

# Students should see themselves as writers



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SAN ANGELO, Texas -- Being a full-time writer is one kind of experience, but teaching writing to university students is another experience altogether.

Practitioners can go about their business rarely giving a thought to the principles of their trade. But the teacher, responsible for the learning of others, is a slave to the principles. For this reason, the teacher frets over quality and must determine a measure of quality in order to award fair grades.

As a visiting Angelo State University writing professor since August, I have read several sets of student essays, newspaper columns and editorials. The quality of the writing is no better or worse than that of student writing I have encountered elsewhere.

Student writing at most colleges and universities nationwide remains mediocre to poor. But it does not have to be. Student writing can be much better -- if not super. (Please understand that a handful of my ASU students write like pros already, and they will make big names for themselves. Still, I worry about the writing of many others.)

Here is the source of the problem: Too many students on the nation's campuses, ASU included, see themselves as mere students. But in the academy, they are more than mere students. Everyone is, or should be, a writer.

A writer.

Professors -- who must publish or perish -- know this fact. They know that writing is the most effective tool for communicating ideas and imparting information (knowledge). English professors, social and political scientists, economists, historians, theologians, psychologists, biologists, chemists, physicists and mathematicians all publish. (They must.)

Students need to comprehend the essential reality about writing now, while they are students. They need to start seeing themselves as writers, not as harassed victims playing a game of handing in "word salads" to meet a deadline or to satisfy an assignment for that Pavlovian reward called a grade. This game is devoid of real benefits.

I have spent most of my adult life in the academy either as a student or as a professor.

As a student, my most valuable learning came from the written word. Sure, I had some great lecturers, especially at the University of Chicago, but I learned most from great writing.

The written word inspired me. In Chicago, I took the written word to my apartment. I did not need a professor standing in front of me. I curled up in bed with Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, the novel that influenced me most as a writer. I sat on the shore of Lake Michigan with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. I rode the El reading Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. At Jimmy's, I enjoyed the evening with a beer in one hand, a burger in the other and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* on the table in front of me. And, as a writer, I always will be indebted to *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White.

As a student, I learned this invaluable lesson: Great writing is a "movable feast," to steal a term from Hemingway. The world's greatest ideas endure through writing. Yes, lectures have their place, but their efficacy does not compare to the lifelong influence of the written word.

As a professor, my most important teaching tools are my published writings and those of other professionals. No amount of talk can instruct like a well-turned sentence or like a well-researched, logically argued book or article.

Ultimately, someone has to do the writing. The academy is the starting place -- the incubator. We in the academy are the disseminators of knowledge. Students need to know this fact. They need to learn the craft and art of writing. Unfortunately, most writing across the curriculum programs are too hit-and-miss to inculcate a love of writing or even an attitude of appreciating the importance of writing.

Professors -- our textbook and journal authors -- need to start professing to our students the value of writing. It is what we do, and we are writing. Professors need to help students start seeing themselves as writers.

When students see themselves as writers, as I did at Chicago, they discover a new way of seeing our language. They discover the power of the written word. They become more willing to accept criticism of their work. In fact, they demand tough grading and brutal honesty in editing.

They discover that writing, both inside and outside the academy, is their *raison d'être*. After all, they will write the new textbooks, the editorials and columns, the medical journal articles announcing lifesaving research. Our students are the new writers -- but only if professors teach them so and practice what they teach.

***I first read this article in the Gainesville Sun under the title "College Students Must Write" The introductory blurb the Sun added said, "A university is the best place to learn—and realize—that writing is an essential part of every career." I am thrilled that I finally located it online so I can share it with you all.***

***Love,  
Mrs. H***