

The Ability to Write Essays

This skill will survive curriculum fads and ease the transition to university.

By Hugh Robertson

About ten years ago, I sent a letter to university history departments across the country asking professors where they thought the emphasis should be placed in high school history programs: knowledge and course content, research and communication skills, or attitudes and values. By a large majority, the responses indicated that skills should be the prime focus of high school history programs.

Also about ten years ago, I sent a questionnaire to 21 of my grade 13 graduates who had just completed their first terms at university — and survived! The questions asked how the features and skills of my history program had prepared them for university. Research and writing skills topped the list by a country mile.

And then, about five years ago, I posed a series of questions to a class of BEd students specializing in senior English at the University of Ottawa. The questions included the following.

- a) Were you adequately prepared in the skills of research and writing in high school? By a ratio of three to one, the answer was no.
- b) How important should research and writing assignments be in high school English programs? The response was unanimous: “they should be an essential component of the program.”

Recent articles in *Harper's Magazine* (“This Pen for Hire,” June 1995) and *College Teaching* (“Curbing Epidemic Cheating Through Systemic Change”, Fall 1995) have once again focused on a perennial problem in education: faking, buying and plagiarizing essays and term papers. Frenetic “all-nighters” seem more pervasive than ever, and the ease of downloading material from the Internet has resulted in either hybrid creations from a variety of dubious databases or even complete essays downloaded from web sites devoted to student assignments.

From my contacts with community college and university instructors, I gather that there is a steady decline in the quality of research and writing assignments at the undergraduate level. Some professors no longer set major writing assignments in first-year classes because the students do not possess the skills to handle the assignments.

It is my contention that the major problems associated with research and writing assignments — procrastination, plagiarism, disorganization and lack of motivation — are largely the result of student confusion, insecurity and apprehension, and not necessarily indolence or inclinations towards improbity. Lack of a systematic process for handling these assignments is at the root of the problem.

Students need clearly-defined pathways to chart their way through their academic tasks. Initially, the skills that shape these pathways must be taught — learning by osmosis or by trial and error is not an effective alternative to direct teacher instruction. Once the procedures have been taught, students can modify them and design their own process pathways. With constant practice through their school years, students should be roller-blading their way along by the time they graduate from high school.

Perhaps schools could design and publish a policy for the preparation and presentation of all major assignments. Such a policy might include some of the following features.

- Direct teacher instruction in the skills of research and writing
- Adequate class and homework time to complete assignments
- Individual student-teacher consultations
- A schedule of due dates for the major stages
- Clearly-defined criteria of assessment

- Avoidance of peer- and self-evaluation, as well as bonus marks for early submission
- A careful balance between individual, paired and group assignments

As a former high school educator, I know that there are problems of class size and discipline, social dysfunction and McJobs, television and the Internet, and dropping standards and lowered expectations, but it is nevertheless teachers' professional responsibility to prepare university-bound students for the intellectual rigour of academic life. Transition to post-secondary education would not be as traumatic if we graduated students from high school who were literate, resourceful, critical thinkers.

It is ironic that as we move into the era of the “independent and lifelong learner,” one of the vehicles that will promote the process is so disparaged. If teachers are not prepared to conform to a school policy on assignments, they should be discouraged from setting research projects. It may be better not to set assignments than to have students learn bad habits from unsupervised reports and essays. A carefully-designed research and writing program, consistently implemented but sufficiently flexible to encourage innovation and imagination, will provide our students with what Mark Twain dubbed “roots and wings.”

(Mr. Robertson recently retired from Ashbury College in Ottawa after many years as the head of the Social Science Department. He frequently conducts workshops on research and writing. In addition, he has written four books that lay out clearly how students and teachers should structure the research and writing of reports and essays. He can be contacted at 613-747-6967.)