

# Dermer: Let's figure out how to teach our students to write again

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(Photo: Tim Brinton)

Americans do not write well. In 2002, so many educators, employers, and policy-makers considered the quality of writing in the United States to be inadequate that the College Board established a national commission to review writing instruction in schools and colleges. Neither the commission nor its report, "The Neglected 'R' — The Need for a Writing Revolution," ([http://www.collegeboard.com/prod\\_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf)) produced a revolution. Indeed, about 10 years later, a survey of 318 business owners, CEOs, and C-suite executives revealed that 80% thought effective writing should be better taught in colleges.

Though many of the best college graduates continue on to professional schools and graduate schools, even they may not write well. In fact, many universities are now sending their graduate students to writing camps. At camp, students receive writing assistance, learn to master time management as well as goal setting skills, receive social support, and work in distraction-free environments.

Ironically, writing can even be a problem for educators. For example, the state Department of Public Instruction's website presents a barely intelligible, 63-word description of "differentiation."

"Teachers provide a variety of instructional techniques that engage students toward shared ownership of their proficiency. Responsive instruction, through progress monitoring, provides students what they need in a timely manner and incorporates best practices to meet the needs of individual students. Individualized learning plans are used to meet unique student nuances, reflect different levels of competency and learning styles, and apply differentiated strategies."

This description, like most "unfinished" writing, taxes readers' time and understanding. Here is a 20-word revision that preserves the description's apparent meaning. "By knowing each student's needs and capabilities as well as frequently monitoring each student's progress, teachers appropriately instruct each student."

The revision is about a third the length of the original. Put another way, would you rather read a 63-page book or a 20-page book that says about the same thing? And isn't the revision clearer than is the original?

Why was the original written so poorly? I suspect that most individuals write poorly because they have been denied what I call "complete teaching." Complete teaching includes: instructions, models, practice and feedback.

For writing, excellent instructions are abundantly available in best-selling books and from experienced teachers. Excellent models of writing are abundant too, as text. But extensive practice in writing along with constructive feedback from experienced teachers is often scarce.

For example, consider a teacher who asks a student to write a substantial essay. For this assignment, the teacher could easily spend 40 minutes writing out feedback. Now imagine that each semester the teacher is responsible for three classes of 20 students. If so, the teacher would be spending 40 hours for just one assignment. As revision is very important, what about a second or a third draft? And what about conferring with students who seek additional help? Clearly, providing constructive feedback for multiple drafts requires much time and effort.

Nevertheless, good approximations to the complete teaching of writing may be present in high school English courses and in college composition courses. But they may be absent from many advanced college courses. In advanced courses, especially at research universities, the teachers who review writing may be graduate students or others without mentored experiences or time to provide adequate feedback. Consequently, teachers may only grade and provide a few comments on just one draft.

Advanced college courses should afford students multiple opportunities to revise, given constructive feedback from experienced teachers. In these courses, complete teaching can help students write in genres that were not covered in college composition courses.

Where it's present we must support the complete teaching of writing. Where it's absent we must organize, petition or complain to complete its teaching. If the teaching of writing remains incomplete in our schools and colleges then we must complete its teaching in our homes — by doing it ourselves or by hiring experienced tutors.

*Marshall Lev Dermer is associate professor of psychology, emeritus, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. E-mail: [dermer@uwm.edu](mailto:dermer@uwm.edu) (<mailto:dermer@uwm.edu>)*

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