

# The Write Stuff

Higher education has destroyed young Americans' ability to express themselves on the page—or in their own minds.

**By Reid Buckley**

ONE STUDENT SHOUTED indignantly, "I thought this was a course in public speaking!" There were murmurs of assent. I explained that, all things being equal, one's thoughts were best written out before they were spoken. But the 30 or so members of the class remained upset. They wished to "wing it."

That is the essence of the contemporary zeitgeist, which preaches spontaneous efflorescence born of inspiration issuing from a well of authenticity and soaring on the exuberant wings of conceit. It is the philosophy of ejaculation and orgasm and no Catholic guilt. These young people had not been taught to edit. They had not been taught self-criticism. They had been reared in an environment of self-esteem, even when this went unexamined and was unearned. And when they returned a week later with the fruits of their labors, I was appalled. I took the papers home and spent two afternoons and two evenings past midnight editing them.

I had to contend with an illiterate heaping of multisyllabic social-studies mush whose meaning was either obscured or contradicted by other heapings of academic mush, as indecipherable as they were ungrammatical. Illicit inferences lurked under false premises like salamanders under rocks. Logical connections did not exist. Non sequiturs were thick as chiggers. Do not mention grace or style. Of the 28 papers I labored through, only in two did I detect talent buried in the rubble. I had never seen

anything so hopeless.

When I handed my University of South Carolina students their edited work, several shot up their hands and demanded to see me after class, to which I readily agreed. I sat down with each of them in chambers behind the lecture hall and went over the papers sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. This took a lot of time. I had scrawled in the margins, squeezing my comments between the typed lines of the text. I had tried to be charitable, but because of the limitations of space, I had to be blunt.

One fellow had nothing to say about the shoddiness of his work, except to ask me belligerently, "How much does the final speech weigh?" "Fifty percent," I said, reminding him, "You are aware of that, it's on the syllabus." "Well, it's unfair," he protested hotly. "This could ruin my 4.0 average! You do that, and I'll complain to the dean!" He stomped out, leaving me to marvel that anyone so deprived of the ability to express himself could fly such academic banners. 4.0!

When I proceeded to go over the essay of another young man, his voice caught in his throat and he broke down. I was taken aback. We hadn't proceeded beyond the first page. His wasn't the worst effort, either. But he wasn't protesting my criticisms. To the contrary. "You're right," he kept repeating, tears flowing, "It's awful. I can't write my thoughts down. They come

out a mess, I know!" And then he related a scandal. Not in four years of high school and three years of college had a single teacher expressed concern about his writing or offered to edit it. When he said this, other students spoke out to confirm cognate experiences. "What can I do now?" this young man asked me despairingly. "I graduate in two months!"

The dimensions of his doom and that of these other young people hit me with full force. Not once in their educational lives had they been taught to impose order on chaos, that being contrary to the central dogma of liberal-arts education in our country today. There is no such thing as choosing, as distinguishing between the false and the real, discriminating between good and bad. The cost of this heresy to our nation is beyond calculating: for two generations our businesses, professions, universities, and politics have been populated by moral illiterates who reject reason.

The art of writing is the soul of reason, from which all civilization has spun. If one cannot give expression to one's thoughts, one is reduced to grunts. These young men and women were to be graduated in two months' time. Yet they were functionally illiterate, as the saying goes—a hideous euphemism for being thrust into the adult world intellectually crippled. Several other students who crowded around me now claimed that never had

they had their written work reviewed. I was incredulous. “Never?” “Not once!” came their reply. Two or three then claimed that in nearly four years of college they had never been required to write an essay. Examinations were multiple choice.

I had no answer for them. The laziness of the faculty disgusted me. Some of these students were studying to be teachers. My anger burned. It was not their fault that they were unable to think or write their way out of a paper bag. A whole generation was being defrauded. The final day of the course I advised my

and graduate 4.0. Reality becomes virtual. Hard true thought—the primal condition of writing—which can be offensive, difficult, and unpopular, is rendered by academe in language of such bureaucratic opacity that, it is hoped, no one will be able to penetrate it, to discover that it is hollow, that Nero is wearing no clothes. Reality is euphemized, extenuated, attenuated, temporized, dishonored. One is not born to this; one is obliged to acquire the vice of fungible truth in our decadent society and our deeply corrupted educational system.

language into gibberish. In place of clear, straightforward prose, budding geniuses in graduate seminars have to impress their professors with the profundity that only bad writing and vacuous ‘theorizing’ can communicate.

With her husband’s help, Betsey Fox soon got out from under the baneful influence of academe. American scholars and professors of the liberal arts—along with sociologists, economists, and theorists of any discipline—may be the only class of intellectuals in which their ordinary social chitchat is superior to their polished prose. They are capable of saying, “Will someone shut the damn door?” or “Who let the cat in?” But when they write for publication—that is, for the admiration of their peers—our intellectuals seem to strap on impenetrable dullness like chain mail.

A certain defensive posture explains the vice. It is difficult for us laymen to understand the degree to which academics are twerps, nerds, doofuses, and dweebs, not to mention moral cowards. Academics who are not protected by tenure are terrified of exposing themselves as the second-rate minds that most of them are, as sloppy, lazy, superficial, and mean-spirited pseudo-scholars to whom the discredited concept of truth is of less concern than what is politically *de rigueur*. So they rig their prose out in dense, nearly impenetrable syntax. Relative clauses become cherished long-lost cousins. Hairsplitting becomes more important than getting anywhere. Our academics become unable to shut the damn door or put out the cat or parse a sentence or respect the sequence of a syllogism.

They are afraid of putting on plain display their biases, the ordinariness of their minds and spirits, so they take cover in jargon. Sure, to not one person in ten million is given originality of

## WHEN THEY WRITE FOR PUBLICATION—THAT IS, FOR THE ADMIRATION OF THEIR PEERS—OUR INTELLECTUALS SEEM TO STRAP ON IMPENETRABLE DULLNESS LIKE CHAIN MAIL.

students that their parents should join in a class-action suit against the state’s Commission of Higher Education, and at the end of the second term, I resigned.

In the past 70 years, the American Dream has been reduced to owning one’s own home and other materialist satisfactions. No other dimension of human existence is allowed. That, of course, was never the American Dream. The American Dream was to be free. But one does not say these things in the Age of Obama, when government is no longer perceived as the handmaiden of tyranny. Paper money replaces gold, vice virtue. Sociology replaces merit, earmarks candor. Euphemistic language replaces plain speech with sentimentalized softening. Public figures do not lie; they misspeak. They do not cheat or transgress the law or do moral wrong; they make mistakes.

Communication suffers in this culture of moral and intellectual relativism, where standards, like the coin of the realm, are debased. One can be illiterate

I do not exaggerate. Eugene Genovese, the grand onetime Marxist historian, has written a tender memoir on his recently deceased wife, Betsey Fox, whom it was my privilege to know. In the course of his reminiscence, Professor Genovese remarks that it required graduate school for his wife’s prose to be ruined. She was 11 years younger than he and a budding Marxist scholar when he was already an established figure on the red-hot Left. He had been impressed by her college papers from Bryn Mawr, but when she went on to Harvard for advanced studies, her papers lost all charm, directness, and style. Academic bloviations took the place of the hard-hitting analytical energy that she had given evidence of as a younger woman and for which she would later become renowned as a polemicist. He ruminated:

I reminded myself that most graduate schools seemed dedicated to the transformation of the English