

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE IMPACT THAT WRITING HAS ON HER LIFE, EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD ANNA FROM KENT, OHIO, SAID: "IT HAS MADE MY LIFE WORTH LIVING. It has given me joy and a way to connect with people. It has made all my classes easier. It's a way to share who I am with people who would otherwise know nothing about me."

Writing reaches into the student, drawing upon creative and critical thought. Writing has the ability to take the mediocre student and propel him into a world of potential where there once was none. Writing is fertilizer for blooming self-esteem and a basic building block for all aspects of life.

In the academic as well as the business world, the ability to write well is fuel. The person who is able to place thoughts, information, and research into coherent written form is hired, promoted, rewarded, and respected. So why isn't writing given the red-carpet treatment that it deserves?

Writing isn't just for reporters and editors anymore. The Web has turned most employees into sometime writers, particularly with e-mail. Web sites, intranets, and other content-management systems have intensified the need for people to compose words.

In 2004, The National Commission on Writing (NCW) surveyed 120 major American corporations. Seventy percent reported that two-thirds of their salaried employees needed writing as a critical skill. Among hourly wage earners, the expectations were less, but twenty to thirty percent still needed fluent writing.

Poorly written applications are rejected, and applicants with ill-written letters are denied interviews. One company commented that employees did not move up without writing skills, even if they happened to make it through the hiring process.

"Quality Counts 2007: From Cradle to Career, Connecting American Education From Birth to Adulthood" was released in January 2007 by **Education Week**. Eight in ten employers found written communications of high school graduates sorely lacking. Even more disappointing was the realization that more attention was infused into the early grades while less was invested in high schools where college and workforce-readiness standards are needed.

A 2006 survey by the Society of Human Resource Management reflected more than thirty percent of employers who doubted that their college-graduate employees could write a simple business letter. Their synopsis stated that the United States was losing its competitive edge among progressive world economies.

TEACHERS AND PARENTS SPEAK UP

Americans want more writing attention in schools. In 2005, The National Writing Project, a federally funded program serving more than 100,000 teachers at 189 universities, surveyed every income and educational level, every political and ideological persuasion and ethnic group in every region of the United States. Seventy-two percent believed that "a person needs to write well to advance in almost any career or job today." That same percentage felt that all future teachers should train in the teaching of writing. Only 23 percent felt that schools met the writing needs of their children today.

Ruth Hasseler, an educator from the University of Buffalo, replied in response to a **WritingKid** online newsletter post for parental and educator feedback. "I used to think that an English major would make one a competent writing teacher. The writing courses are at the bottom of the university food chain. Who ends up teaching the Freshman Comp courses? The lowly teaching assistants! Most rookie teachers teach writing the way THEY were taught . . . thus, a self-perpetuating process."

Beth from Columbus, Ohio, taught English and writing in middle and high school for ten years. "The main reason we still teach children to write is to pass proficiency tests—there is no creative writing stressed in schools anymore."

Susanna Lang is a middle school educator in Chicago. "To the extent that writing is taught, it is formulaic. Students are rarely invited to express themselves freely, or helped to understand how to manipulate form. The good news is that there is so much good work being published for kids of all ages. Parents should complain to their teachers if writing assignments in school are boring or formulaic."

Meredith Dangel teaches English 101 at North Carolina State University. "One of my ambitious students was nearly in tears on the first day of class. She said, 'I didn't know what a verb was until my senior year in high school. I never learned the parts of speech. Can I pass your class?' All I could say about this was WOW?"

Some blame the Internet as the culprit for replacing entertainment once gleaned from books.

Instant Messaging and forums promote shortcut language that creeps into writing. Regardless of the cause, the result damages everyone.

But the message isn't all grave. Richard Whitney is a tutor at Northeastern University in Boston. In the late '70s, businesses complained that the school's graduates could not write.

The university implemented a writing requisite in 1982, mandating that undergraduates write a minimum 5,000-word essay on a real-world problem in their discipline, a requirement still expected. "These kids, as motivated as many of them are, are lost." What began as a return to college for a history degree evolved into a tutoring mission for Whitney, who stays busy acting as a formal writing mentor for students.

The National Writing Project offers advice. At its Web site, parents are guided as to what to look for in a good school writing program. For example, instead of students being asked to write on the teacher's topics, they should have the opportunity to create topics that matter to them. Instead of writing topics for no audience, audience and purpose for papers should be defined in the assignments.

YOUTH FIND THEIR WAY

WritingKid newsletter enthusiasts recently replied to an online poll about their writing options. Responders ranged from ninth graders to college freshmen. Frustration laced many responses.

Raelyn, a ninth grader from Alberta, wrote, "I'm sort of above what they're trying to teach us. I've figured out writing through different (online) writing sites. On my own, I've finished two stories totaling

why
johnny
needs a
Writing
mentor

▶ C. HOPE CLARK

WRITING CONTESTS

Just a sampling here; cruise the Web for more:

ByLine Magazine (<http://www.bylinemag.com>) sponsors monthly student contests.

Delacorte Press Books for Young Readers (<http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/writingcontests>) seeks first-time novelists in two long-standing annual contests for a First Young Adult Novel and a First Middle-Grade Novel.

Funds for Writers (<http://www.fundsforwriters.com>) has a contests link as well as **WritingKid**, a free biweekly newsletter delivered by RSS feed and often used by writing instructors.

HarperTeen FanLit (<http://www.harperteenfanlit.com>) offered a 2006 online short story writing event that attracted 135,000 votes on 4,500 submissions; its winning chapters will be published in 2007 as an e-book.

Scholastic Art & Writing Awards (<http://www.artandwriting.org>), run by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, attracts thousands of students in grades seven through twelve each year for regional and national awards that could include scholarships.

Writer's Digest (<http://www.writersdigest.com>) has a monthly writing contest for students aged thirteen and under.

Writers of the Future (<http://www.writersofthefuture.com>), established for aspiring writers in 1983 by L. Ron Hubbard, is an annual anthology of the finest science fiction and fantasy short stories by new writers.

[**Editor's Note:** See *VOYA's* annual *Teen Poetry Contest winners* in this issue on page 18. Submission guidelines are also available online at <http://www.voya.com/Contests/index.shtml#poetry>.]

WRITING GROUPS

Almost every library and bookstore sponsors writing groups. Every state has regional writing organizations that meet locally, such as these groups:

Georgia Writers Association <http://www.georgiawriters.org>

Kansas Authors Club <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/orgs/kac>

Oklahoma Writers Federation <http://www.owfi.org>

Pennwriters, Inc. <http://www.pennwriters.org>

South Carolina Writers Workshop <http://www.myscww.org>

PROFESSIONAL WRITING ORGANIZATIONS AND CONFERENCES

Organizations range from dog writers and horror writers to poets and journalists. Most offer student contests and conference opportunities. Find many writing organizations at <http://www.fundsforwriters.com/links.htm>.

American Society of Journalists and Authors <http://www.asja.org>

Mystery Writers of America <http://www.mysterywriters.org>

National Federation of State Poetry Societies <http://www.nfsps.com>

Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America <http://www.sfwa.org>

At conferences, learning from those who have published is phenomenal education. Find writing conferences through a search at <http://www.shawguides.com>.

WRITING MAGAZINES

The budding writer learns much from trade publications such as:

Teen Ink <http://teenink.com>

The Writer Magazine <http://www.writermag.com>

Writer's Digest <http://www.writersdigest.com>

120 pages." She wrote a poem in school, but she submitted it for competition outside the academic arena and won \$80.

Ayesha is a senior in the Bronx. "I find it really annoying to have just learned last year that I have serious grammar issues. I would have liked to learn grammar earlier so my Latin class wouldn't be such a struggle for me." But Ayesha doesn't despair. She belongs to a school poetry club and a group outside school called Urban Word. She works hard on a writing portfolio and independently on her grammar.

Jordan, a high school junior, has published in **WritingKid** newsletter. "School teaches us a cut-and-dried writing method that would bore even the most passionate writer to tears. I participate with the yearbook, but I do wish that there was a writing club." He misses an English teacher who "was very good at helping his students with writing because he could write well." It's a clear message that students recognize teachers who are confident in their writing abilities. Jordan has published, received writing awards, and served as a newspaper intern.

Some students are distressed like Wen, a freshman at Barnard College. "I was good in high school, but in college it is so frustrating that now my writing is no longer great—not even very good." She seeks a mentor because she is afraid to accomplish anything on her own. "I can't see my writing from an objective point of view anymore."

See the sidebars on this page for resources that answer questions such as "Where can I enter contests?" "Where can I find someone to review my writing?" "Where can I find other teen writers like me?"

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

The National Writing Project lists many successful writing projects aimed at uplifting the young writer. Judith Ruhana built a writing unit around the Skokie Northside Sculpture Garden in Chicago, with children writing poetry, songs, descriptions, and short stories inspired by the scenery. Jackie Wesson developed a week-long writing fair in Satsuma, Alabama, prompting more than 4,000 submissions not only from students but also from parents, grandparents, business people, politicians, and celebrities.

Vonda Gardner is a writing educator in Green Bay, Wisconsin, who shares her writing with her students. She writes for a local newspaper, and students see the steps that she goes through to reach the published copy in the paper, demonstrating the reality of the full process.

A corporate-sponsored writing competition in Nashville, Tennessee, invites students in grades three through twelve to write in any of a dozen categories. Robin Minnick is a freelance writer who has worked with the committee on coordinating entries and judging. She also wrote a grant for a project to create a magazine for a middle school.

Since **Absynthe Muse** teamed with **FundsforWriters** to create the Little Owl Mentoring Program in 2005, students and published writers have been matched in 160 pairs. *VOYA* Youth Correspondent Elisabeth Wilhelm was a teen writer who established **Absynthe Muse**, an online young writers' locale where the mentor program is parked. As editor of the **WritingKid** newsletter, an arm of **Funds for Writers**, I had an interest in the same demographic. The project matches the strengths of the published writers with the needs of the young people. The results tell the tale:

"I love mentoring. If my mentee is an example of her generation of science fiction and fantasy writers, an honored tradition will not only continue but will be amazing to read."—Susan Hanniford Crowley, member of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America.

"My mentee's high energy and motivation never cease to amaze me. Our e-mails re-spark my interest in writing and remind me how much I really have learned about this profession."—Lisa Waterman Gray, member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors and multi-grant winner.

And from the young person's standpoint:

"My mentor's fabulous. Her name's Joy, and she knows."—Jack, mentee.

"I love my mentor! She's so nice and has taught me a lot about how to create a world, or use an existing one. My first impression of the program was like 'Oh! Wow!! Cool!' and I must say, it has lived up to all of it."—Sarah, mentee.

EACH WORD HELPS

Encouraging young people to write does not have to be a burden. Once they realize how empowering writing can be, their natural energy will consume them. Writing tasks can be as simple as thank-you letters and journals, or as inspirational as poetry and the new worlds of a science-fiction novella.

Tools abound for new writers. Johnny wants to write; he just craves someone to show him the way and nod every now and then to confirm his direction.

"Students often begin the school year by telling me that they hate writing. I tell them that after a while, they won't hate it anymore. Last year, one of my students came to me and said, 'You were right when you said that I would like writing. It's my favorite subject now.'"

—Vonda Gardner, teacher.

RESOURCES

Organizations

Absynthe Muse <http://www.absynthemuse.com>

FundsforWriters <http://www.fundsforwriters.com>

The National Commission on Writing <http://www.writingcommission.org>

The National Writing Project <http://www.writingproject.org>



Publications

Brooks, Terry. **Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life**. Ballantine/Del Rey, 2004, ©2003. 208p. \$13.95 Trade pb. 978-0-345-46551-1. VOYA October 2003.

Dunn, Jessica, and Danielle Dunn. **A Teen's Guide to Getting Published: Publishing for Profit, Recognition, and Academic Success**. 2nd Ed. Prufrock Press, 2006. 262p. \$14.95 Trade pb. 978-1-59363-182-6. VOYA October 2006.

Education Week <http://www.edweek.org>

Hambleton, Vicki, and Cathleen Greenwood. **So, You Wanna Be a Writer? How to Write, Get Published, and Maybe Even Make It Big!** Beyond Words Publishing, 2001.

160p. \$8.95 Trade pb. 978-1-58270-043-4. VOYA February 2002.

Johnson, Julie Tallard. **Spiritual Journeying: Writing Your Way to Independence**. Bindu Books/Inner Traditions International, 2006. 272p. \$14.95 Trade pb. 978-1-59477-056-2. VOYA August 2006.

Levine, Gail Carson. **Writing Magic: Creating Stories That Fly**. HarperCollins, 2006. 176p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-051961-2. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-051960-5. VOYA December 2006.

National Writing Project and Carl Nagin. **Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools**. Jossey-Bass/John Wiley & Sons, 2006, ©2003. 144p. \$19.95 Trade pb. 978-07879-8067-2.

Writing for a Change: Boosting Literacy and Learning Through Social Action. Kristina Berdan et al, Eds. Jossey-Bass/John Wiley & Sons, 2006. 192p. \$22.95. 978-0-7879-8657-5.

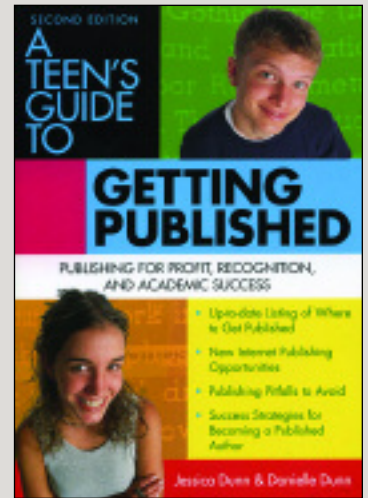
Surveys

"The Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution." The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, April 2003. http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf

"Quality Counts 2007: From Cradle to Career, Connecting American Education From Birth to Adulthood." **Education Week**, January 4, 2007. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2007/01/04/index.html>

"Writing: A Powerful Message From State Government." The National Commission on Writing, July 2005. http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/powerful-message-from-state.pdf

"Writing: A Ticket To Work . . . Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders." The National Commission on Writing, September 2004. http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf ■



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