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Navigating the Nuances of “Good Writing” at the College Level

Abstract

The transition to college-level writing is one that has proved difficult for many students as often times the high school curriculum which we are taught is not an accurate representation of the collegiate standards that we are en route to encounter. However, while this inequivalence in what students are taught might contribute as to why some struggle to do well in college writing, there is also something to be said about the social construct that has become “the good writer.” Outlining the parameters of being a good writer is something that varies from person to person, and is, more often than some would like to admit, quite arbitrary and vague. That, in itself, makes it exceedingly hard for students to deduce whether their writing is up to par with the expectations of their professors until their assignments have been returned, and the damage is irreversible. In order to help students navigate the nebulous labyrinth that is learning to become a successful writer in college, this article aims to shed light on the parallels between what qualities professors think are characteristic of good writers and, when exhibited, give students the best chance of succeeding. To pursue this topic and garner insight into the thoughts of both parties involved, primary research was conducted in the form of a student survey and questionnaire answered by professors

Introduction

There seems to have always been a disconnect that persists between the illusion of what undergraduate college students believe makes a good writer and the image of what a good writer is in the eyes of a professor. Some aspects of writing, such as the ability to analyze sources in depth and construct a chronologically logical argument, are seen at different levels of importance

between professors and their students, making the process of writing a paper geared towards the right audience more challenging. Not only that, but this disparity between pupil and professor makes it increasingly difficult for students to gauge their own writing capabilities, as the sliding scale of importance ranges from person to person in regards to different aspects of “good” writing. Thus, one of the focuses of this article is to create a more narrowed, baseline definition that students can use to evaluate if their writing is up to par with the expectations of their teachers.

As a first-year at the University of California, Davis, and having taken a few paper-heavy classes, I can attest to the reality that writing in high school is vastly different from what writing at the college level is like. From my experience, writing in college brings out a heightened need to exhibit refinement in writing, as the audience I am writing for, mainly my professors and their teaching assistants, have a different set of expectations that they would like to see fulfilled. While I can recognize that a paper taken from when I was in high school, even a well scoring one, would get obliterated if turned in at the college level, I wouldn’t be able to pinpoint exactly why it is that that paper would be low-scoring. Thus leading me to assert that advanced placement writing courses taught at the high school level are not necessarily accurate representations of what college curriculum fully encapsulates, although it is one of their main selling points.

Therefore the question that remains is, “What characteristics do professors believe make good writers?” To aid in the search for this answer, I would like to draw attention to a point that Professor Emeritus, Lynn Z. Bloom, articulates in her article “Good Enough Writing: What is Good Enough Writing, Anyway?” which states, “B-level writing is good enough to satisfy first-year writing standards and to meet norms of acceptable writing in more advanced classes. It is

thus good enough to serve as the lingua franca for writing throughout the writer's home institution, and presumably, to meet the standard for writing beyond that college-the larger community, and the student's future professional world" (Bloom 71). In this sense, Bloom suggests that college writing is seen as the standard for not only students in college, but also for individuals in the working world thus the answer to the proposed question is best sought out from the source itself: college professors.

Methods

The methods I utilized in order to seek information on this topic include both primary and secondary sources, which contribute to an equally weighted perspective of both professors and students on the subject. My secondary sources consist of three articles sourced from an online, peer-reviewed textbook from the UC Davis Library Database. Two of the chapters I selected from the textbook are written by a Professor Emeritus from the University of Connecticut and Purdue University respectively, while the last is authored by the Chair of the Department of English at Manchester Community College. Primary research was conducted in the form of online surveys answered by my fellow University Writing Program (UWP1Y) classmates and interview questions that I emailed out to two of my professors who teach classes in which writing is integrated as an important part of the curriculum.

When looking for secondary sources, I focused my search by looking through articles written by active or retired college professors as well as those closely associated with the writing program at their specific collegiate educational institute. It was important to me that some of the articles contained personal experiences that professors shared with students of their own as the topic of this research article pertains to the working understanding between both parties as it relates to successful writing at the college level. When surveying my peers, I focused on

questions that would give me a clearer understanding of what characteristics students thought made successful college-level writers. I asked a group of students to evaluate statements like “It is important for college-level writers to understand their audience” and “It is important for college-level writers to be able to write across multiple genres of writing” on a sliding scale that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Professors received questionnaires with five short answer questions such as “Why do you think some students struggle with writing at the college level?” and “Do you think your depiction of a good college-level writer matches your students’ rendering of a good college-level writer?” In its entirety, the primary and secondary research performed for this article served as an avenue for gaining a more thorough understanding of both parties attitudes towards the subject of “good” college-level writing.

Discussion of Findings

After reviewing the student responses to the survey, it became apparent to me that, for college students, the image of a “good” writer cannot be done justice with a simple definition that loosely ties together what appears to be a multifaceted construct, contrary to what some would like us to believe. When asked the question: “What qualities do you think make a good writer?” students responded with a variety of answers, some of which showed parallels, but in their entirety highlighted just how diverse a person’s perception on what “good” writing is exactly. One student response reads that good writers are sufficient at, “Getting the point across, addressing audience, having credible evidence, and being able to express themselves clearly,” while another states, “Flow, organization, and grammar.” When compared, these starkly different responses to a question that one might think should produce similar answers suggests that good writing, as we know it, is not as blatant as a mathematical formula. In her article, “What Does the Instructor Want? The View from the Writing Center,” Professor Emeritus Muriel Harris of

Purdue University states, “When I first confronted the question posed by the editors of this volume, “What is college-level writing?” my initial response was a desperate desire to evade answering. Then a feeling of utter helplessness set in when pondering a question much like one of those all-encompassing questions we used to debate over endless mugs of coffee in college coffee houses. Everyone in those discussions had different answers on different days to the same question” (Harris 121). Here, Harris further attests to the claim that good writing has multiple different meanings depending on the person, lending her expertise to show that good college-level writing is a vague ideal in itself and thus a difficult concept for students to fully grasp.

Student responses to the survey also revealed a lack of confidence in being able to find parallels between their depictions of what good writers are and what image of a good writer their professors perpetuate. Therein lies a monumental problem in the social dynamic between college students and their professors, ironic considering clarity in writing and communication are so heavily stressed in higher levels of education. One of the most interesting observations I found while reading through responses revolves around the question: “Do you think your image of a good writer matches that of your professors?” The purpose of including this question was to see if the disparity between the manifestations of student versus professor might still be a barrier that impedes students from succeeding in writing at the college-level. One student’s response, “I am not quite sure, but I do believe that the individual's definitions are different, so there might be an individual difference. I also do think that professors have worked in their field for such a long time, so their expectation may be higher than how I think of it,” depicts the struggle that students face when self-evaluating the quality of their writing.

Whilst going through the professor questionnaire responses, it became apparent to me that although a university might have a specialized curriculum set in place for writing courses, as

classes begin to deviate from strictly writing based into more of a blend with other disciplines, such as history or arts and humanities, the standards seem to exhibit more flexibility, which allows the definition of a “good” writer to be metamorphosed into one that fits the course description. In Chapter 21 of *What is “College-Level” Writing?* titled “College-Level Writing: A Departmental Perspective” James M. Gentile, Chair of the Department of English at Manchester Community College, articulates that, “As a department chair, I continually address these multiple definitions of college-level writing. Many of these definitions are not necessarily inconsistent with but instead are only a part of our departmental understanding of such writing... And yet, experience tells me that any established standard of the college level is difficult to realize even at the departmental level” (Gentile 316). In this sense, Gentile accurately describes an issue, commonly faced by college students, whose roots stem from the inability to produce a working definition of adequate writing that works for all courses across the educational spectrum.

The first professor I interviewed was Dr. Dan Melzer, who serves as the head of First Year Composition here at University of California, Davis. When asked to respond to the question, “Why do you think some students struggle with writing at the college level?” Professor Melzer points to the issue that some college students struggles in writing stem from poor teaching, stating, “The most common reason that students struggle with college-level writing is because of poor teaching. Most teachers have no training in how to teach writing, so their assignments can be confusing or overwhelming, and they might not build in a process for drafting and revising and giving feedback, and when they do give feedback it might be confusing or not very helpful. Another factor in why students struggle is inequity. Some students have gone to privileged high schools, and some students have gone to high schools that are under-resourced.” Here, Professor Melzer presents the argument that perhaps students who struggle

with writing are put at a disadvantage since before even stepping foot on a college campus, due to the disparity in the quality of education they receive prior to coming to college. Therefore, the preconceived notion that most students have, that good writers are simply born that way, becomes more of a myth than a principle of life.

The next professor I interviewed was Dr. Adam Zientek, a professor in the Department of History at UC Davis. One of the main goals for this article was to try and untangle the complex issue of what being a good writer in college means, and to do so, an important aspect to consider is why college students struggle with writing at the college level in the first place. When presented with this question in the questionnaire, Professor Zientek replied, “I believe that students struggle, in general, in one of two ways. Both are based on misconceptions about what they believe professors ‘look for’ in essays, which lead students to do what they *think* we want them to do. On the one hand, some students misunderstand what professors mean when we ask for “original” arguments in papers. ‘Original’ does not mean an argument that nobody has ever thought of before, or a brilliant new interpretation of a text. ‘Original’ means putting the ideas from class together in a compelling and clear way that is of your own design.” In this sense, Professor Zientek makes the argument that a part of the reason why students struggle with college-writing is because they misinterpret things that the prompt asks them to do, thus supporting my previous argument that the disparity in understanding between student and teacher plays a significant role in hindering the success of college students. However, to combat this problem, both Professor Melzer and Professor Zientek stress in their responses to the question, “What can students do to become successful college level writers?” that writing is a process that takes time, effort, and a willingness to continue to revise until the desired product is achieved.

Conclusion

The results of my research show that while it remains a nearly impossible task to set concrete guidelines as to what a “good writer” is exactly, there are steps that students can take to condition themselves into harboring characteristics of advanced, experienced writers at the college level. First, students need to realize that writing is an ongoing process. “Good writers” revisit their work multiple times through the creation of multiple drafts and are not afraid of revision or restructuring when they see fit. They are able to be open with their writing and seek out feedback from their peers, TAs, or their university’s Writing Center in order to get multiple perspectives on their writing, showing a want to succeed and grow as a writer. Writing is a discipline that is ever evolving and changing shape.

As many of us are aware, writing takes on different forms and expectations as we move across disciplines. However, at its core, writing at the college-level requires more from students than the standard we were used to coming from high school. As Professor Zientek puts it, “Good writers go through three stages. First, they think writing is very hard. Then, they think writing is very easy. Finally, they understand that writing is much harder than they thought before, and that if it comes easy, it needs work. Standard college writers between the first and second stage—they understand how to structure an argument around a thesis and use evidence to advance that argument. Good college writers are between the second and third stage—they pay attention to what words they use, and they try to use the right words to express their meaning. In other words, good college writers are aware that they are writing, not just thinking, and so are disciplined and self-aware. They struggle to make their language organized, clear, and terse. This takes editing and rewriting, not just proofreading.”

In its entirety, becoming a “good writer” is something that comes with improving upon your own personal writing style and understanding who your audience is. “Good writers” seem to me to be people who are never satisfied with their work. They are always hungry to make improvements and keen on seeing to the betterment of their methodologies which translates into their work.

Works Cited

Sullivan, Patrick, and Howard B. Tinberg. *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* National Council of Teachers of English, 2006.