

Set the Bar Higher on Student Writing

College Board Writing Commission Report

Will Fitzhugh, National Writing Board

Letter to the Editor of Education Week, May 14, 2003, p. 35

I was glad to see the report of the College Board National Commission on Writing this week. Their emphasis on more time for writing echoes the findings of the History Research Paper Study done last September, with funding from the Albert Shanker Institute, for The Concord Review by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut [the report may be found at www.tcr.org].

In addition to too little time, many teachers have not had experience with writing long serious academic research papers themselves, and so are little prepared to give students the coaching they need to develop those skills for college, even if they had time.

The College Board Commission gives the following sample of high school writing in their report, to show “examples of how powerfully children can express their emotions.”

“The time has come to fight back and we are. By supporting our leaders and each other, we are stronger than ever. We will never forget those who died, nor will we forgive those who took them from us.”

Michael, High School

If we are serious about preparing the three-quarters of our high school students the College Board Report says go on to take up the work of college term papers, I would like to see examples of high school academic writing like the following by one of their peers, offered to students to emulate...

I published a 7,900-word paper on John Maynard Keynes by a public high school student in New York City. The student was a Sophomore and here is a brief excerpt from that essay:

“In my judgment, Keynes’s The General Theory was truly revolutionary. It is true that some individual ideas in The General Theory had appeared in the writings of economists before Keynes, including those of Malthus, Hobson, Robertson, Kahn, and Wicksell. It also must be acknowledged that the New Deal had already put into practice Keynes’s determination that the government must invest in public-works projects during a depression. But the arguments which show that The General Theory is revolutionary are still stronger. Keynes was the first person, by refuting Say’s Law, to expose the assumptions economists had been making for the past hundred years; in doing this, Keynes created a much more “general” theory than had appeared in the past. Even if government policies had anticipated some of his ideas, Keynes was the first person to show that these policies were theoretically sound. And Keynes’s conclusion that policies of government investment were necessary in a depression was radically different from the policies advocated by most economists since Adam Smith—it truly marked an end to the advocacy of *laissez-faire*.”

High school students are capable of truly exemplary academic writing if we take the time with them and take care to set good standards for them to meet.

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