

## They Can Write

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In the 1980s, when I was teaching history at the high school in Concord, Mass., there was increasing concern about measuring the outcomes of education. It occurred to me that a journal of exemplary high school history essays might show other students and teachers what was possible.

So I established a quarterly journal in 1987, and students started to send in their work. Each year for the past 12 years the Concord Review has given out a prize, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize, for outstanding academic promise seen in the 44 published research papers.

About a decade later I founded the National Writing Board to provide an independent assessment of high school research papers. Now the main high school writing assessment is the superficial new SAT essay, a 25-minute test on which factual errors do not matter to the score.

Since 1987, I have been privileged to publish 737 exemplary high school history research papers from 34 countries in the Concord Review. None of these papers would have met the standard English department guidelines, or for that matter the requirements for a high score on an SAT essay. They are all too long, too concerned with historical accuracy, and not personal enough.

Some of the best have come from students in New York City, including one of the first two Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize winners in 1995, a paper by Aaron Einbond, then a Sophomore at Hunter College High School, on the degree of originality in John Maynard Keynes' "The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money."

When I first read this 7,366-word paper, I thought it could not have been written by a high school sophomore. But I learned that Mr. Einbond had placed 5th in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search, was first clarinet in the New York Youth Symphony Orchestra and a legend around Hunter, so I published the paper. He went on to Harvard, became a Marshall Scholar at Cambridge, and is now getting a Ph.D. in music composition at Berkeley.

I also published two papers by Hana Lee, class of 2003 at Hunter, one on Tiananmen Square and one on Transcendentalism. She graduated first in her class at Hunter and she recently told me she was at Harvard, majoring in molecular biology and evolutionary genetics, and "working in a lab that studies a chaperone protein in Arabidopsis that may function to buffer the effects of genetic variation in phenotype."

Some of the papers by New York students have been about New York itself, including a great essay on the economic revitalization of Flushing by Amy Peltz at Hunter, who is now at the University of Chicago. Ms. Peltz wrote, "In these times of rising anti-immigrant sentiment, it is important to remember the valuable contributions immigrants can make. In Flushing, the Asian immigrants saved Main Street. Perhaps there are other immigrants waiting in the wings, and other Main Streets in need of saving." There was a fine paper about the history of Jewish Harlem by Sarah Goldberg who went to the Horace Mann School and is now at Williams. There was a great paper on the Harlem Renaissance by Gabriella Gruder-Poni, an Italian girl studying in this country, who also attended Hunter.

There have also been fine history papers from the Bronx High School of Science, Poly Prep Country Day School, Fieldston, Great Neck North High School, Horace Greeley High School, and Paul D. Schreiber High School, among several other schools.

While this is some of the good news, there is some bad news as well. Part of the bad news is the low and non-academic writing standards of the College Board. With funding from the Albert Shanker Institute (affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers) the Concord Review commissioned a study of the state of the history research paper in public high schools in America in 2002.

We found that, while 95% of teachers praised the value of research papers, 81% never assigned a 5,000-word paper, and 62% never assigned a 3,000-word paper in history classes. Most teachers said they simply did not have time to assign, monitor, and read history papers, so they didn't have their students do them.

The English department in public high schools has its attention on fiction, personal, and creative writing or the five-paragraph essay. Nonfiction reading and serious research papers are not to be found there.

There are real consequences for students who go on to college or to jobs. The Business Roundtable reported on a survey of its member companies in

2004, in which it had found that they were spending \$3,090,943,194 annually on remedial writing courses for their salaried and hourly employees, in about equal numbers. American College Testing (ACT) reported this spring that 49% of the high school graduates they tested were unable to read at the level of college freshman texts.

James Story, an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation reported in the September 2006 School Reform News, "Nearly 50 percent of Texas college freshmen require remedial or corrective courses." Of course some of this remediation is in math, but a large share is in reading and writing.

The powers that be in college freshman composition courses are not doing much to raise standards for academic writing in the high schools either. Nancy Sommers, the director of Expository Writing at Harvard, told a Chronicle of Higher Education colloquium on writing that she was grateful to the high school teachers who had prepared students for Harvard by having them work on the five-paragraph essay.

Some Harvard students don't see that as great help in preparing for college. Laura Arandes, Harvard Class of 2005, wrote, in a letter to me, that she was shocked by how poorly her public high school in California had prepared her for college papers. She had never been assigned anything more than a five-paragraph essay, at which, she said, she was quite good.

She commented to me, "This lack of forethought on the part of high school educators and administrators is creating a large divide among college graduates — and it's one that helps neither the students nor their alumni institutions. Modern public high schools have an obligation not simply to pump out graduates at the end of the year, but also to prepare their students for the intellectual rigors of college."

Many forces are at work in dumbing down writing (and nonfiction reading) in our high schools. Teachers are too busy, most favor creative or personal writing, and nonfiction books are no longer assigned. Students have little to write about, and major organizations, like the National Commission on Writing in the Schools, have a lot of money and publicity, but serious nonfiction academic writing is not one of their goals for high school students.

The Concord Review has very little money and few subscribers, and its funding future is always in doubt. I met with the Director of Education Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities a couple of years ago and he told me that while he thought all of our efforts were truly wonderful, but NEH could not provide any funding for us, which has been the case at scores of other foundations over the years.

People are accustomed to thinking of high school student academic work, especially in history, as being of no value. I started the Concord Review in 1987 not only to recognize exemplary papers by high school students of history, but also to distribute them as widely as possible to give lots of other students a chance to read some history and to see what some of their diligent peers have been able to do.

A few teachers, like Broeck Oder at Santa Catalina School in Monterey, California, and Bill Rives, at the Singapore American School, have bought class sets, to make sure their history students see this good work, but most high school teachers seem to have neither the time nor the inclination to let their students know that some of their peers are meeting much higher expectations than they are. Their students will find that out soon enough in college, perhaps.

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