Service Commission, the Federal government's largest employer, has recently doubled its in-house writing programs in order to develop adequate civil servants.

The colleges and universities complain that many of the most intelligent freshmen, in some ways more articulate and

sophisticated than ever before, are seriously deficient when it comes to organizing their thoughts on paper. By the time they reach college, the professors complain, it is almost too late to help them. The breakdown in writing has been in the making for years, they say, and the causes for it range from inadequate grounding in the basics of syntax, structure and style to the popularity of secondary-school curriculums that no longer require the wide range of reading a student must have if he is to learn to write clearly.

There is no question in the minds of educators that a student who cannot read with true comprehension will never learn to write well. "Writing is, after all, book-talks," says Dr. Ramon Veal, associate professor of language education at the University of Georgia's College of Education. "You learn book-talk only by reading." But as the standard tests suggest students' reading ability is declining-and the effects of this erosion are readily apparent. For example, when the Association of American Publishers prepared a pamphlet to help college freshmen get the most from their textbooks, they found that its "readability level"-calculated for twelfth-grade skills-was far too high for students entering college. The pamphlet had to be rewritten at the ninth-grade level.

The reading and writing skills of most Americans have never been remarkable, and the inability of the average high-school graduate to write three or four clear expository paragraphs has been the object of scornful criticism at least since the time of Mark Twain, when only 7 per cent of the population managed to earn high-school diplomas. What makes the new illiteracy so dismaying is precisely the fact that writing ability among even the best-educated young people seems to have fallen so far so fast.

The evidence is massive. At the University of California at Berkeley, where students come from the top 12.5 per cent of high-school graduates, nearly half of last year's freshmen demonstrated writing skills so poor that they were forced to enroll in remedial courses nicknamed "bonehead English." Officials at Michigan State University are so concerned about writing incompetence that they may soon require all under-graduates to pass a writing exam demonstrating "minimal literary skills" before they receive diplomas. The Georgia Board of Regents, distressed at the lack of writing skill demonstrated by graduates of the state's 32 colleges, already requires such a test-and demands remedial writing programs of those who cannot pass. At Temple University in Philadelphia, the proportion of freshmen failing an English placement exam has increased by more than 50 per cent since 1968. Harvard's freshman course in expository writing-the only class every Harvard student is required to take-has been expanded to such an extent in the past two years that some faculty members now call it a "pseudo-department."

Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress has been testing and evaluating the writing skills of Americans between the ages of 9 and 35. In its first appraisal of writing skills six years ago, it found that 9-year-olds showed almost no mastery of basic writing mechanics, that 17-year-olds demonstrated serious deficiencies in spelling vocabulary and sentence structure and that participants over 18 were reluctant to write at all. Last month's announcement that writing skills have slipped steadily ever since indicated that older students in particular now show "increases in awkwardness, run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs."

The judges, a panel of English teachers and scholars from across the country, suggest that most of those tested in the assessment have been strongly influenced by the simplistic spoken style of television. E.B. White, essayist emeritus of

The New Yorker, puts it this way: "Short of throwing away all the television sets, I really don't know what we can do about writing." No one has yet produced a thorough study of the effect of TV on a generation of students raised in its glare, but on at least two points most language experts agree: time spent watching television is time that might otherwise be devoted to reading; and the passiveness of the viewing-"letting the television just sink into one's environment," in the words of Barzun-seems to have a markedly bad effect on a child's active pursuit of written skills. "The TV keeps children entertained," complains Albert Tillman, director of a writing clinic at the University of Illinois. "It does not demand that they take active part in their learning."

Even the effects of television might be counteracted if students were required to learn the language in the classroom. There, however, the past decade has produced a number of changes that in some school systems have all but terminated the teaching of the written language. Overcrowded classrooms and increased workloads have led many teachers to give up assigning essays and to rely, instead, on short-answer exercises that are easier to mark. As a result, many students now graduate from high school without ever having had any real practice in writing.

The 1960s also brought a subtle shift of educational philosophy away from the teaching of expository writing. Many teachers began to emphasize "creativity" in the English classrooms and expanded their curriculums to allow students to work with contemporary media of communication such as film, videotape and photography. In the process, charges Dorothy Mathews, director of undergraduate English at Illinois, they often shortchanged instruction in the written language. "Things have never been good, but the situation is getting a lot worse," she complains. "What really disturbs us is the students' inability to organize their thoughts clearly." An essay by one of Matthews's Illinois freshman stands as guileless testimony to the problem: "It's obvious in our modern world of today theirs a lot of impreciseness in expressing thoughts we have."

Even where writing still is taught, the creative school discourages insistence on grammar, structure and style. Many teachers seem to believe that rules stifle spontaneity. Dr. Elliott Anderson, professor of English at Northwestern University, reports that many highschool teachers have simply stopped correcting poor grammar and sloppy construction, and he is inclined to think that these creative teachers have subverted their own goals. "You don't get very interesting creative results," he notes, "from students who can't use the language as a tool in the first place."

In the opinion of many language experts, another major villain is the school of "structural linguistics." Writing is far less important than speech, the structural linguists proclaim, because only about 4 per cent of the world's languages have a written form; they believe that there are no real standards for any language, apart from the way it is commonly spoken. Philologist Pei traces the predominance of this school to the 1961 publication of Webster's Third International Dictionary, the first English dictionary that did not give preference to the way the language is used by its best-educated writers. Since then, he suggests, teachers in the classrooms have come increasingly under the sway of the structural-linguistic dogma: that the spoken idiom is superior to the written, and that there is no real need for students to study the rules of their language at all. "If you will scoff at language study," asks Pei, "how, save in terms of language, will you scoff?"

The pervasive influence of the structural linguists, coupled with the political activism of the past decade, has led many teachers to make the view that standard English is just a "prestige" dialect among many others, and that insistence on its predominance constitutes an act of repression by the white middle class. Last year, after a bitter dispute within its own ranks, the Conference on College Composition of the National Council of Teachers of English adopted an extraordinary policy statement embodying that philosophy. Entitled "Students' Rights to Their Own Language," the document is more a political tract than a set of educational precepts. "Linguistic snobbery was tacitly encouraged by a slavish reliance on rules," it argues, "and these attitudes had consequences far beyond the realm of language. People from different language and ethnic backgrounds were denied social privileges, legal rights and economic opportunity, and their inability to manipulate the dialect used by the privileged group was used as an excuse for this denial."

The supporters of this argument reject the notion that public education is designed to help those who do not use standard English to survive in a society that does. "We tend to exaggerate the need for standard English," insists Elisabeth McPherson, an English teacher at a St. Louis community college who helped draft the declaration. "You don't need much standard English skill for most jobs in this country." True enough. But won't students, denied the opportunity to master standard English because their teachers refuse to teach it, also lose the chance at higher-ranking jobs where standard English does prevail? McPherson, who calls herself "idealistic," replies that "the important thing is that people find themselves through their own language."

But, "prestige dialect" or not, standard English is in fact the language of American law, politics, commerce and the vast bulk of American literature - and the traditionalists argue that to deny children access to it is in itself a pernicious form of oppression. They also emphasize that the new attempt to stress the language as it is spoken rather than as it is written has significance far beyond the basics of jobs or social mobility. "Learning to write is the hardest, most important thing any child does," says Dr. Carlos Baker, chairman of the English department at Princeton University and author of a best-selling biography of Ernest Hemingway. "Learning to write is learning to think."

Baker and like-minded colleagues stress that setting down thoughts in writing forces students to examine the actual meaning of their words and the logic - or the lack of it - that leads from one statement to another. "You just don't know anything unless you can write it," says semanticist S.I. Hayakawa. "Sure, you can argue things in your head and bring them out at cocktail parties, but in order to argue anything thoroughly, you must be able to write it down on paper." The late James Knapton, a former supervisor of remedial English at Berkeley, quit the university in disgust eight years ago when officials dropped the school's essay requirement for admission. "I really worry about the great unwashed mass of students sloshing around out there," said Knapton, who before his death last summer was teaching English at a San Francisco high school. "Diagramming sentences is out, no one teaches Shakespeare any more, and there are all those kids talking and rapping with each other, not knowing how to examine what they think in one discursive sentence."

How to stop the rot is a matter of increasingly vigorous debate. Knapton, for one, thought the first step must be to teach the English teachers themselves how to write. "If *they* don't know," he asked, "how on earth are they supposed to teach the children?" Knapton's point is well taken. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, it is now possible for an aspirant who wants to teach high-school English to go all the way through high school, college and advanced-education degrees without taking a single course in English composition.

Some researchers estimate that more than 50 per cent of the nation's secondary-school English teachers did not specialize in English at all during their college years. School officials in Maryland were horrified by the results of a recent study which showed that half of the teachers who apply for English-teaching jobs in Montgomery County fail a basic test of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Just last week, the Board of Education of Stamford, Conn., passed a resolution requiring all

teachers now employed in the district to pass a test in written and spoken English - or to take remedial courses. The board member who pushed the ruling through explained that he was alarmed at the number of incomprehensible communications he had recently received from those responsible for teaching English to Stamford children.

Many of the critics also point out that the worst debasement of the language to date is probably "educationese" itself, the jargon in which prospective teachers are taught to teach. English professor Peter Neumeyer of the State University of New York at Stony Brook cites several "deadly examples" of the prose produced by educators. Their subject? Teaching children to write. A few examples:

"The behaviors can be taught or encouraged to happen spontaneously in a content context."

Her results was a confusion matrix showing how often these children confused each letter with every other letter."

"The major dimensions of a teaching prescription are illustrated below in relation to the prescribed terminal behaviors described above."

Last year, educators in San Francisco decided to do something about the teaching gap. The Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP), founded with money from Berkeley's School of Education and College of Letters and Sciences, invited teachers from nine California counties to spend a five-week summer session with a coalition of Berkeley professors. Six days a week, eight hours a day, the teachers studied current research on writing, examined practical approaches to teaching it, developed curriculum materials and wrote extensively on their own. Each then returned to his school district to offer similar training to his colleagues. The workshop was such a success that it was repeated this summer, and as a result, 31 Bay Area school districts have funded their own writing workshops and a consortium of California colleges and universities is considering plans for more such programs.

In other areas, a number of schools have come up with their own methods of improving writing skills. A Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., th traditional four years of required English courses have been thrown out altogether and replaced with a school-wide requirement for competence in reading and writing. Every students, regardless of his grade level, must take the course - called, simply enough, "Competence" - until he passes it. The focus is on sentence and paragraph construction and the elements of style (box). The premise, says the headmaster Theodore Sizer, is elementary: "Until a youngster can demonstrate that he is competent in reading and writing, you just cannot pass him along to more advanced studies."

In some inner-city schools, many teachers seem to be getting better results in reading and writing by teaching standard English as a second language. "When I first started teaching," says Betty Flasch, an English teacher at Dusable High School in Chicago's black ghetto, "I was always saying, 'No, Joan, you don't mean you ain't got no more, you mean you don't have any more'." That approach, she reports, built up "incredible hostility" among her students, who resisted and denounced her efforts to make them use "honky talk," a dialect literally foreign to their families and friends. Today, Flasch tells her students that she will teach them a new language - standard English - and that when they have mastered it, they will be bilingual. To teach them how their everyday speech is related to ordinary English, for example, she has her pupils translate Shakespeare's Elizabethan dialect both in modern prose and into their own "street" language (page 60). Her results, she reports, have been remarkable. And interestingly enough, she finds that the youngsters respond particularly well to traditional drills for teaching standard English. "They get a big kick out of diagraming sentences," says Flasch, "whereas they seem to be turned off by a lot of the audiovisual techniques."

But audiovisual techniques, as well as television itself, are here to stay, and now a number of concerned teachers and researchers are beginning to suggest that they be used to promote - not replace - the study of the written language. "Kids spend three to four hours watching TV everyday," says Peter Almond, who has been studying children and television for the Carnegie Council on Children. "Why not learn to use it more wisely?" Almond reports that many of the best teachers already assign reading and writing exercises based on television shows their students watch, and in that way try to channel the "quick impression" talents developed by television into the more reflective skills demanded by the written language.

Educators agree that it is absolutely essential to make students write. "That's the only way they learn," says Eunice Sims, coordinator of English for the Atlanta school system. "Let them write about whatever interests them and teach from that. You can always move a student from essays on street fighting to essays on Shelley." Sims thinks that even in overcrowded classrooms where teachers cannot possibly analyze every single paper, the students still should write as often as possible. "if a teacher reads every fifth paper a child writes, he or she knows pretty well how the student's doing."

Most of the experts, in fact, applaud the modern notion that grammar and syntax are most successfully taught through a child's own writing, not by handing him a set of abstract rules and expecting him to conform once he has learned them by rote. "The main principle is to get a student deeply involved in the materials of his past and memory and have him write

about them," says James Dickey, resident poet at the University of South Carolina. "Then the teacher must become a kind of coach. In football, if someone is slow of foot the coach makes him do wind sprints. In writing, if a student is weak on how language is put together I have him get an elementary grammar book and *exercise*."

Despite the laudable coaching efforts of some individual teachers, however, very little improvement in the writing skills of American students is likely unless the educational establishment recaptures the earlier conviction that the written language is important. One thing that is clearly needed is a renewed emphasis on reading as both a discipline and a diversion. Those who would teach English must also once again insist that not all writing is equally admirable. "At some point you have to stop a kid, tell him that string of epithets masquerading as a poem was garbage twenty years ago and it's garbage now," says Princeton's Baker. "You have to direct good writing, sluice it, build banks around it."

The spoken word, while adding indisputable richness and variety to the language as a whole, is by its very nature ephemeral. The written language remains the only effective vehicle for transmitting and debating a culture's ideas, values and goals. "Every lover of the language knows that its glory resides in the recurring infusions of new elements . . . and that change is constant, continual, and will never cease," wrote Lincoln Barnett in his classic work "The Treasure of Our Tongue." "But the written word is the brake on the spoken word. The written word is the link between the past and the future."

The point is that there have to be some fixed rules, however tedious, if the codes of human communication are to remain decipherable. If the written language is placed at the mercy of every new colloquialism and if every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway, then we will soon find ourselves back in Babel. In America today, as in the never-never world Alice discovered on her trip through the looking-glass, there are too many people intent on being masters of their language and too few willing to be its servants.

"There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more or less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be Master - that's all."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Picture 1, 18-year-old college freshman; Picture 2, 17-year-old high-school student; Picture 3, 17-year-old high-school student; Picture 4, 13-year-old junior-high student, Fenga & Freyer; Picture 5, Passive voice: TV entertains, but demands no really active learning; Picture 6, Active voice: To write, first learn to read, Photos by Jeff Lowenthal; Picture 7, Flasch and students: Teaching Standard English as a second language, Jeff Lowenthal; Picture 8, Pei: If you will scoff at language study. . .how, save in terms of language, will you scoff?," Robert R. McElroy - Newsweek; Picture 9, McPherson: 'You don't need much standard English skill for most Jobs in this country'

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