

Education background: college graduate But can he write?

By Jane Willson

Photo by Mark Pynes

Inside most university closets dangles a common skeleton — the graduate who cannot write.

Packaged in black robes and tassled hats, the products of higher education are distributed annually to the nation's job market holding what used to be a guarantee of excellence — the university degree.

But in the eyes of many personnel recruiters and employers, it's a scholastic honor that is becoming meaningless.

"It's a shame," remarks a personnel recruiter in response to the growing number of college graduates who are unable to write.

"We offer a spot on our application where applicants can respond in their own words with additional information. Many can't perform (in writing) even on a simple conversational level. It gives you the feeling the person's overall skill is reflected in that writing."

Employers hired these people because they had college degrees and "they thought that meant something," says Kathleen Dubs, composition director in the University English department. "They found out it didn't mean anything at all."

The dilemma brings up the nagging question — Why? Looking for answers brings up even more nagging questions. High school, the university, the overall education system, parents and television all have faced the finger of blame.

But high schools top off the hit list.

"Every secondary school in the nation will say that they have a writing problem, but they're not doing a whole hell of a lot about it," says Rick Goad, a doctoral student and GTF with the University's secondary education department.

"Students don't seem to be improving," says Goad, who has evaluated writing curriculums in a number of Oregon schools. "Weaknesses run the whole gamut — penmanship, spelling, grammar, punctuation.

"They've got to recognize that students just aren't getting what they need," he says.

College students don't blissfully ignore writing problems, Dubs says. Rather, they criticize their high school education.

"They have a sense of frustration, a sense of anger and a realization that they've wasted a lot of time. If I had a dollar for every student who said to me that high school was a waste of time, I could probably retire," she says.

High school students write book reports and occasionally term papers, but those assignments hardly give good writing experience, says Susan Lessick of the University's Learning Resources Center.

The problem starts with dividing education into separate departments, such as "math," "P.E." and "English," Goad says.

The idea that teaching writing is just for the writing teacher is self-defeating, he notes.

At the University, the story sounds similar, Dubs says. "Teaching students to write falls on the shoulders of the English department."

Concern among educators over the national writing problem has instigated a revival of the "writing-across-the-curriculum" movement, Dubs says. The movement prompts professors in all subject areas to demand that their students write literate prose.

While college faculty, students and parents rail at the inadequacies of high schools, those in the high school camp contend their hands are tied.

Wayne Hill, assistant principal of South Eugene High School, says schools are reflective of society. Public schools are expected to respond to the whims of the larger society, he says, and school districts often are forced into curriculums that stray from teaching basic writing.

Federally mandated roadblocks — such as budget cutbacks — also have made teaching writing more difficult.

"Most of the educational emphasis in the public schools these last few years has not been on student performance — it has been on minimum competencies and equal opportunity," Hill says.

"There's only so much energy to go around."

Although schools accept some of the blame, they also point accusingly to parents and their homes as suspects.

"The school system is pretty much set up on the assumption that the kids are squared away (emotionally) and it's our job to teach them," Hill says.

"That's not a good assumption anymore."

"You've got to do a whole lot of support work these days — comforting, playing half social worker — and all that takes away from academic skills."

And then there's TV.

According to one researcher, the constant viewing

of TV could have a direct effect on a student's writing ability, especially if it precludes reading from the student's life.

In Edgar Dayle's "hierarchical cone of learning," reading — the translation of written symbols into verbal symbolic meaning — is the most strenuous form of learning. TV, lower down on the cone, is a passive or vicarious type of learning.

Dubs agrees on the negative effects of TV, and she says parents don't understand those effects.

Watching TV instead of reading ultimately hurts writing skills, she says.

"If you're not reading good prose, you're not going to be able to write good prose."

But pointing fingers and blaming institutions goes only so far. Soon the question of responsibility returns to the students themselves.

"For many students, education becomes learning to survive in the system, rather than learning," Dubs says.

It's not hard for students to graduate from the University without having to write much if they chose the right major, Lessick observes.

And the increasing number of students who manage to slip through the cracks of the university system without learning to write is painfully evident to employers. It shows from the moment a graduate fills out an application, they say.

"It's apparent that a number of applicants just aren't taking the time necessary to fill out the application and plan what they are doing," says one local personnel recruiter. "They'll start out printing and end up writing — and the writing is illegible."

"Let's face it, when there are 200 applicants for a position and you have to weed it down to 10, spelling, punctuation, grammar and neatness all count."

Goad says many people get through the education system without learning that writing is a struggle. Writing is something you never really "learn," he says.

Dubs agrees. "Many people are looking for 'the key' to writing, so that once you have it you can forget about doing any work," she says.

"There is no key. Writing is a constant struggle."

Jane Willson earned a master's degree here in instructional technology and has seven years teaching experience from the elementary to college levels.

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