P.S. to the NEWS

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THE TEACHING OF WRITING

In our current era of consumerism, it is a wonder that Ralph Nadar or some public interest law firm hasn't investigated the shoddiest consumer product or service on the market today -- the teaching of writing by the public schools. When Detroit automobile dealers call back hundreds of defective cars, we are rightly scandalized. When a large percentage of high school graduates and job applicants cannot write a literate letter, we should be equally scandalized.

Writing is an even more accurate index of education than reading, which has stimulated much soul-searching about methods in recent years. Whereas reading can be considered a passive skill, writing forces you to formulate your own thoughts, organize them in a coherent way, and put them on paper in a form that communicates a message to others. It requires familiarity with vocabulary, syntax, and sentence structure, and a thought process that puts it all together.

Writing performance has deteriorated even more than reading. College entrance examination scores have declined for twelve straight years and conclusively confirm what parents, colleges, and employers have known for some time, namely, that our schools are failing to teach students the essential verbal and math skills.

At some colleges, the proportion of freshmen failing an English placement exam has increased by more than 50 percent since 1968.

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At other colleges, nearly half the freshmen are enrolled in the remedial courses called "bonehead English." At Harvard, the freshman English course is so large that the faculty calls it a "pseudo-department."

Oral expression by today's students reveals similar disabilities. Anyone who does much talking with teenagers knows that they can hardly utter a single sentence without saying "you know" or "I mean." Test your young friends.

Some people blame the decline in writing skills on television and other visual mediums that encourage a lazy learning pattern, instead of reading books with a large vocabulary. Some blame the relaxation of state requirements for high school English. Others blame it on the fact that more than half our country's high school English teachers did not specialize in English during their college years.

Some blame should also be placed on the short-sighted pedagogues who try to excuse their failure to teach writing behind such shibboleths as "students have the right to their own language" or "it is linguistic snobbery to force them to change their ungramma tical ways." To refrain from teaching standard English to the disadvantaged child will only perpetuate his handicap and bar him from the higher-paying jobs for which good English is a prerequisite.

Professor Bunzel of San Jose University summed it up very well when he said: "I agree with George Orwell, 'If people cannot write well, they cannot think well; and if they cannot think well, others can do their thinking for them.'"

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