

## Less is Less

Will Fitzhugh, *The Concord Review*

The College Board is about to add a writing test to the SAT, making the new possible score 2400 instead of 1600. The writing part will provide thirty minutes for the candidate to give an opinion in response to a prompt, and these responses will be scored at the rate of thirty an hour, or no more than two minutes each.

This is the sequel to the SAT II writing test, for which students have in the past spent up to six hours preparing a generic essay with which they can respond to any prompt, for instance with the help of tutors at the Chyten organization in Boston, who charge about \$165 an hour.

The new test will add pressure to students already working on their micro-mini autobiographical “personal” essays which they need to submit to many college admissions officers when they apply to college.

These writing exercises then have to be added to the creative and personal and journal writing so highly preferred by many educators over the traditional old-fashioned term papers.

One result of all this attention to short, superficial, and nonacademic writing efforts is that about 30 percent of college freshmen now need remedial writing courses, and most professors complain that practically all of their students seem to understand very little about reading for and writing a research paper of any kind.

An additional consequence is the likelihood that the great majority of U.S. high school students now graduate without ever having read a single nonfiction book. College reading lists, of course, look even more forbidding to students who have never read that sort of book.

Educators offer many excuses for this superficial approach to writing. They say that they fear plagiarism (although it is just as easy to plagiarize a five-paragraph essay as a 25-page one). They say they don't have time to plan, coach, and correct research papers (and many don't). They say that, for some reason, while high school students can take calculus and honors physics, they shouldn't be asked to move beyond the seventh-grade challenge of the five-paragraph essay. And naturally there are those who feel that any academic expository writing will permanently damage the creative potential of the young persons in their care.

It is frustrating for me, because I have published 649 history research papers by high school students from 34 countries since 1987, and they are as serious and as well-written as one could wish, so I know that high school students can read and write, if they are not actively prevented from doing so, as the majority are in U.S. high schools at present. [[www.tcr.org](http://www.tcr.org)]