

Romantic Fiction
Will Fitzhugh, *The Concord Review*
21 July 2004

A Senior at Harvard College recently told the story of her first expository writing class in college. As a high school student in California she had never written anything longer than a five-paragraph essay. When her instructor at Harvard announced the first paper and said it would be five to eight, she said, "Paragraphs?" and everyone in the class, including the instructor, laughed at her.

A study done in 2002 for *The Concord Review* found that the majority of U.S. high school students no longer write history research papers. The head of the history department at Boston Latin School, an exam high school which is the oldest public school in the country, wrote that they have not assigned the "traditional history term paper" for more than a decade.

What sort of writing are our students doing instead? In the case of many, if not most, it amounts to diary entries, creative writing, and personal essays, including the sort of expressions of opinion that require no reading and not much thought. The new SAT, starting in 2005, will include an essay which accounts for 800 points of the 2400 points available on the revised exam. This essay test is much the same as the old SATII writing test, which thousands of students in Boston have managed to beat by spending six or eight hours with a tutoring service, like Chyten Educational Services, at which they write an essay, memorize it, and then reproduce it to the College Board's "novel" prompt, and they average a score of 747, according to an article in *The Boston Globe* in February 2003.

In addition to these short opinion pieces, many college admissions offices ask applicants for 500-word accounts of their personal lives, struggles, encounters, reflections, and so on—again, the sort of writing that requires no knowledge of anything beyond the applicant, and it requires no reading. The damage that these sorts of writing expectations does to the amount of nonfiction reading done in the high schools is the subject for another article, but Will Dix, from the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, recently asked a panel at the Illinois Association of College Admissions Counselors, which had talked about the new writing test, what they thought the impact would be on the teaching of writing in the high schools. In his words: "Finally, I asked the panelists if they'd discussed how using the new tests might affect the teaching of writing at the high schools they work with. I might as well have been speaking in tongues. After a long silence, someone said, 'Why would we do that?'"

Almost every high school has a literary magazine, with short poems, photographs, drawings, and the like, to help demonstrate the creativity of students. I have found only three or four high schools which have magazines for the academic nonfiction of students.

While of course we need more Hemingways, Updikes, and Steven Kings, where will we find the next James Madison, Abraham Lincoln and David McCullough if we do not encourage, teach, and recognize serious academic writing by our students while they are still in school? As *The Economist* recently commented, "The only thing worse than having an elite is not having one."

The College Board's National Commission on Writing in the Schools last year called for more attention to writing, and in their report they kindly provided an example of the sort of writing by a high school student they thought admirable. They said this could show "how powerfully children can express their emotions."

"The time has come to fight back and we are. By supporting our leaders and each other, we are stronger than ever. We will never forget those who died, nor will we forgive those who took them from us."

Michael, High School

I suppose this is the kind of writing, which, expanded for 25 minutes, would earn an 800 on the new SAT? But I also have examples of the kind of creative/personal writing which students are lead to believe is worth publishing in a journal. The following entry by a ninth grader was received in July by *The Concord Review*:

My Reflection

I stare at my reflection,
Yet I don't see me.
First glance,
I thought it was you.
Second glance...
Wait...that's...me?
That's me and,
My sky blue eyes,
My nose,
My blond hair.
I stare at my reflection,
Yet I don't see me.
At first it was you.
Then it appeared
To be me.

Some people I sent this submission to thought it was a joke, but they don't realize how much writing in the schools has become dumbed-down, self-centered and not even very creative. Creative writing in general is now held to no standard. How can you grade or even criticize someone's feelings about themselves, after all?

Those same colleges which ask applicants for brief autobiographical statements as essays, are also home to the professors who routinely observe that not only do their new students seem to have difficulty with reading the nonfiction books they assign, but also they seem to have had no experience with writing term papers, and indeed, in perhaps the majority of cases now, they haven't had any.

The number of corporations and law firms with remedial writing classes for their new employees is still to be determined, as is the money spent to make up for the lack of academic expository writing in high school, college, and, it would appear now, law school as well, but the number is said to be large and growing and so is the cost.

Our Romantic commitment to poetry, personal journals and so on perhaps does credit to our love of student fiction and our pleasure in having something to put up on the refrigerator door, but if we do not ask our students to read nonfiction books and write academic research papers before they leave school, we have not only dumbed down their opportunities in school, but we have deprived our society of the sort of writing we need in our companies, courts, newspapers, and legislatures, and the recent drop in reading of fiction found by the National Endowment for the Arts might very well be echoed by some future study by the National Endowment for the Humanities of the reading of nonfiction books by the citizens of our democracy.