

Write Right: Improving Essay Writing Skills

Communication, creativity and making connections are three skills that are integral to succeeding in the modern workplace. However, many studies have picked up that not only are many students entering universities with weak writing skills, they are also graduating without excelling in essay-writing and other forms of academic communication. It is therefore crucial to recognize the importance of students improving their writing skills throughout high-school and university. This essay looks at various reasons why students should hone their essay writing skills, looking at the influence of the information age, needs of employers, development of logical arguments and benefits to numerous fields.

A major factor in the demand for high quality writing skills is that the world is currently in an information age. Knowledge needs to be more accessible, comprehensible and of a higher standard than ever before. For almost every academic topic, it is likely that there is already a plethora of academic articles covering the same area, therefore, it is increasingly important for new writing to be more relevant, concise and poignant. Students who excel in writing skills will stand out to universities and employers, who need their employees to not only be able to communicate verbally, but efficiently, accurately and appropriately convey written information. In South Africa, employers consistently rank writing ability and communication skills as extremely important for emerging university graduates (Du Preez & Fossey, 2012).

As Maher (2011) found in her study on first-year university students in South Africa, there is correlation between academic writing skills and general academic performance. Furthermore, some of her results reiterated previous findings that highlighted a “lack of organization and coherence in [students] writing” (Maher, 2011). Many tertiary institutions are finding that high school graduates are insufficiently equipped to meet the demands of university essay writing. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that in a South African context, many students are not writing in their mother tongue (Du Preez & Fossey, 2012).

Essays are an opportunity to display not only students' ability to follow instructions and academic conventions, but give opportunities for students to develop creative, opinionated and original approaches to the given tasks, rather than giving stock answers to questions. While testing methods such as multiple choice may challenge a student's memory and recollection, essay writing forces students to engage more intensely with their content, picking and weaving together information to form a rational argument rather than merely regurgitating facts. Improving writing skills contributes not only to the student's own synthesis of new content, but also to the understanding and critical analysis of reading existing publications written by others. Redford and Prat-Sala (2011) emphasize the strong link between writing and reading skills, and by practicing writing for different purposes, audiences and styles, students will be better equipped to comprehend a wider variety of sources.

Learning to sort, clarify and logically express thoughts in writing is beneficial to almost all academic fields. Scientific, medical and engineering fields all require written reports, theses, presentations and pitches, and the strong competition for jobs within these career fields means that poor writing skills can be detrimental to graduates' success. Improving writing skills encompasses more than just spelling, grammar and citation specifications. It also focuses on editing, revision and reflection, which can help students develop more careful, thorough and meticulous work methods. These skills, as well as developing habits such as brainstorming and drafting, prove to be beneficial in the workplace, which will require research, conceptualizing, planning, and pitching ideas.

Sub-par essay writing skills amongst many students have led to the need for extra intervention to improve the quality of academic literacy. This is due to the many reasons for students to have optimal writing skills, which include increasing their marketability in an increasingly competitive job-market, staying relevant in an information age, helping develop

their own logical and be able to effectively express information and knowledge in a variety of academic fields.

References

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